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NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF NONRELIGIOUS PARANORMAL PHENOMENA:  
A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF THE  
*SAN ANTONIO LIGHT* AND  
*SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS-NEWS*

A Thesis  
by  
**PAMELA L. PARMER, B.A.**


Presented to the Graduate Faculty of  
University of the Incarnate Word  
in partial fulfillment  
(of the requirements)  
for the degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS

December 2000  
Major Subject: Communication Arts

NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF NONRELIGIOUS PARANORMAL PHENOMENA: A  
CONTENT ANALYSIS OF THE *SAN ANTONIO LIGHT*  
AND *SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS-NEWS*

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by  
PAMELA L. PARMER

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## ABSTRACT

### NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF NONRELIGIOUS PARANORMAL PHENOMENA: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF THE *SAN ANTONIO LIGHT* AND *SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS-NEWS*

Pamela L. Parmer, B.A.

A content analysis was used to examine how paranormal phenomena was portrayed in the San Antonio daily newspapers and determine if there was any trend in portrayals from 1970 to 1990. The *San Antonio Light* and the *San Antonio Express-News* were analyzed from March to May 1970 and March to May 1990. The analysis included data from the individual papers, comparing and contrasting the data from the two time periods. The data between the two papers also was compared and contrasted. The phenomena included unidentified flying objects, aliens, psychics, and ghosts. It excluded religious phenomena such as reincarnation, witchcraft, and visions/sightings of holy personages such as the Virgin Mary. Phenomena was coded for type, number of appearances, section of newspaper, page of appearance, length of story, and tenor (i.e., positive, negative, neutral portrayals). The phenomenon keyword was coded as to whether it was included in a headline and whether the story included a photo, graphic, or table. Positive portrayals were defined as reports in which such phenomena overall were considered or referred to as factual events and/or abilities. A negative portrayal was one that overall indicated skepticism, or statements disproving the existence of the reported phenomena. A neutral, or balanced, portrayal was one that presented an equal percentage of contrasting views of the phenomena and/or use of qualifying language. This research

is the first part of a larger research question to be answered in the future: Has the portrayal of the paranormal influenced the public's belief in such phenomena? This question would require use of research methodologies such as questionnaires or experiments. If research points to such an influence, another question that merits further study is which has a greater impact—television and newspaper coverage—or is it only a combination of coverage that has an impact?

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The alleged UFO crash in Roswell, New Mexico, in 1947 is often marked as the beginning of Americans' interest in unexplained events and paranormal phenomena. However, as Jeff Reid in the *Utne Reader* (1988) writes, Raymond A. Palmer and the science fiction pulp magazine *Amazing Stories* has been credited with popularizing the idea of flying saucers in the 1930s and 1940s. Reid cites John A. Keel's article in the *Whole Earth Review* in which Keel wrote that after World War II, "some new excitement was needed. Raymond Palmer was supplying it. ... Soon newspapers nationwide swarmed with eyewitness saucer stories, which have recurred cyclically ever since." Since then, there also have been radio reports, books, magazine articles, television programs, and films dedicated to the unexplained and the paranormal.

A content analysis was conducted to examine how nonreligious paranormal phenomena have been covered in the *San Antonio Light* and *San Antonio Express-News*. By analyzing both newspapers rather than just one, the research presented a more complete picture of media representation of these phenomena. Each paper had its own editorial viewpoint and they were not the same on many issues. The papers' viewpoints were examined to see if they converged or diverged on the issue of the paranormal.

This content analysis measured the number of occurrences, tenor of occurrences, section (placement) of occurrences, and length of story in column inches. The research included coding the use of a paranormal keyword in the headline and whether the story included use of a photograph, graphic, or table. The data were collected from a three-month period (March to May) in 1970 and 1990. The data were compared and contrasted across the time periods and the newspapers.

The phenomena that was coded were unidentified flying objects; aliens and alien abduction; psychics, mediums, telepathy and psychic ability, including psychic surgery and clairvoyance; telekinesis; extrasensory perception; ghosts, poltergeists and spirits; crop circles; and other the supernatural and paranormal events/abilities. It

excluded phenomena related to religion such as reincarnation, witchcraft, miracles, and visions of holy personages. These phenomena were not be coded because of the strong religious nature of the city, which might tend to cause overrepresentation of such phenomena and skew the results of the analysis.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions to be answered were:

1. How did the newspapers' portrayals of paranormal phenomena differ in 1990 from those in 1970?

This was measured for each newspaper and then data were analyzed for both papers together to see what, if any, overall trend (positive, negative, or neutral) existed in the newspaper market in San Antonio.

2. What sections of the newspapers were most associated with positive portrayals? negative portrayals? neutral or balanced portrayals?

Again, this was analyzed within each newspaper and across both newspapers.

3. Did the occurrence of portrayals show a change in which section of the paper they appeared?

The tenor of portrayals was analyzed for both 1970 and 1990.

4. What kind of phenomena received the most coverage?

The data were analyzed within each paper and time period, then analyzed across papers and time to see if trends existed in the presentation of paranormal phenomena (i.e., do certain phenomena, such as telekinesis, rise and fall in amount of coverage across time)?

5. Did trends exist in the tenor of the portrayal of specific phenomena over time?

This was analyzed within each paper and across the San Antonio newspaper market from 1970 to 1990.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies by researchers such as Allen, O'Loughlin, Jasperson, and Sullivan (1994) and Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli (1986) have shown the influence the media have over their audiences through priming and cultivation effects. Media influence also is due in part to the media's self-promoted credibility and to framing. The situation also is affected by the blurring of the lines between news and entertainment with less of a distinction now among *A Current Affair*, *Dateline*, and *60 Minutes*, as well as the televising of docudramas and fiction such as the *X-Files*, which plays on the public's belief in governmental cover-ups.

Two surveys have found that respondents cite media stories as the reason for their beliefs in the paranormal (Alcock, 1981; Evans, 1973). In addition, psychology Professor Norman Remley attributes the public's growing belief in paranormal phenomena to the media. In an interview with the Dallas Morning News (Hadnot, 1998), the Texas Christian University professor said, "The framework in which people explain their personal experiences has been constructed by these shows about psychic encounters or supernatural events. People have more information, whether it is valid or not, because of TV."

This raises the following questions:

1. Has there been an increase in the presentation of paranormal phenomena?
2. Have the reports/representations been objective?
3. Do the media really influence their audience to believe in the paranormal?
4. What are the consequences of increased belief in the paranormal?

To begin to address these questions, first we must define what is considered paranormal. *Merriam-Webster's* (1996) defines it as that which is "not scientifically explainable, supernatural." There are many phenomena that fit into this definition, including UFOs, aliens and alien abduction, psychics (including mediums, telepaths, and

those who claim to have clairvoyance or the ability to perform psychic surgery), telekinesis, extrasensory perception (ESP), ghosts, poltergeists, spirits, and crop circles.

Next, we must address the issue of whether there has been an increase in paranormal content. There has been little research in this area. But coverage of the paranormal has grown from the pulp fiction stories about flying saucers and reports of UFOs to Erich von Däniken's books on "ancient astronauts," reports of alien abductions, and an explosion of psychic phone networks.

The Internet also is helping spread news of the paranormal. According to the PR Newswire (1998), Toronto Internet Service Provider has launched a weekly horoscope page, one of only many Web pages devoted to astrology. The weekly horoscopes will be provided by columnist Brandi Jasmine, whose existing astrology sites attract more than 60,000 visitors a month.

"Reality-based" shows such as *Unsolved Mysteries*, *Sightings*, and *The Unexplained* fill the airwaves, as do shows such as *Encounters*, *The Other Side*, and *The Extraordinary*. *Alien Autopsy: Fact or Fiction*, which is presented in docudrama fashion, was scheduled for its third broadcast in 1995 (Coe, 1995). Other entertainment shows taking more of a realistic approach include *Dark Skies* and *The X-Files*, which some see as adding credibility by borrowing the authority of such agencies as the Federal Bureau of Investigation (Evans, 1996). Locally, a daytime television show hosted by a former TV news anchor, regularly features a psychic.

Gray and Sparks (1996) conducted content analyses of a 3-week sample of programs from four networks. Results showed that more than 50 percent of programs aired during prime-time contained at least one mention or depiction of a paranormal event, including astrology, ESP, UFOs, haunted houses, and astral projection.

The media provide such coverage in order to gain market share (and therefore revenue) and to meet the perceived needs of their audience. The process begins with Schramm's model of communication (Severin & Tankard, 1997). In 1954, Schramm proposed that the sender encodes and sends a message, which then is decoded and interpreted by the receiver. The receiver, in turn, encodes and sends a message to the

original sender, which decodes and interprets that message. The process repeats itself, providing a continual flow of information between sender and receiver.

In the case of the mass media, the audience can send either overt messages about what they think of their media choices (i.e., letters to the editor, Web site feedback) or let their message be sent via circulation figures or television ratings. If users find that their needs are being met by a message or particular type of message, they will send positive messages to the media. The media then will provide more content of a like nature. If users find that their needs are not being met, they will send negative messages to the media. The media outlets then can elect to change their message, either in content or format, in an attempt to provide content they believe will meet their audience's needs and, therefore, increase market share.

The audience has a variety of media outlets from which to choose, and the choices continue to grow with the expansion of cable and satellite television, as well as the World Wide Web. Uses and gratifications theory proposes that people choose and use different media for different reasons, among them to gather information, for diversion or escape, for entertainment, to strengthen self-esteem, or to strengthen their interpersonal relationships (Katz, Gurevitch, & Haas, 1973).

Studies have found that elements of uses and gratifications theory increase the chance that media messages will have an effect on audience members. Audience members purposefully select, expose themselves to, and attend to certain messages, becoming more involved with the messages they hear, see, and read (Jungkee & Rubin, 1997). Their involvement with the messages can lead to attitude change through a cultivation effect or to amplification of existing viewpoints.

As people seek to fulfill their need for information, one of the criteria they use when choosing which media messages they attend to is credibility. For this study, credibility was defined as trustworthiness, accuracy, competence, bias/objectivity, and balance. Consumers of mass media have been taught to evaluate media outlets and their messages in these terms. The credibility of the media source affects how audience members perceive the messages they receive from that source.

Studies show that credibility results in repeated use of a media outlet for information, the outlet having satisfied its audience members' needs (Jungkee & Rubin, 1997). Over time, this repeated use also might lead to a cultivation effect, changing attitudes concerning a topic.

The adding of credibility can legitimize topics previously kept on the fringe of public acceptance such as paranormal phenomena. For example, for many decades, stories on alleged UFO sightings, telepathy, and ghosts appeared only cyclically, rising in popularity briefly, only to fade out again. Chiefly, these periods of media coverage occurred during times of great stress and national conflict. Also, such stories were reported by the mainstream media with an objective viewpoint, a viewpoint that generally was to change in the 1980s (Reid, 1988).

People tuned into these messages either because they already believed in the paranormal, for entertainment, or for some other need. Because news organizations "only report the facts" in the audience's eyes, they added credibility to the stories and drew nonbelievers' interest. The use of exemplars amplified this effect as reporters include "eyewitness" accounts of the alleged sightings and paranormal ability.

This encouraged more people to believe what was reported. Coverage of the paranormal fulfilled a need for the audience, and in the fight for a bigger audience, more organizations began pick up UFO sighting and other stories on the paranormal. The idea of UFOs and the paranormal gained credibility through the preponderance of coverage by the regular news media, television newsmagazines (which carry the credibility of their supporting news organizations), and quasi-news programs such as *Sightings* and *Unsolved Mysteries*, which cultivated the legitimacy of flying saucers, extraterrestrials, ghosts, and other paranormal phenomena.

Now magazines are offering niche horoscopes that match their audience's interests (Hainer, 1995). For example, the political magazine *George* has a horoscope about politicians and has run a past-life reading for President Clinton. The financial magazine *Fortune* asked Decoroscope astrologer Shelley von Strunckel to analyze the Capital Cities/ABC merger with Disney and running a story on which were the luckiest zodiac signs. *Fortune* editor Jim Michaels says, "We don't do much with astrology, but I



hope we're not so dead serious that our readers don't expect an occasional chuckle out of us." And although some reports, like *Fortune's* lucky zodiac story, may have been written tongue-in-cheek, some audience members may have been unable to tell that it was not a serious piece of journalism. After all, if it's in the print media on the TV news, we've been taught it must be true, right?

Added to this mix is the media and the public's distrust of the government, especially following Watergate. The public's trust in government plummeted following the *Washington Post's* expose of the Watergate scandal, in which a break-in at the Democratic Party offices at the Watergate Hotel was traced back to top government officials. The subsequent cover-up and revelation of secret tapes and other dirty tricks led to the resignation of President Richard M. Nixon. When the media report on the alleged cover-up of UFO sightings and alleged landings, UFOs gain credibility through the government's denial of a cover-up.

Two of the tests for determining credibility are objectivity and balance. However, some say these qualities are lacking in media reports on paranormal phenomena. The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP, 1996) has called on the media to provide balanced reporting of paranormal phenomena. Leaders of the organization, which publishes the *Skeptical Inquirer*, blame the media (and especially television) for the public's growing beliefs in the paranormal.

Mainstream media, including the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, *Nightline*, and *20/20*, reported a number of UFO stories in 1987 (Reid, 1988). Reid cites a *Columbia Journalism Review* article that noted that although some stories were reported with scorn, "serious journalistic inquiry was absent from all accounts." In particular, "*Nightline*, for instance, gave UFO 'abductees' most of one program with debunkers given short shrift."

Klare (1990), who believes that balanced reporting goes out the window when the paranormal is involved, writes, "Ghosts are welcome guests in daily newspapers. Other types of psychic phenomena are entertained as well." Klare undertook a study of newspaper stories about psychic phenomena, covering four newspapers from 1977 to 1988. The newspapers studied were the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, *Columbus Dispatch*,

*New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*. In all, Klare found 222 stories that dealt with psychic phenomena. He coded them according to story type (news or feature), reporting approach (credulous, neutral, skeptical, interdeterminate), story image (danger to people encountering the phenomena, benefit to people encountering it, not specified), and story source (experiencer, practitioner, parapsychologist, scholar, CSICOP investigator, scientist or other investigator, other).

Klare found that non-critical articles on the phenomena outnumbered skeptical articles by 2 to 1 and in comparing story source and reporting approach, several paranormal claims were made without critical discussion. The two local papers had the highest percentage of credulous stories (53 percent in the *Plain Dealer*, 56 percent in the *Dispatch*) and the lowest number of skeptical stories (3 percent and 13 percent, respectively). The *Washington Post* had the greatest number of stories dealing with psychic phenomena, reporting 49 percent of them in a credulous fashion and 20 percent in a skeptical approach. The *New York Times* reported just 29 percent in a credulous approach and 26 in a skeptical manner.

The number of sentences given to each source in the stories coded as neutral also revealed a bias toward the claims of those who believe in the paranormal. CSICOP investigators, scientists, and other investigators got just 13 percent of the sentences, while parapsychologists, practitioners, and experiencers received 60 percent.

However, some believe that newspapers still stress balanced reporting more than broadcast media. "Generally, even cub reporters know that when writing an article on a controversial subject they should try to present both sides of the issue. If they fail to do so, their older and wiser managing editors will remind them. An article may devote 60 to 70 percent of its content to pro-UFO views, but with TV, the pro-UFO content typically runs 95 percent—or higher," writes Klass (1996).

Not all stories or television programs provide slanted coverage of paranormal phenomena. The *Minneapolis Star Tribune* ran a story on October 29, 1997, on paranormal phenomena, the efforts of several skeptics and debunkers, and reasons why people may believe in the paranormal (Dawson, 1997). ABC's *20/20*, hosted by Barbara Walters, aired a broadcast on April 4, 1997, offering the skeptics' viewpoint on the Fox

program *Alien Autopsy* (Brown, 1997). The skeptics and special effects artists pointed out problems with the supposed autopsy, including formerly Top Secret documents that state the government never recovered a crashed UFO, the seam line from the body cast from which the alien was molded, and the testimony from a retired military photographer who said that an autopsy such as this would have been shot with a still camera, using color film.

Sparks and Pellechia (1997) examined the role scientific authority had in determining belief in paranormal phenomena. Sparks and his co-researcher were interested in the two basic presentations of UFOs and alien abductions that have appeared in the 1980s and 1990s. Some reports simply present various points of view and leave it to the audience to decide what is fact and truth. Other stories include comments from a scientific authority regarding the reported events. The researchers asked college students to read three news stories. One story was based on an actual magazine story in which people claimed to have been abducted by aliens. The other two stories were actual articles on other subjects. The first story was altered in one of four ways: the abductions were presented as likely to have happened but not affirmed to a scientific authority, the abductions were presented as likely to have happened and were affirmed to a scientific authority, the abductions were discredited but no scientific authority was mentioned, and the abductions were discredited by a scientific authority. A fifth story, unrelated to alien abductions, was used as a control story.

Researchers then asked the subjects questions about their beliefs regarding story content. The group that read stories where abductions were affirmed by a scientist showed the greatest belief in UFOs and alien abductions. The researchers reported that the group that read the story in which the scientist discredited the abductions showed the second highest belief in UFOs and alien abductions. Sparks and Pellechia speculated that merely mentioning a scientific authority lends credence to the report, regardless of the authority's position on the subject.

The researchers followed up this study with another examining balance in reporting (Sparks, Pellechia, and Irvine, 1997). They used two segments from CBS' 48 *Hours* program on UFOs and alien abductions. One segment, lasting about 7 minutes,

presented “eyewitness” testimony that the U.S. government had recovered a spaceship with aliens aboard following a mysterious crash in Roswell, New Mexico. No opposing viewpoint was aired. A second segment focused on a group that regularly goes to the Arizona desert to record UFOs on videotape. Some of the group’s footage was aired, then examined for the network staff by film and videotape analysts. The analysts used computer technology to enhance the image. They concluded that the “spaceship” was a jet and noted that the footage was shot 40 miles from a major metropolitan airport.

The researchers first asked participants to fill out a survey regarding beliefs in UFOs, then several weeks later showed them one of the two segments. The group that saw the first segment on Roswell showed an increase of several points in UFO beliefs, while those that saw the balanced report decreased their beliefs by almost as many points.

Framing a story can affect its balance the audience’s perception of the story. Framing is the context in which the media present an issue or event. It also “suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration” (Tankard, Hendrickson, Silberman, Bliss, & Ghanem, 1991). Media frame stories by deciding what to cover and what to exclude; where to place stories in the newspaper or broadcast; and through the use of devices such as photographs, illustration, headlines, pull quotes, leads, and nut graphs.

Framing also helps people understand the news and helps set the public agenda. If the media present an inaccurate or incomplete picture, this misinformation is passed on to their readers and viewers. Anderson (1998) says that U.S. media traditionally have acted not only as a mirror, reflecting public opinion, but also as a “rudder steering popular opinion.”

An example of framing is seen with a story on UFOs aired on CBS’ *48 Hours*. Klass (1998) was interviewed for the program and showed a formerly Top Secret USAF/Navy document dated December 10, 1948 that said the UFOs might be Soviet spy vehicles. Klass’ interview, presenting the skeptical viewpoint, was cut from the program. In doing so, CBS framed the story.

To examine whether the media influence beliefs in the paranormal, Sparks, Nelson, and Campbell (1997) conducted a random sample telephone survey of 120 people in Lafayette, Indiana. Although the researchers recognized that telephone surveys are limited in providing evidence of a causal relationship between television exposure and paranormal beliefs, they believed research in this area needed to be started.

Participants estimated the amount of time they watch television on an average weekday, average Saturday, and an average Sunday. The results were then calculated to provide an average weekly viewing time. Participants also were asked whether they had seen the following programs that routinely show paranormal themes: *Unsolved Mysteries*, *Sightings*, *The X-Files*, and *Psychic Friends*. Participants also were questioned as to their personal experiences with the paranormal.

More than 50% of participants believed in ghosts, almost 33 percent believed they sometimes had been able to read another person's mind using ESP, nearly 45 percent believed in UFOs, and about 25 percent believed people could use telekinesis to bend metal objects. When researchers examined the correlation between television viewing and paranormal beliefs, they found no significant relationship between the two factors. However, researchers reported that exposure to *paranormal* programming was a significant predictor of belief in supernatural beings. Also, those participants who reported no personal experience with the paranormal but watched paranormal programming had a higher level of belief in supernatural beings. This same correlation, however, did not hold up for belief in psychic energy.

Sparks, Hansen, and Shah (1994) found that paranormal content framed with a disclaimer about the fictional nature of the program made a difference in belief in the paranormal. This team of researchers conducted an experiment to see how the use of the tag line "The following story of paranormal activity is based on reported incidents" on the television program *Beyond Reality* affected the audience's perception of the material. Subjects were given a survey that included items regarding paranormal beliefs about 2 weeks before viewing a version of the program, which depicted astral projection—a person's spirit leaving the body to travel through time and space and then returning. One group of subjects saw the program with no tag, another group saw it with a "reality" tag

that researchers said was basically the same as the one usually broadcast, one group saw it with a disclaimer that said the program was fictional and presented for entertainment only, a fourth group saw it with a disclaimer that “the depicted events violated the known laws of nature and that nothing like them had ever occurred,” and a fifth group watched a situation comedy that did not refer to the paranormal (Sparks, 1998).

After viewing the program, subjects were surveyed about their paranormal beliefs. The two groups that saw the program with either of the two disclaimers reported more doubt in the existence of paranormal phenomena, while the first group (who saw no introductory tag) expressed a greater confidence in their existence. The group that saw the reality tag did not show any change in beliefs. The researchers did a follow-up test three weeks later with the same results.

The blurring of news and entertainment also is the result of mainstream media adopting more sensationalistic techniques such as reenactments and celebrity content while tabloid-style media are adopting more mainstream techniques and content. This leaves the audience hard pressed sometimes to decipher what is news and what is not (Paterno, 1996).

Sparks, Sparks, and Gray (1995) researched the effects of dramatic reenactment footage on paranormal beliefs. Using a 20-minute segment from *Unsolved Mysteries* concerning UFO sightings, the researchers measured the changes in beliefs among people who were ranked either high or low in vivid mental imagery, using the Vividness of Visual Imagery Questionnaire, a standard measure (Marks, 1973). Vivid imagery was used because “vivid information may have a disproportionate influence on human judgment because it evokes a rich associative network, which (in turn) is readily available when judgments are made (Shedler and Manis, 1985).

The researchers gave the subjects a questionnaire designed to disguise the true purpose of the next phase of the study. In the experiment phase, the researchers showed one group the segment as aired, with special effects of UFOs and aliens, and showed another group the segment with the special effects replaced by footage from the same broadcast such as an empty sky instead of a UFO. (The edited footage was reviewed by a sample of adults who indicated they could not tell the segment had been edited.) After

viewing the footage, subjects again were asked to fill out a questionnaire that asked about the commercials (to disguise the study's purpose) and measured the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with 16 statements about the video.

The researchers found that high vivid imagery was positively correlated to reports of lingering fright reactions to mass media. They also reported that those with high vivid imagery rankings found the edited version of the tape more believable than those with low vivid imagery rankings, showing that discussing but not showing visual details increased the program's believability. For those who saw the unedited footage, there were no differences in believability between those with high or low imagery rankings.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### Content Analysis

A content analysis was conducted to examine the coverage of the *San Antonio Light* and *San Antonio Express-News*. This study covered the periods of March through May in 1970 and 1990.

Content analysis is a nonobtrusive method of research that helps answer the question of “ ‘Who says what, to whom, why, how, and with what effect?’ ” (Babbie, 1995). Content may be coded according to manifest content, latent content, or both.

Manifest content is the surface content. In my research, this included coding the section in which paranormal content (e.g., UFO, psychic, aliens) appeared in a story. Although manifest content provides ease and reliability in coding, it lacks validity in that it tells the researcher and audience nothing of the meaning of those terms.

Coding latent content means measuring the meaning of the communication. For my study, it meant measuring whether a report was positive, negative, or neutral. Coding for latent content adds validity but falls short on reliability because each person could interpret and code the story differently.

By coding for both manifest and latent content, researchers can measure the correlation between both methods. If it is a positive correlation, then the theoretical argument is strengthened; if negative, the theory is weakened (Babbie, 1995).

The strengths of content analysis, according to Babbie (1995), are economy of time and money, ease of repetition over other research methods, ability to conduct longitudinal research, unobtrusiveness, and strong reliability. He reported its weaknesses as limitation to recorded communication and limited validity unless studying communication processes.



### Definition of Paranormal Phenomena

The phenomena that was tracked was defined as references to unidentified flying objects; aliens and alien abduction; psychics, mediums, telepathy and psychic ability, including psychic surgery and clairvoyance; telekinesis; extrasensory perception; ghosts, poltergeists and spirits; crop circles; and other the supernatural and paranormal events/abilities.

### Coding

Stories were coded as to whether they were positive, neutral or balanced, or negative.

A positive portrayal was one that overall contained language that indicated acceptance of the phenomena as fact, without qualifying terms such as alleged, supposed, claims or with those qualifiers applied to a viewpoint disputing the existence of the phenomena. A positive portrayal also did not include the use of quote marks around the paranormal phenomenon or ability.

A neutral, or balanced, portrayal was one that presented an equal percentage of contrasting views of the phenomena and/or use of qualifying terms or punctuation.

A negative portrayal was one that overall indicated skepticism, using qualifying terms and punctuation, including those mentioned above in reference to the phenomena, or statements and/or evidence disproving the existence of the reported phenomena.

### Location of Appearance

These references were tracked for number of appearances as well as where they appeared (i.e., news, editorial, features, business, sports, column/commentary) and on what page they appeared. In addition, stories were coded as to their length in column inches (1-3, 4-6, 7-10, 11-15, 16 or more). They also were coded according to whether a

phenomenon keyword was included in the headline and whether the story included a photograph, graphic, or table.

These categories added qualitative information to the study. Inferences could be drawn regarding how the newspapers treated paranormal phenomena in different sections of the appears (i.e., did the papers give more balanced attention in news sections than in features?). Placement, as coded by page and section, also provides information about how important the paper considered the story and what importance an audience might attach to the story. Headline writing and use of a graphic increase visibility and might imply increased importance and credibility.

The original coding sheet used in the study is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1  
Coding Sheet

**Case #                      SAEN                      SAL                      Date appeared**

**Tenor**

1. Positive
2. Neutral/Balanced
3. Negative

**Type of Phenomena/Number of Appearances**

1. UFOs
2. Aliens and alien abduction
3. Psychics\*
4. Telekinesis
5. ESP
6. Ghosts, poltergeists and spirits
7. Crop circles
8. Other supernatural and paranormal phenomena

**Placement**

**Page**

**Space**

- |                      |  |                      |
|----------------------|--|----------------------|
| 1. News              |  | 1. 1-3 inches        |
| 2. Editorial         |  | 2. 4-6 inches        |
| 3. Features          |  | 3. 7-10 inches       |
| 4. Business          |  | 4. 11-15 inches      |
| 5. Sports            |  | 5. 16 or more inches |
| 6. Column/Commentary |  |                      |

**Phenomenon keyword in headline?**

Does the story include a photo?      graphic?      table?

\*(includes mediums, telepathy and psychic ability, such as psychic surgery and clairvoyance)

## DATA ANALYSIS

Univariate statistical analysis was used to help determine what trends there were, if any, in coverage of paranormal phenomena. This was examined for the newspapers individually and together, and for the sections of the newspapers, both individually and together.

The chi-square test is used to determine if two variables are independent or related. Chi-squares were run to see if there were correlations between the month a story ran and the tenor of the story, the month the story ran and the section in which it appeared, the month a story ran and the type of phenomena covered in the story, and the month in which the story ran and the number of mentions of paranormal phenomena. In addition, a chi-square was run on the variables of astrology and mention of paranormal phenomena.

The chi-square test also was used to see what trends, if any, exist in the presentation of paranormal phenomena over time and across newspapers (i.e., do certain phenomena, such as telekinesis, rise and fall in terms of amount and tenor of coverage?).

## DATA COLLECTION

Research was conducted from May 2000 through October 2000, using microfilm copies of the *San Antonio Light* and the *San Antonio Express-News*. Note that during the 1970s the *Express-News* was a combined edition on Saturday and Sunday, but published separately as the *Express* and the *News* during the week. For this study, the *Express* edition of the paper was used.

Research was conducted using microfilm at three local institutions: Trinity University, University of Texas at San Antonio, and the San Antonio Central Library.

In addition to the microfilm, keyword searches were conducted for the *San Antonio Light* for the time period March through May 1970. The online content of the Newsbank database contained only content for the *Light* during this period and did not include regular column material. The keyword searches were used only to confirm that no material was missed during the visual search process. In addition to the words describing the Type of Phenomena on the Coding Sheet, the following words and phrases were used in the search: horoscope, astrology, astrologer, crystal ball, precognition, phrenology, tell fortunes, fortune telling, in the stars, astrological, zodiac, palm reading, palm reader, prophecy, prophet.

During the research phase of the project, additional variables were added to the coding sheet: Astrology, Classified, and Multiple Phenomena. Astrology was added as a separate variable because it became apparent that it was a major subcategory of the Type category. Many of the cases collected during the research were the daily or weekly astrology/horoscope columns; during most of the period studied the *Express-News* was running two daily astrology/horoscope columns. Classified was added because the *Light* carried some stories in that section of the paper, and Multiple Phenomena was added to account for stories that included more than one phenomena type.

The revised Coding Sheet appears in Figure 2.

Figure 2

## Revised Coding Sheet

Case #	SAEN	SAL	Date appeared
--------	------	-----	---------------

**Tenor**

1. Positive
2. Neutral/Balanced
3. Negative

**Type of Phenomena/Number of Appearances/Astrology**

1. UFOs
2. Aliens and alien abduction
3. Psychics\*
4. Telekinesis
5. ESP
6. Ghosts, poltergeists and spirits
7. Crop circles
8. Other supernatural and paranormal phenomena
9. Multiple phenomena

**Placement****Page****Space**

- |                      |  |                      |
|----------------------|--|----------------------|
| 1. News              |  | 1. 1-3 inches        |
| 2. Editorial         |  | 2. 4-6 inches        |
| 3. Features          |  | 3. 7-10 inches       |
| 4. Business          |  | 4. 11-15 inches      |
| 5. Sports            |  | 5. 16 or more inches |
| 6. Column/Commentary |  |                      |
| 7. Classified        |  |                      |

**Phenomenon keyword in headline?**

**Does the story include** a photo?      graphic?      table?

\*(includes mediums, telepathy and psychic ability, such as psychic surgery and clairvoyance)

Cartoons were not coded if they appeared in the regular daily comic section but were coded if they appeared in any other section such as Editorial, OpEd/Commentary, Business, or Sports. The placement beyond the highly segregated comic section draws attention to these cartoons, giving them added weight. Four cartoons were coded.

In addition, stories or columns written in Spanish were not coded because the researcher does not read Spanish. The *Express-News* ran a regular news brief roundup titled Noticiero En Español in 1970.

Data were not collected on advertising or advertorial stories (articles that look like regular news stories but are in fact biased toward or paid for by an advertiser). If the story was not clearly labeled as being produced by the advertising department of the newspaper, it was considered valid for inclusion in the study. This primarily came into play in the real estate, automotive, and special sections such as one on health careers. During the 1970s, the *San Antonio Light* and *San Antonio Express-News* were not as diligent in labeling advertorial copy as such. Therefore, stories in sections such as real estate and automotive were included in the study during the 1970s but were not in the 1990s.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

#### Time

Seven hundred ninety stories were found to contain nonreligious paranormal phenomena content during the periods March through May 1970 and March through May 1990. Analysis shows that there were more nonreligious paranormal phenomena stories in March through May 1970 than in March through May 1990 (see Figure 3). In both 1970 and 1990, coverage peaked in April, dropping back to almost the same number of stories in May as were found in March. This trend held true for each newspaper in 1970, but not in 1990 when content was more evenly distributed across the three months. Comparing each month to the same month two decades later, analysis shows that March 1970 contained 135 stories compared to 116 stories in March 1990, April 1970 contained 161 stories while April 1990 had 122 stories, and May 1970 had 138 stories while May 1990 had 118 stories (see Figure 4).

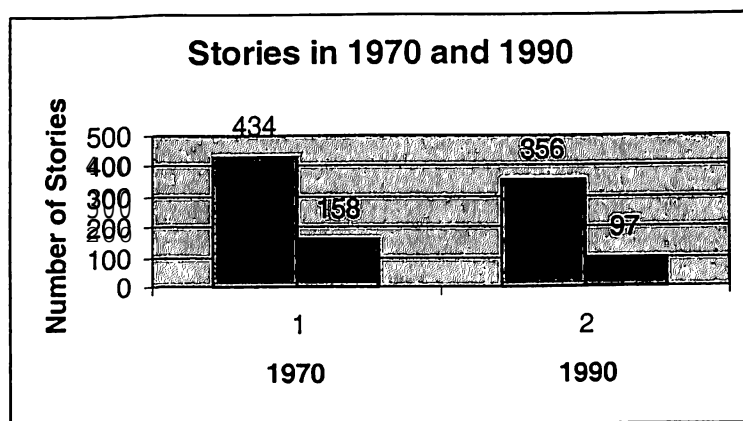
Additionally, the data show that overall there were 100 more stories (13%) on such phenomena in the *Express-News* (445 stories) than in the *Light* (345 stories) (see Figure 5). The *Express-News* ran nearly twice the number of stories on paranormal phenomena as the *Light* did in 1990.

In addition, when data were compared for the individual months, generally there were more stories on such phenomena in the *Express-News* than the *Light* (see Figure 6). The only month in which the *Light* ran more nonreligious paranormal content than that *Express-News* was March 1970, during which time the *Light* ran 74 stories compared to the *Express-News'* 61.



Figure 3

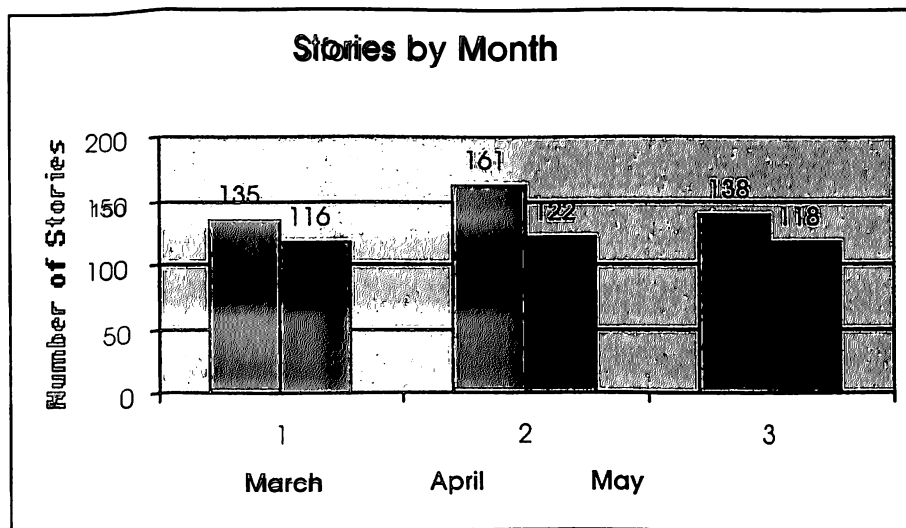
Comparison of Stories in 1970 and 1990\*



\*Data in blue include horoscope columns; data in red exclude horoscope columns.

Figure 4

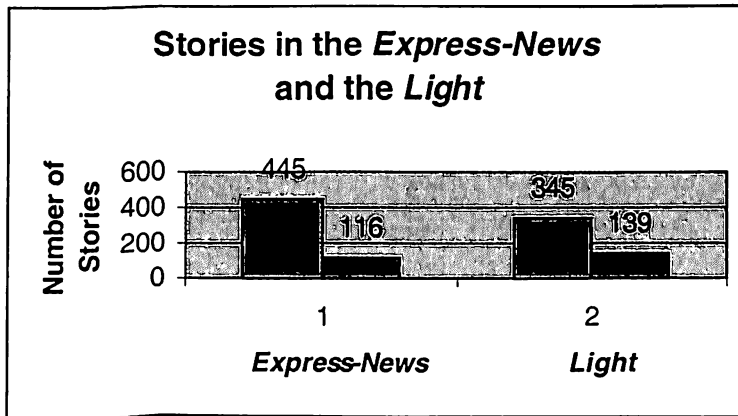
Comparison of Stories by Month\*



\*Data for 1970 are in blue; data for 1990 are in red.

Figure 5

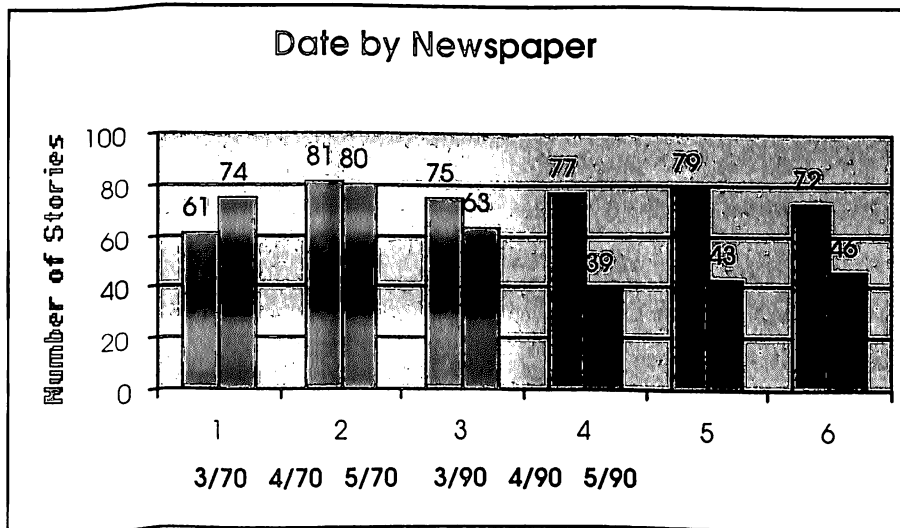
Comparison of Stories in the *Express-News* and the *Light*\*



\*Data in blue include horoscope columns; data in red exclude horoscope columns.

Figure 6

Comparison of Stories in the *Express-News* and the *Light* by Decade\*



\*Data for the *Express-News* are shown in blue; data for the *Light* are in red.

### Tenor

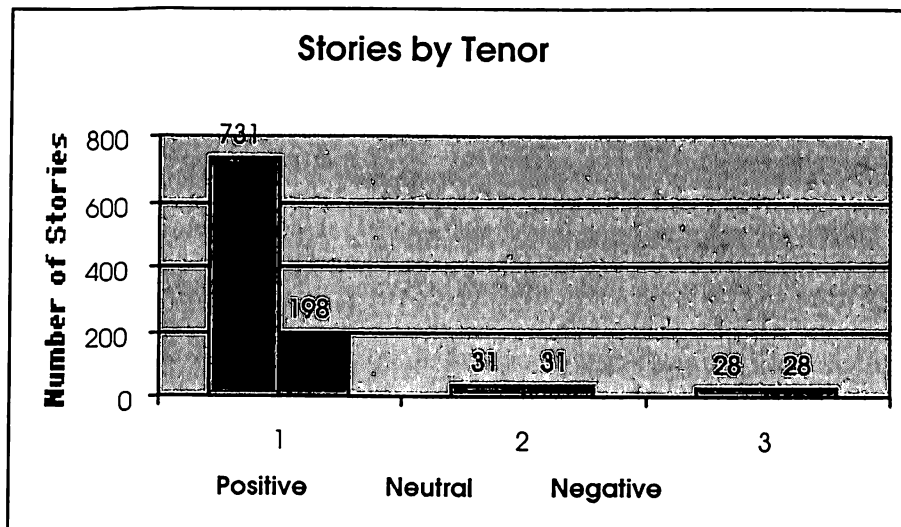
Seven hundred thirty-one stories (92.5%) were coded as positive in tenor (reports in which paranormal phenomena overall are considered or referred to as factual events and/or abilities), while 31 (3.9%) were coded as neutral (presents an equal percentage of contrasting views of the phenomena and/or use of qualifying language), and 28 (3.5%) were coded as negative in tenor (overall indicates skepticism, or statements disproving the existence of the reported phenomena). This reflects the fact that 67% of the material that met the study criteria (533 stories) were horoscope/astrology columns that by their nature are positive. When horoscope columns were eliminated from the sample, analysis showed that 198 stories (77%) were coded as positive, 31 (12%) as neutral, and 28 (11%) as negative (see Figure 7).

When the individual newspapers are analyzed, data show that 411 stories in the *Express-News* were coded as positive (92.4%), 15 as neutral (3.4%), and 19 as negative (4.3%). When the horoscope columns are deleted from the sample, the analysis shows 73 stories were coded as positive (68.2%), 15 as neutral (14%), and 19 as negative (17.8%). In the *Light*, 320 stories including the horoscope columns were coded as positive (92.8%), 16 were neutral (4.6%), and 9 were negative (2.6%). When the horoscope columns were deleted from the sample, the data show that 125 stories were coded as positive (83.3%), 16 were neutral (10.7%), and 9 were negative (6%). For a graphical representation of these data, see Figures 8 and 9.

As the data show, *Express-News* had more positive stories overall by virtue of running more horoscope columns, but when the horoscope columns are deleted from the sample, it is clear that the *Light* was more positive in its stories about nonreligious paranormal phenomena. The two papers were nearly even in the number of stories that could be considered neutral, and the *Express-News* had nearly double the number of negative stories that the *Light* carried. See Figure 10 for a comparison of the tenor of paranormal stories carried by the two papers, excluding horoscope columns.

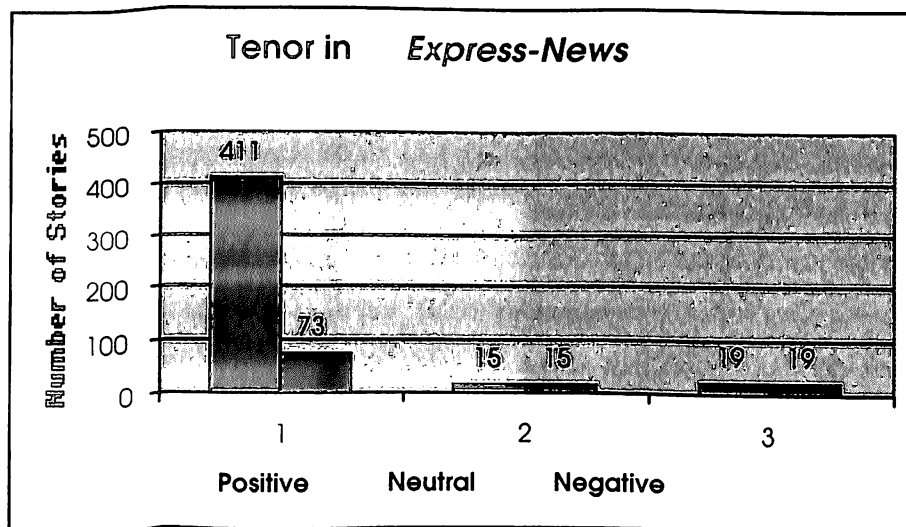
Figure 7

Comparison of Stories by Tenor\*



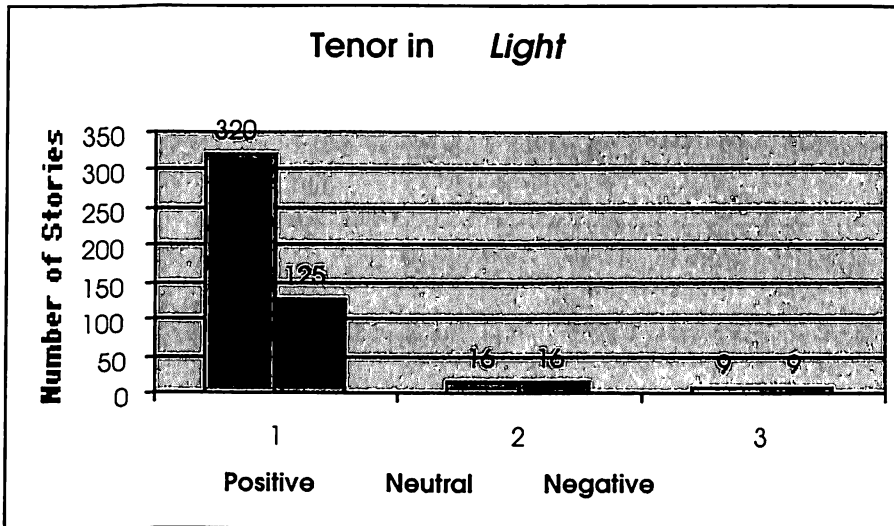
\*Data including horoscope columns shown in blue; data excluding horoscope columns shown in red.

Figure 8

Comparison of the Tenor of Stories in the *San Antonio Express-News*\*

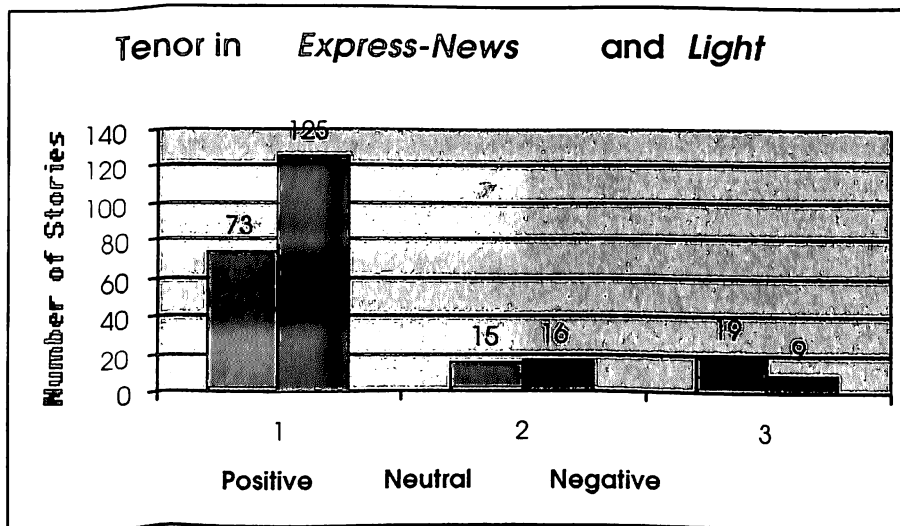
\*Data in blue include horoscope columns; data in red exclude horoscope columns.

Figure 9

Tenor of Stories in the *San Antonio Light*\*

\*Data in blue include horoscope columns; data in red exclude horoscope columns.

Figure 10

Comparison of Tenor in the *Express-News* and the *Light*,  
Excluding Horoscope Columns

## Section

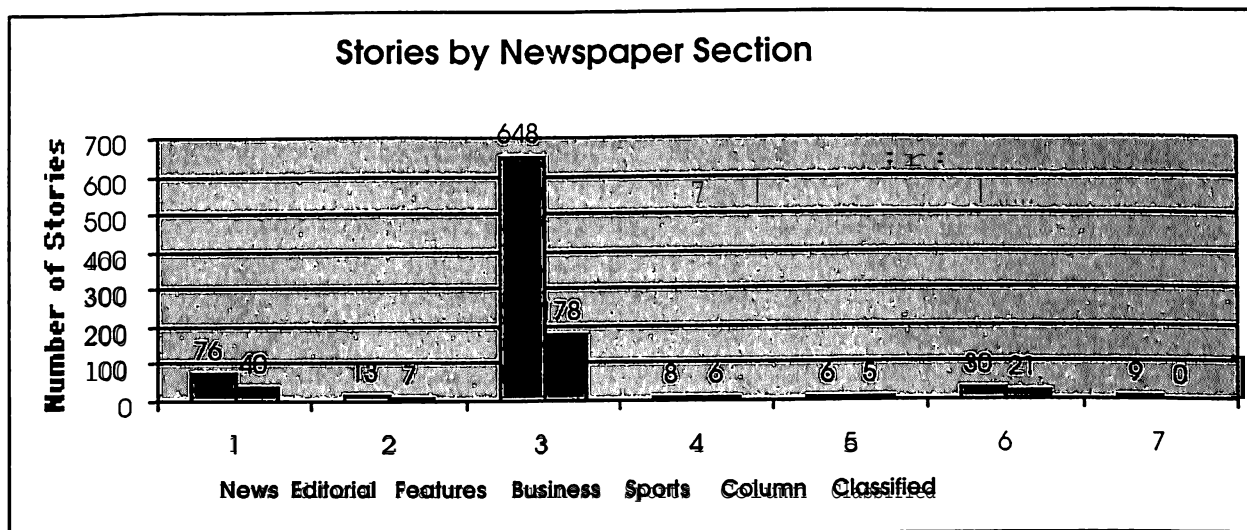
The features section of the newspaper carried the greatest number of stories on nonreligious paranormal phenomena, both overall and individually by newspaper. Analysis of the data shows that overall, 76 stories (9.6%) appeared in the news section, 13 (1.6%) in the editorial section, 648 (82%) in features, 8 (1%) in business, 6 (.8%) in sports, 30 (3.8%) in column/commentary (defined as the OpEd/Column section facing the editorial page), and 9 (1.1%) in the classified section (see Figure 11).

In the *Express-News*, 60 stories (13.48%) were in the news section, 4 stories (.9%) were in the editorial section, 369 (82.92%) in features, 4 (.9%) in business, 3 (.67%) in sports, and 5 (1.12%) in column/commentary. No stories were in the classified section. In the *Light*, 16 stories (4.64%) were in the news section, 9 (2.61%) in editorial, 279 (80.87%) in features, 4 (1.16%) in business, 3 (.87%) in sports, 25 (7.25%) in column/commentary, and 9 (2.61%) in classified (see Figure 12).

Figure 13 shows the number of stories per section when the horoscope columns were deleted from the dataset. The gap in the total stories in the news section of the *Express-News* and the *Light* shrunk, while all other categories except the features section remained nearly the same. In the features section, the data show the *Light* carried more paranormal stories, the opposite of when the horoscope columns were included.

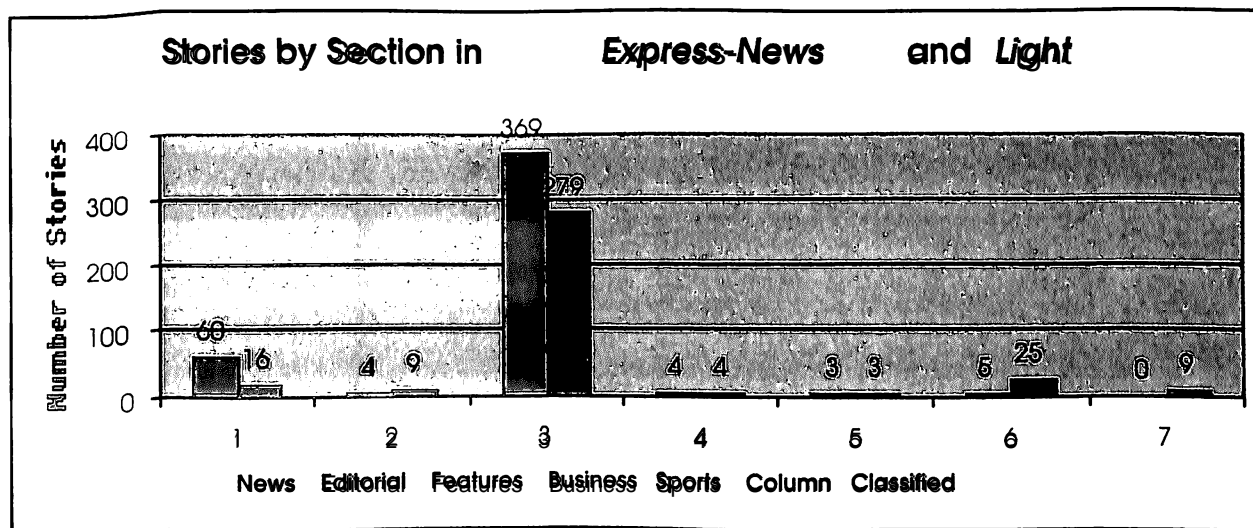
Figure 11

Comparison of Stories by Newspaper Section\*



\*Data including horoscope columns are shown in blue; data excluding horoscope columns are shown in red.

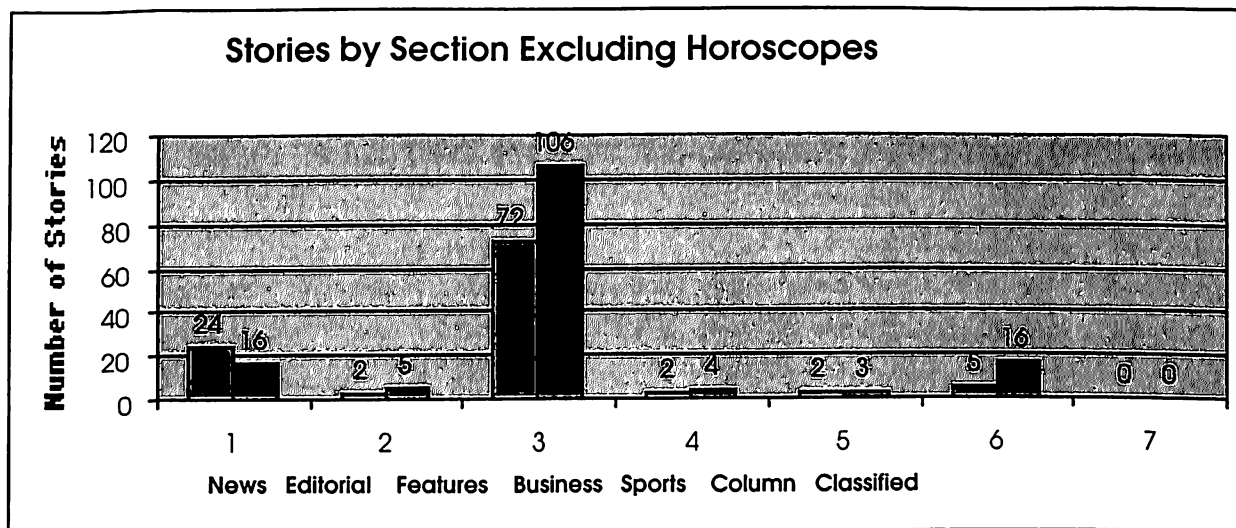
Figure 12

Stories by Section in the *San Antonio Express-News* and the *San Antonio Light*\*

\*Data from the *Express-News* are shown in blue; data from the *Light* are shown in red.

Figure 13

Comparison of Stories by Section Excluding Horoscope Columns



\*Data from the *Express-News* are shown in blue; data from the *Light* are shown in red.

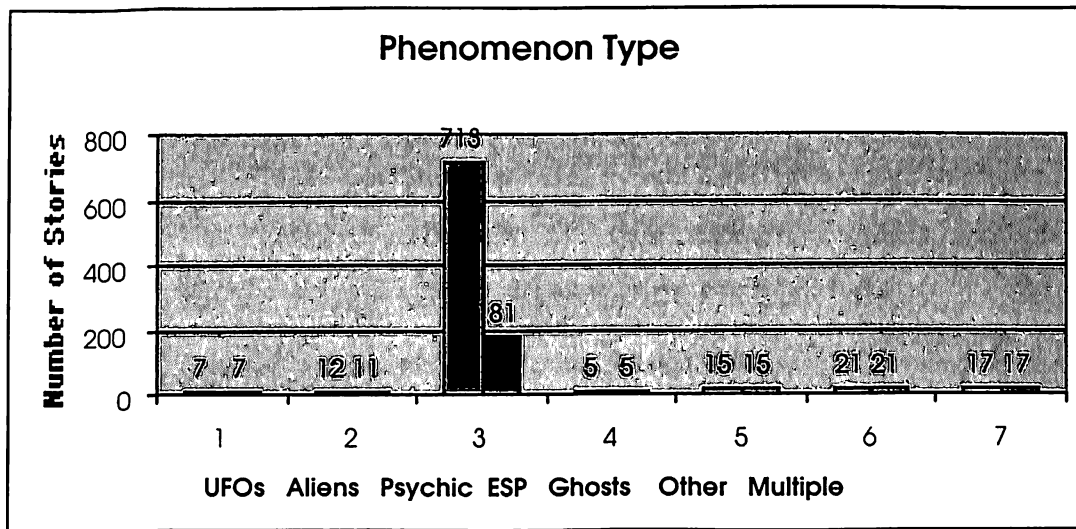
### Phenomena Type

The breakdown of phenomena type for both newspapers combined is shown in Figure 14. Seven stories (.9%) dealt with UFOs; 12 (1.5%) focused on aliens and alien abductions; 713 (90.3%) dealt with psychic phenomena, including mediums, telepathy and psychic ability, such as psychic surgery and clairvoyance; 5 stories (.6%) were about ESP; 15 (1.9%) were about ghosts, poltergeists, and spirits; 21 (2.7%) dealt with other supernatural and paranormal phenomena such as crystals; and 17 (2.2%) were about multiple categories of paranormal phenomena. There were no stories coded on telekinesis or crop circles. When the horoscope/astrology columns were deleted from the sample, the analysis breaks down as follows: 7 (2.7%), UFOs; 11 (4.3%), aliens and alien abductions; 181 (70.4%), psychic phenomena; 5 (2%), ESP; 15 (5.8%), ghosts, poltergeists, and spirits; 21 (8.1%), other supernatural and paranormal phenomena; and 17 (6.7%), multiple categories of phenomena.



Figure 14

Comparison of Stories by Phenomenon Type\*



\*Data including horoscope columns are shown in blue; data excluding horoscope columns are shown in red.

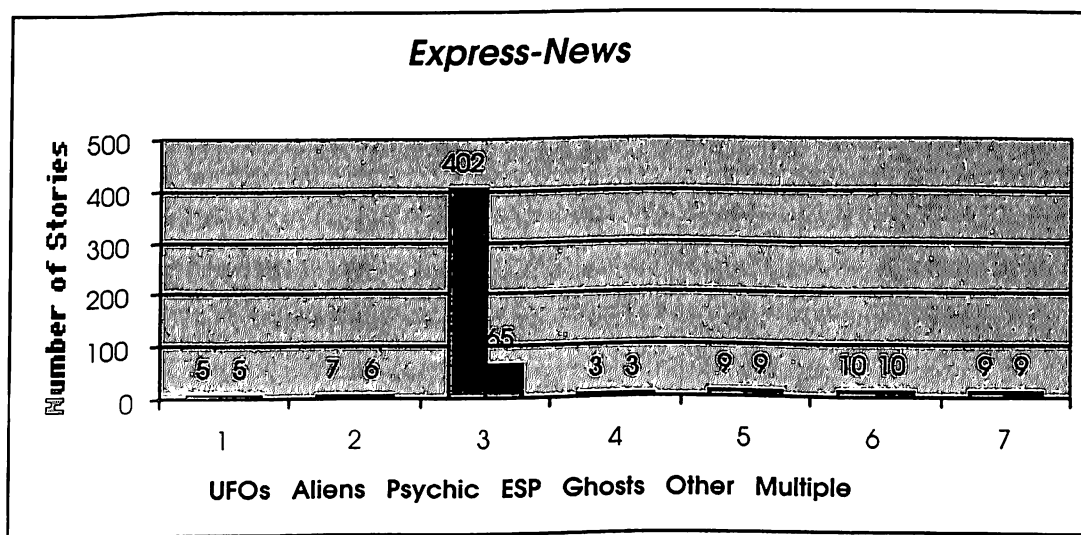
The results of an examination of phenomena type by individual newspaper are shown in Figures 15 and 16. Including the horoscope columns, the *Express-News* contained 5 stories on UFOs (1.1%); 7 on aliens and alien abductions (1.6%); 402 on psychics phenomena (90.3%); 3 on ESP (.7%); 9 on ghosts, poltergeists, and spirits (2%); 10 on other supernatural and paranormal phenomena (2.2%); and 9 on multiple categories of paranormal phenomena (2%). When the horoscope columns are excluded, the *Express-News* contained 5 stories on UFOs (4.7%); 6 on aliens and alien abductions (5.6%); 65 on psychics (60.8%); 3 on ESP (2.8%); 9 on ghosts, poltergeists, and spirits (8.4%); 10 on other supernatural and paranormal phenomena (9.3%); and 9 on multiple categories of paranormal phenomena (8.4%).

Including the horoscope columns, the *Light* contained 2 stories on UFOs (.6%); 5 on aliens and alien abductions (1.4%); 311 on psychics (90.1%); 2 on ESP (.6%); 6 on ghosts, poltergeists, and spirits (1.7); 11 on other supernatural and paranormal phenomena (3.2%); and 8 on multiple categories of phenomena (2.3%). When the

horoscope columns are excluded, the *Light* contained 2 stories on UFOs (1.3%); 5 on aliens and alien abductions (3.3%); 116 on psychics (77.3%); 2 on ESP (1.3%); 6 on ghosts, poltergeists, and spirits (4%); 11 on other supernatural and paranormal phenomena (7.3%); and 8 on multiple categories of paranormal phenomena (5.3%).

Figure 15

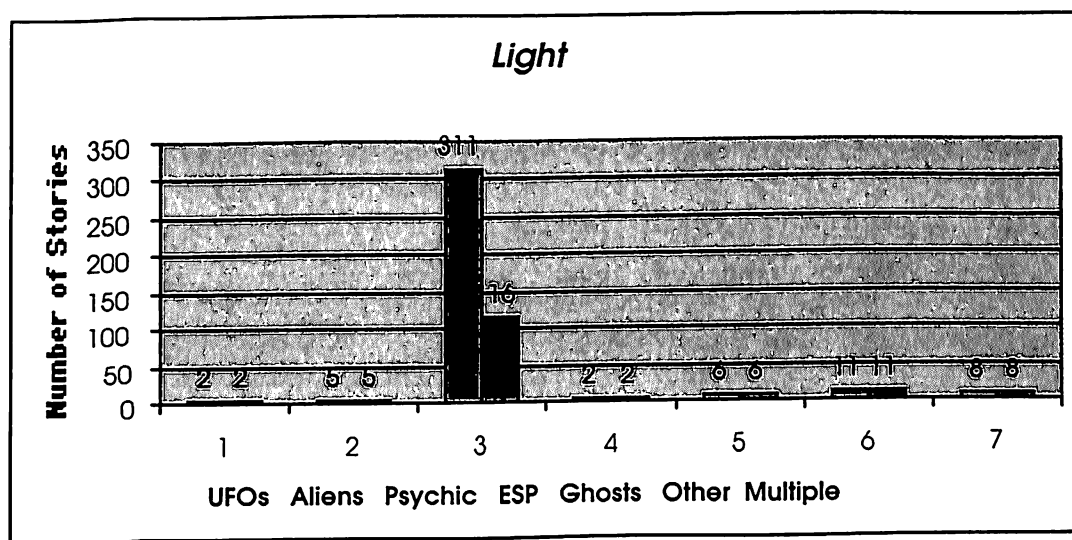
Stories by Phenomenon Type in the *San Antonio Express-News*\*



\*Data including horoscope columns are shown in blue; data excluding horoscope columns are shown in red.

Figure 16

Stories by Phenomenon Type in the *San Antonio Light*\*



\*Data including horoscope columns are shown in blue; data excluding horoscope columns are shown in red.

### Length

Overall, 92 stories were 1–3 inches in length (11.6%), 13 were 4–6 inches long (1.6%), 213 were 7–10 inches long (27%), 141 were 11–15 inches long (17.8%), and 331 were 16 or more inches long (41.9%). When the horoscope columns were deleted, the data show that 92 stories were 1–3 inches in length (35.8%), 13 were 4–6 inches long (5%), 29 were 7–10 inches long (11.3%), 29 were 11–15 inches long (11.3%), and 94 were 16 or more inches long (36.6%) (see Figure 17).

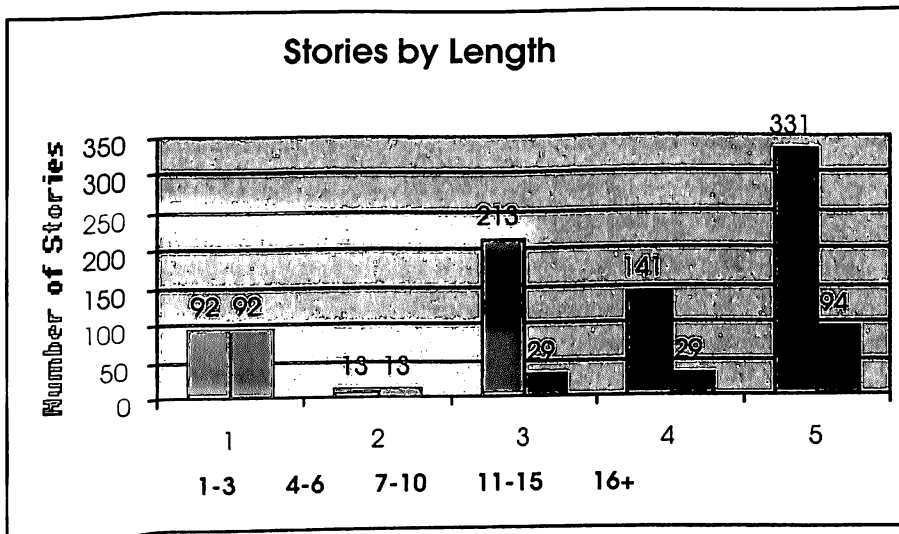
The results for the individual papers show a good deal of variance in story length (see Figure 18). In the *Express-News*, 4 stories were 1–3 inches long (.9%), 11 were 4–6 inches long (2.5%), 111 were 7–10 inches long (24.9%), 97 were 11–15 inches long (21.8%), and 222 were 16 or more inches long (49.8%). In the *Light*, 88 stories were

1–3 inches long (25.5%), 2 were 4–6 inches (.6%), 102 were 7–10 inches (29.6%), 44 were 11–15 inches (12.8%), and 109 were 16 or more inches (31.5%).

Figure 19 shows the comparison of story length between the two newspapers when horoscopes were deleted from the dataset. The gap between the *Express-News* and the *Light* widened in the 7–10 inch category from a 9-point difference to a 17-point difference. The gap narrowed from 53-point difference to a 1-point difference in the 11–15 inch category and from a 113-point difference to a 14-point difference in the 16 or more inch category. The other two length categories remained the same.

Figure 17

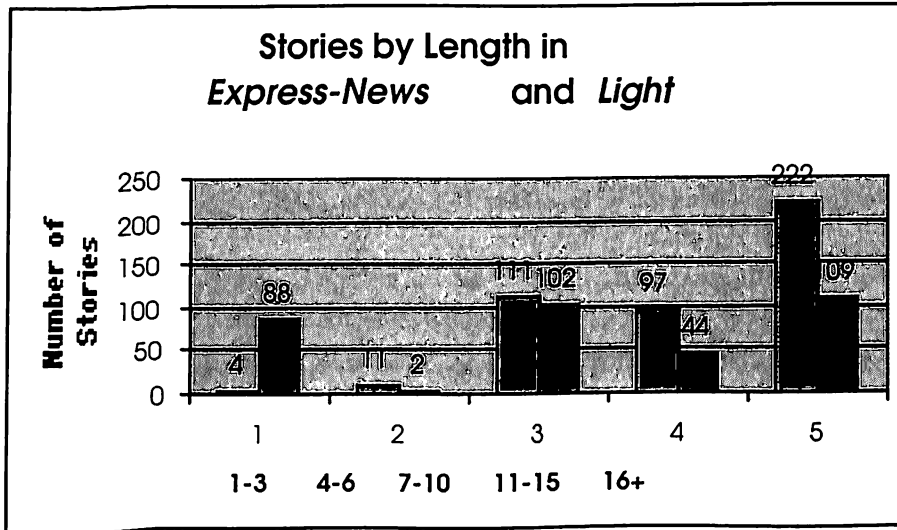
Comparison of Stories by Length\*



\*Data including horoscope columns are shown in blue; data excluding horoscope columns are shown in red.

Figure 18

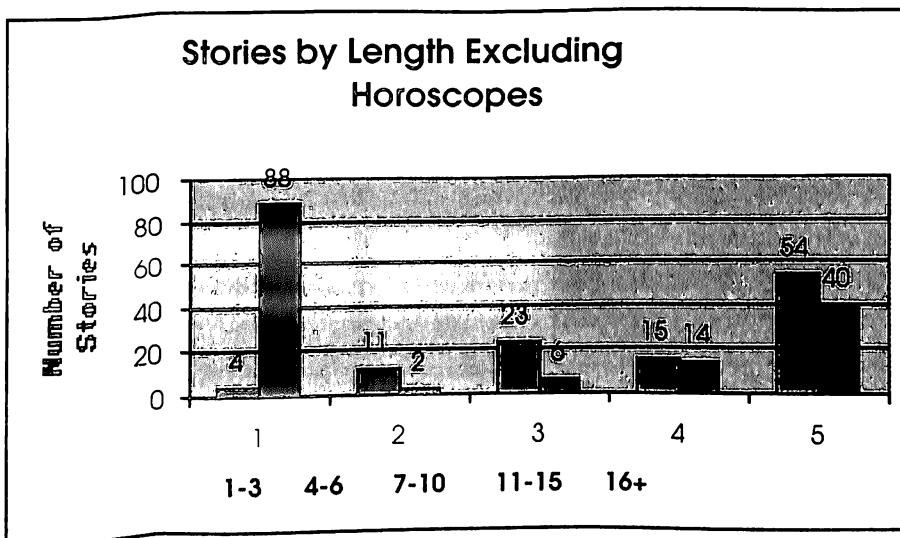
Comparison of Stories by Length in the *San Antonio Express-News* and *San Antonio Light*\*



\*Data from the *Express-News* are shown in blue; data from the *Light* are shown in red.

Figure 19

Comparison of Stories by Length Excluding Horoscopes\*



\*Data from the *Express-News* are shown in blue; data from the *Light* are shown in red.

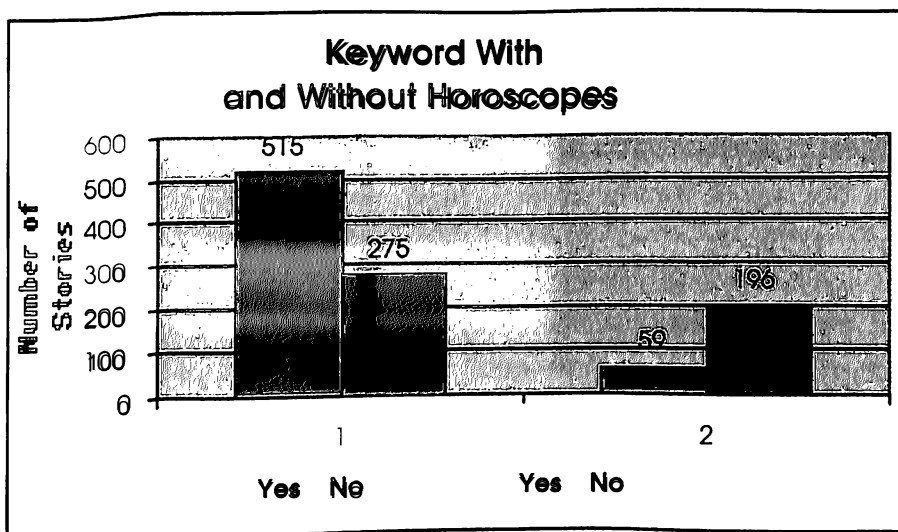
### Keyword

Analysis of the data shows that 275 stories (34.8%) contained a paranormal phenomenon keyword in the headline and 515 (65.2%) did not. When the horoscope columns are eliminated from the sample, research shows that 59 stories (23.1%) contained a keyword, while 196 stories (76.9%) did not (see Figure 20).

The data also show that 144 stories (32.4%) of the stories in the *Express-News* contained a paranormal phenomenon keyword in the headline while 301 stories (67.6%) did not. In the *Light*, 214 stories (62%) contained a paranormal phenomenon keyword and 131 stories (38%) did not. Again, when the horoscope columns are deleted from the sample, 40 stories (37.4%) in the *Express-News* contained a keyword in the headline and 67 stories (62.6%) did not. In the *Light*, 20 stories (13.3%) contained a keyword, while 130 (86.7%) did not. See Figures 21 and 22.

Figure 20

Comparison of Stories Containing a Paranormal Keyword in the Headline\*



\* Data in blue include horoscope columns; data in red exclude horoscope columns.

Figure 21

Comparison of Stories Containing a Keyword by Newspaper

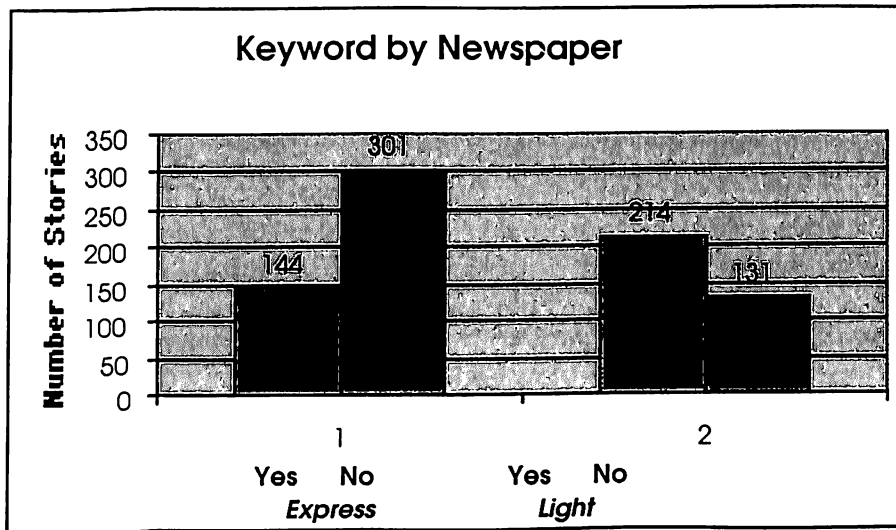
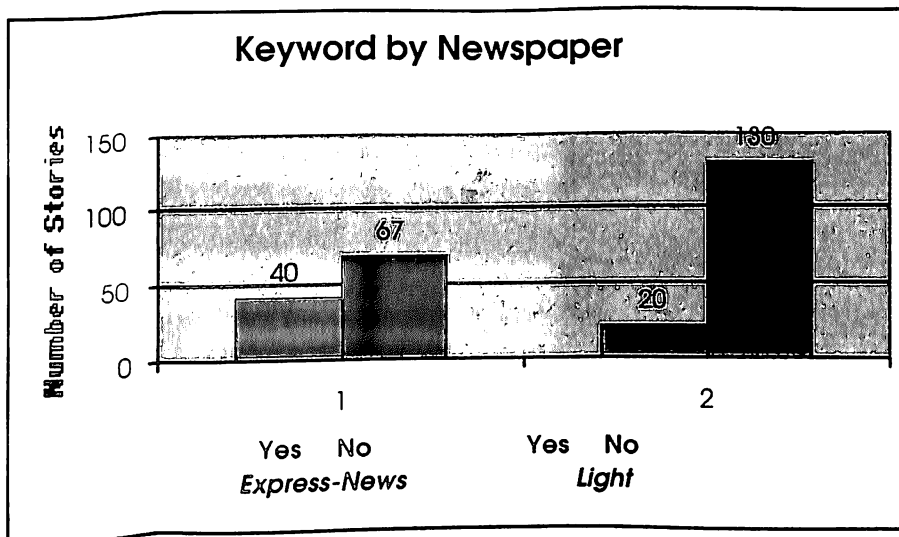


Figure 22

Comparison of Stories Containing a Keyword by Newspaper Without Horoscopes



## Graphic

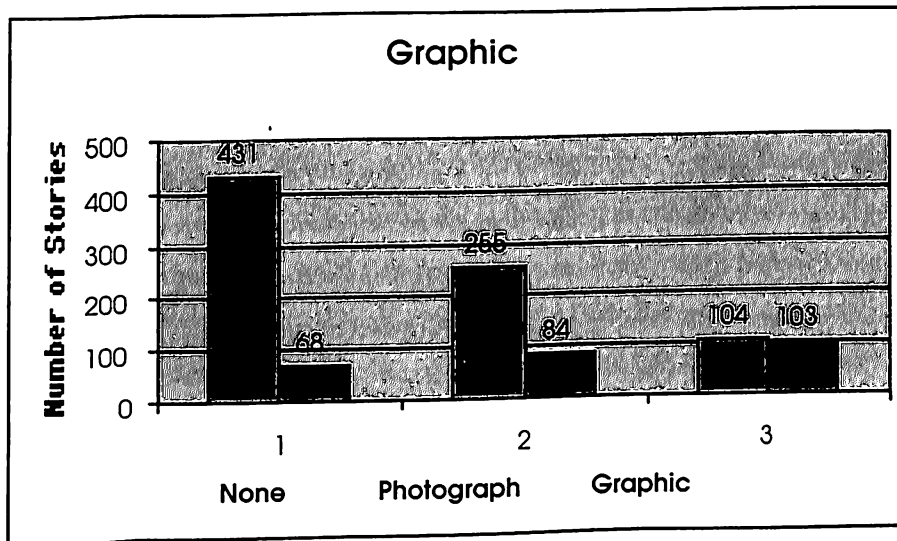
There were fewer stories that contained either a photograph or other graphic (e.g., illustration, logo) than those that did not. Overall, there were 431 stories (54.6%) without a graphic of any kind, 255 stories (32.3%) accompanied by a photograph (or a photograph and caption only), and 104 (13.2%) with another type of graphic. When the horoscope columns are eliminated from the data, the breakdown is as follows: 68 (26.7%) with no graphic, 84 (32.9%) with a photograph, and 103 (40.4%) with another type of graphic (see Figure 23).

Analysis of the data shows that in the *Express-News*, 207 stories (46.5%) contained no graphics at all, 223 (50.1%) contained a photograph, and 15 (3.4%) were accompanied by a another type of graphic. In comparison, 224 stories (64.9%) in the *Light* had no graphic, 32 (9.3%) also had a photograph, while 89 (25.8%) had a another type of graphic. When the horoscope columns are deleted from the dataset, the breakdown for the *Express-News* is: 39 with no graphic (36.8%), 53 with a photograph (50%), and 14 with another type of graphic (13.2%). For the *Light*, the breakdown is 29 with no graphic (19.5%), 31 with a photograph (20.8%), and 89 with another type of graphic (59.7%). See Figures 24 and 25.



Figure 23

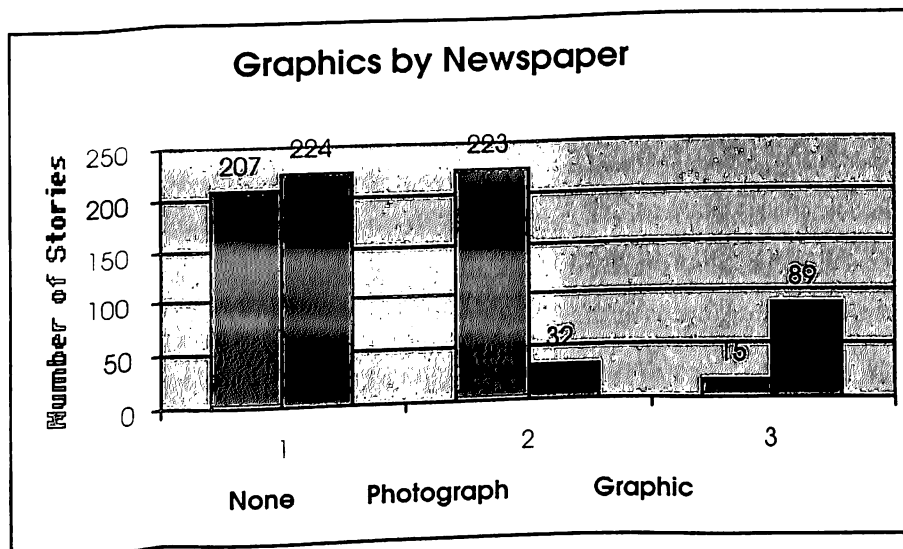
Comparison of Stories Containing a Graphic\*



\* Data in blue include horoscope columns; data in red reflect elimination of horoscope columns from sample.

Figure 24

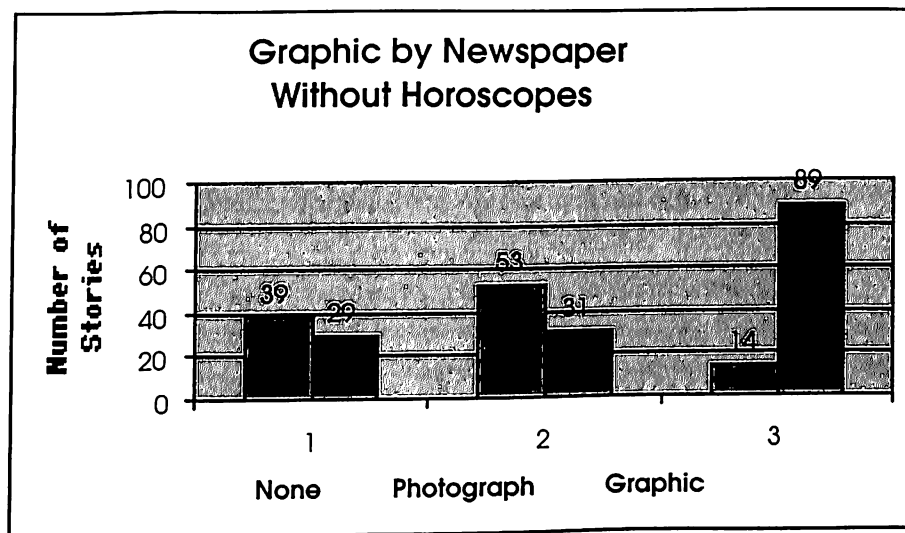
Comparison of Stories Containing Graphics by Newspaper\*



\*Data from *Express-News* shown in blue; data from *Light* shown in red.

Figure 28

Comparison of Stories Containing Graphics by Newspaper Without Horoscopes\*



\*Data from *Express-News* shown in blue; data from *Light* shown in red.

### Chi-Squares

Chi-squares were run on several pairs of variables to determine if a pair of variables are independent or related. When comparing the month in which the story ran with the tenor of the story, chi-square analysis shows that the two variables are not statistically independent. The chi-square for these two variables was 6.521, with a statistical significance of .259. This held true when the two years were examined separately against tenor. The chi-square for 1970 and tenor was 3.099, with a statistical significance of .212; the chi-square for 1990 and tenor was 2.595, with a statistical significance of .273.

However, chi-square analysis comparing the month in which the story ran with its placement in sections of the paper showed that these two variables are independent, with a chi-square of 16.534 and a statistical significance of .005.

A chi-square analysis also compared the month in which a story ran with the type of phenomena covered in the story. This, too, showed that the two variables are not

statistically independent. The chi-square for these two variables was 2.395 with a statistical significance of .792.

Two other pairs of variables were analyzed using chi-square: month in which a story ran and mention, and astrology as a subset of psychic phenomena and mention. Both analyses showed that these variables are independent of each other. The chi-square for the first pair was 22.954 with a statistical significance of .000; for the second pair it was 7825 with a statistical significance of .000.

Analysis showed that tenor was related to the month in which a story ran as was the type of phenomena. This suggests that these are times of the year in which certain types of phenomena might increase in coverage because of outside considerations (i.e., more stories on the supernatural and superstition on April 1) and at certain times of the year, newspapers are more willing to present certain tenors of coverage (i.e., tongue-in-cheek stories about leprechauns and other supernatural folk in March). It would be helpful if more analysis could be done on the rest of the year to see if the results of these comparisons remain the same.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

Coverage in the two newspapers ranged from daily horoscope columns to stories about celebrities and ghosts to talks on psychic phenomena. Among the positive coverage, there was a profile of Zolar, an alleged astrologer, (Associated Press, March 1, 1970) and a Sunday magazine story on "Astrology: A New Interest in the Occult" (Kleiner, March 15, 1970). In addition, there were stories on the supposed healing and medical properties of crystals and of copper bracelets (United Press International, April 17, 1990), Jeane Dixon's annual psychic predictions (Dixon, April 8, 1990), the link between the so-called Men in Black and UFOs (Scripps Howard Service, April 8, 1990), and beauty tips based on astrological signs (Dahl, March 8, 1970).

Neutral stories included a lecture by Amy Freeman Lee to a group described as being dedicated to objectively examining psychic phenomena (*San Antonio Light*, April 5, 1970) and a couple of women who make Island Magic Jewelry (Budge, March 18, 1990).

Negative stories included a Paul Thompson column on "crystal ball readings" (Thompson, April 4, 1970), a story about astrology and numerology (*San Antonio Light*, April 9, 1970), and a story about a "phony psychic" con man (*Star*, March 4, 1990).

There was a downward trend in the amount of coverage nonreligious paranormal phenomena received over time. The *Express-News* provided more coverage than the *Light* did except for March 1970, mainly because it ran two daily horoscope columns to the *Light's* single column and March 1970 was the only month when the *Express-News* did not run a full month of two daily horoscope columns. Starting in mid-March of that year, the *Express-News* began its second daily astrology column, a computerized column titled Astrodata (later renamed Astraldata).

Of the 790 stories coded for this analysis, 535 were horoscope columns. Of these, 276 appeared in 1970 and 259 appeared in 1990 (see Figure 3, page 24).

Because of the possibility that the ubiquitous presence of horoscope columns in the papers might skew the data, many variables were examined with and without the horoscope columns.

It is difficult to determine the impact horoscopes have on the public's perception of paranormal phenomena. Have they, through their widespread appearance in newspapers, attained a sense of normalcy for the reading public and become in essence part of the background noise of a newspaper? Does this hold true if they appear outside their traditional section of the newspaper, the features section? Further study of this matter is indicated, especially in regard to horoscopes location in a newspaper. The public's acceptance of material in one section of the newspaper might not be the same as its acceptance of the same material in another section (i.e., horoscopes are okay in the "soft news" features section but not in the "hard news" news section).

Although this content analysis doesn't directly address the influence of media coverage of the paranormal, the horoscope columns could be perceived as skewing the results of the research. Therefore, when considering tenor, type, and section, analyses were run both including and excluding these columns to see if there indeed was a difference.

The bulk of the coverage presented was positive in tenor, while neutral and negative coverage was relatively small. This held true both when horoscope columns were included and excluded (see Figure 7, page 27).

When horoscope columns were included in the sample, the *Express-News* had more stories coded as positive in tenor than the *Light* did but when they were excluded, overall the *Light* had more stories that were positive.

Most often, horoscope columns ran in the features section and so might be missed by some readers. When horoscope columns were included in the data sample, the percentages of stories coded as positive, neutral, or negative tenor were about the same in each paper. However, when those columns were eliminated, the *Light* showed a much larger percentage of positive stories than the *Express-News* (see Figures 8–10, pages 27–28).

In answer to Research Question 1 (How did the newspapers' portrayals of paranormal phenomena differ in 1990 from those in 1970?), an examination of tenor across time in the *Express-News* shows that the positive coverage remained relatively constant from 1970 to 1990, both when including and excluding astrology columns. However, there was an increase in stories coded as neutral or negative in 1990 over those in 1970, indicating a slightly more balanced presentation of nonreligious paranormal phenomena.

In the *Light*, however, there was an overall drop in coverage as well as a drop in positive coverage, especially when astrology columns are excluded from the sample. In addition, there was a decrease in the number of neutral or negative stories from 1970 to 1990. This shows a more positive portrayal of paranormal phenomena as a percentage of such coverage.

Overall, there was a decrease in the number of paranormal stories overall as well as in positive portrayals while the number of stories coded as neutral or negative increased. Interestingly, in May 1970 and May 1990 there was a decrease in the number of neutral and negative stories. A reader of both newspapers would see less coverage, but a more balanced coverage, of paranormal phenomena.

The majority of paranormal stories were carried in the features section of each newspaper, followed by the news section. Further study is needed to see whether this would affect readers' perception of paranormal coverage. Readers' perception could be affected by readership trends of certain sections (i.e., some readers might regularly bypass certain sections of the newspaper and therefore be unaffected by coverage contained therein) and by their perception of stories within a "softer" news section of the paper versus a "harder" news section of the paper (i.e., would they expect or accept less objectivity and balance in the features section than in the news section).

In answer to Research Question 2 (What sections of the newspapers are most associated with positive portrayals? negative portrayals? neutral or balanced portrayals?), analysis shows that the features section is the section most associated with positive portrayals in the *Express-News*, followed by the news section, editorial, business, sports, and column/commentary. There was no paranormal coverage in the classified section.

The features section also contained the most neutral portrayals, followed by column/commentary, then news. The features section again contained the greatest number of negative stories, followed by news and column/commentary. The other sections had no neutral or negative stories.

In the *Light*, the features section contained the greatest number of stories with positive portrayals, followed by column/commentary, news, classified, editorial, business, and sports. The features section also had the greatest number of neutral stories, followed by news, business, sports, and editorial. The most stories coded as negative were found in the column/commentary section, followed by editorial, features, and sports. The other sections had no neutral or negative stories.

Overall, the features section contained the most paranormal coverage coded as positive, followed by the news section, column/commentary, editorial, classified, business, and sports. The features section also contained the most coverage coded as neutral or negative. The section with the next greatest number of stories coded as neutral was the news section, followed by column/commentary, and editorial. Within the negative coverage, the next highest count after features was in the column/commentary section, followed by news, then editorial. The other sections did not contain neutral or negative coverage.

Research Question 3 addressed whether the occurrence of portrayals showed a change in what section of the paper they appeared. There was a drop in positive portrayals in the news section from 32 in 1970 to 16 in 1990. Neutral portrayals dropped from 4 to zero, while negative stories increased from 1 to 3. The editorial section saw a drop in all three tenor categories, falling from 8 to 1 in positive portrayals, from 1 to zero in neutral stories, and from 2 to 1 in negative stories.

The features section saw a drop in positive portrayals and a rise in neutral and negative stories. Positive stories fell from 311 to 290, neutral stories moved from 8 to 15, and negative stories increased from 5 to 8. The business section also decreased in the number of positive portrayals from 6 to 2, while neutral and negative stories both remained the same at zero.

There was an increase in positive stories in the sports section, moving from 1 to 4. Neutral stories were the same at zero, and negative stories decreased from 1 to zero. The column/commentary section saw a drop in all three tenor categories, moving from 16 to 4 in positive stories, 3 to 2 in neutral stories, and 4 to 1 in negative stories.

The number of positive stories in the classified section increased from zero to 9, while the number of neutral and negative stories remained the same at zero.

In the *Express-News*, the number of positive stories in the news section decreased from 49 in 1970 to 7 in 1990. The number of neutral stories stayed the same, while the number of negative stories increased from 1 to 3. In the editorial section, the number of positive stories fell from 4 to zero, while the neutral and negative stories remained the same at zero.

The features section saw an increase in the number of stories in all three tenors, rising from 148 to 194 in positive stories, from 5 to 9 in neutral stories, and from 4 to 8 in negative stories. There was no change in the number of stories in any of the tenors in the business section with positive stories remaining at 2, while neutral and negative stories remained at zero. In the column/commentary section, there was an increase in the number of positive and negative stories and a decrease in the number of neutral stories. Positive stories rose from zero to 1, neutral stories dropped from 2 to 1, and negative stories rose from zero to 1. There were no stories in the classified section of the *Express-News*.

In the *Light*, there was an increase in the number of positive stories in the news section, rising from 3 to 9; a decrease in neutral stories from 4 to zero; and no change in negative stories, remaining at zero. In the editorial section, the number of stories in all three tenor categories dropped: from 4 to 1, positive; from 1 to zero, neutral; and from 2 to 1, negative.

Likewise, there were drops in all three tenor categories in the features section. The number of positive stories fell nearly in half, from 173 to 96, while the number of neutral stories fell from 3 to 1 and the negative stories decreased from 1 to zero.

In the business section, there was a drop in the number of positive stories, from 4 to zero, while neutral and negative stories remained the same at zero. In the sports



section, there was an increase in positive stories, from zero to 2. Neutral and negative portrayals remained at zero.

There was a decrease in the number of stories with positive and negative tenors in the column/commentary section, from 16 to 3 in the positive category and from 4 to 1 in the negative category. The number of neutral stories remained the same at 1. In the classified section, there was a rise in the number of positive stories, from zero to 9, while the number remained at zero for the neutral and negative categories.

Unexpectedly there was no coverage in either paper in either time period of telekinesis or crop circles. When horoscope columns were included in the dataset, psychic phenomena accounted for 90% of the paranormal content. Even when those columns were eliminated from the dataset, psychic phenomena still made up 70% of the total coverage. The other six categories of phenomena type were relatively even, with totals ranging from 7 to 21 stories across both papers, 3 to 10 in the *Express-News*, and 2 to 11 in the *Light*.

In answer to Research Question 4 (What kind of phenomena received the most coverage?), research showed that psychic phenomena received the most coverage in both newspapers, even when the horoscope columns were eliminated from the dataset.

In the *Express-News*, the coverage of UFOs remained relatively steady across the two time periods. Showing a decrease in coverage from 1970 to 1990 were psychic phenomena and ESP, which had no coverage in 1990. Increasing coverage was found in the categories of aliens and alien abductions; ghost, spirits, and poltergeists; other, such as crystals; and multiple categories.

In the *Light*, none of the categories remained steady in coverage. Showing a decrease in the amount of stories were the categories of UFOs; psychic phenomena; ESP; ghosts, spirits, and poltergeists; and multiple categories. Coverage of UFOs and ESP dropped to zero in 1990. Increases in coverage were found in aliens and alien abductions and in other.

When the data for the two newspapers are combined, analysis shows that there was a slight drop in UFO stories from 4 in 1970 to 3 in 1990, a jump from zero to 11 in stories on aliens and alien abductions, a drop in psychic phenomena from 409 to 304, and

a decrease in ESP stories from 5 to zero. The number of stories nearly doubled in the categories of ghosts, spirits, and poltergeists; other, and multiple categories.

This shows that there was a consistent trend of coverage between the two newspapers in three categories: psychic phenomena, ESP, aliens and alien abduction, and coverage of other phenomena. This shows that in the San Antonio newspapers certain phenomena do fall in and out of favor in terms of amount of coverage.

Research Question 5 was "Do trends exist in the tenor of the portrayal of specific phenomena over time?" Overall there was an increase in the positive portrayal of UFOs; aliens and alien abduction; ghosts, spirits, and poltergeists; other phenomena; and multiple categories. In 1970, no stories about UFOs were positive, while in 1990 3 were. In 1970, there were no stories about aliens but in 1990 there were 5 positive stories. In 1970, there were 3 positive stories about ghosts, and in 1990, there were 9. Other phenomena rose from no positive stories in 1970 to 6 in 1990, and multiple phenomena increased from 3 in 1970 to 9 in 1990.

Showing a decrease in positive coverage were the categories of psychic phenomena, moving from 409 in 1970 to 304 in 1990, and ESP, which had 2 positive stories in 1970 and none in 1990.

Looking at neutral coverage, UFOs showed a decrease from 2 to none; aliens increased from zero to 3; psychics increased from 4 to 6; ESP dropped from 3 to zero; ghosts dropped from 2 to 1; other increased from 2 to 6; and multiple phenomena stayed the same at 1 each year.

Negative trends also varied. Negative stories about UFOs remained the same at 1 each year; while those about aliens increased from zero to 4; psychics decreased from 8 to 4; ESP and ghosts remained the same at zero; other phenomena decreased from 4 to 3; and multiple phenomena stayed the same at one.

In the *Express-News*, there was an increase in positive coverage of UFOs from 1970 to 1990, from zero to 3, while neutral coverage remained the same at zero, and negative coverage increased from zero to 1. There was no coverage of aliens in 1970, so all three categories rose from zero to 3, 1, and 3, respectively.

Psychic phenomena dropped from 209 stories to 193, neutral coverage increased from 2 to 5, and negative coverage increased from 3 to 4. The ESP category shows a decreased in positive stories from 1 to zero, a decreased in neutral stories from 2 to zero, and no negative stories in either year.

There was an increase in the number of positive stories about ghosts from 1 in 1970 to 7 in 1990. The number of neutral stories rose from zero to 1, and there were no negative stories in either year. Other phenomena saw an increase in the number of positive stories from zero to 3; an increase in neutral stories from zero to 2, and an increase in negative stories from 2 to 3.

The multiple phenomena category showed an increase in positive stories from zero to 6, a steady number of 1 in each year for neutral stories, and an increase from zero to 1 in negative stories.

In the *Light*, there was no change in positive or negative coverage of UFOs, both remaining at zero, while neutral coverage dropped from 2 to zero. Positive coverage of aliens increased from zero to 2, neutral coverage rose from zero to 2, and negative coverage rose from zero to 1.

Psychic phenomena saw a drop of almost half in positive coverage, falling from 200 to 111. Neutral coverage fell from 2 to 1, while negative coverage dropped from 4 to zero. Positive and neutral stories about ESP dropped from 1 to zero each, while negative coverage stayed the same at zero each year.

Positive coverage of ghosts stayed the same at 2, while neutral coverage dropped from 2 to zero, and negative coverage stayed the same at zero. Other phenomena saw an increase in positive stories from zero to 3, neutral stories rose from 2 to 4, and negative stories dropped from 2 to zero. Positive multiple phenomena stories showed an increase from 3 to 3, neutral stories stayed the same at zero, and negative stories dropped from 2 to zero.

Paranormal coverage showed a wide variance in length when horoscope columns were included in the analysis but tended toward the extremes (1–3 inches and 16 or more inches) when they were excluded (see Figure 17, page 35). The *Express-News* ran more longer stories than the *Light* (see Figures 18 and 19, page 36).

More stories contained a phenomena keyword in the headline regardless of whether horoscope columns were included, though the gap between stories with and those without a keyword narrowed sharply when horoscope columns were eliminated (see Figure 20, page 37). When the papers were examined individually, the *Express-News* carried fewer stories with a phenomena keyword in the headline than did the *Light*, except when horoscope columns were excluded from the sample. In that case, the results were reversed (see Figures 20 and 21, page 37–38).

By and large, most of the paranormal coverage did not contain a photograph or graphic. However, when horoscope columns were excluded from the dataset, there were three times as many stories with a graphic element as without (see Figure 23, page 40). Individually, the *Express-News* ran more coverage with a graphic of some kind because many of the horoscope columns included a mugshot of the columnist. When the horoscope columns were eliminated, the data showed the *Express-News* still ran more stories with photographs but fewer with a graphic (see Figure 25, page 41).

There were seven stories on page one of the newspapers, or .9% of the total number of stories. The number of stories on section fronts is shown in Figure 26. In addition, there were 80 stories appearing on the front page of the comics sections for 10.1% of the total stories, one story on the front page of the *Star* (.1%), and one story on the front page of the *Sunday One* magazine (.1%). All together, there were 110 stories (13.9%) given this kind of prominent placement within the two newspapers.

Figure 26

Paranormal Stories on Section Fronts

Section Front	Number of Stories	% of Total Stories
1A	7	.9
1B	7	.9
1C	1	.1
1D	3	.4
1E	1	.1
1F	2	.3
1G	3	.4
1H	3	.4

1K	1	.1
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There were seven days that had eight or more stories in the newspapers: March 16, 1970 (8), April 5, 1970 (9), April 14, 1970 (9), April 19, 1970 (8), April 1, 1990 (8), April 8, 1990 (8), and May 20, 1990 (8). Some of this can be attributed to the focus on astrology as a result of the Fiesta Battle of Flowers Parade theme of the Age of Aquarius in April 1970.

### Further Research

This research is the first part of a larger research question to be answered in the future: Has the portrayal of the paranormal influenced the public's belief in such phenomena? If research points to such an influence, another question that merits further study is which has a greater impact—television and newspaper coverage—or is it only a combination of coverage that has an impact?

The effect of the portrayal of the paranormal on the public's belief could be measured by following up this content analysis with a questionnaire or survey. There are limitations to these methods, however (Babbie, 1995). They rely on self-report, which may skew the results, especially as some people may be reluctant to report belief in phenomena that they believe does not have widespread acceptance. A telephone or face-to-face survey might increase this effect. There also are problems with attaining a large enough sample in the case of mail surveys, and there are limitations on generalization from a survey population to the population at large.

The effect of the portrayal also could be measured by conducting a controlled experiment. Subjects could be asked to complete a pretest survey, measuring their belief in paranormal phenomena. A control group and two experimental groups would then be asked to read stories selected for their portrayal of paranormal phenomena, with one experimental group reading positive portrayals and the other negative portrayals. The three groups then would be given a posttest survey to measure any change in belief. This

experiment could be repeated with the use of videotapes of various types of programs (e.g., news, newsmagazine, docudramas).

### Implications

A poll of 1,236 adults conducted in June 1990 by Gallup Mirror of America reports that 25 percent of Americans believe in ghosts, 36 percent believe in telepathy, and 25 percent believe they have communicated with someone else through telepathy (Gallup & Newport, 1991). The same survey found that 16 percent believed they have contacted a dead person, 10 percent report seeing or being near a ghost, and 14 percent say they have witnessed a UFO. The latter figure is particularly interesting as belief that UFOs are real has dropped from 57 percent in 1978 to 47 percent, while the number of Americans who say they have witnessed a UFO is up from 9 percent in 1973 and 11 percent in 1978. The level of confidence for these results, plus or minus 3 percentage points, was 95 percent.

Gallup followed that poll up with another in 1996 (Hendrick, 1997). That poll showed that 22 percent believe in reincarnation, 33 percent in haunted houses, 25 percent in astrology, 72 percent in intelligent extraterrestrial life, and 48 percent in aliens visiting Earth.

A Scripps-Howard News Service/Ohio University survey reported that 50 percent of Americans believe that flying saucers are real and that the government is engaged in a cover-up of their activity (Frazier, 1995). And a Roper poll reported in *Time* (Jaroff, 1995) showed that nearly 25 percent of Americans, across demographic and socioeconomic levels, believe in UFOs and astrology.

In yet another poll, *Newsweek* reported that 48 percent believe in UFOs, 12 percent had seen UFOs, and 49 percent thought the government was hiding information on UFOs (Boyle, 1996). *Newsweek* found that belief in paranormal phenomena decreased with age: 43 percent of those 18-29 were believers, compared with 39 percent of those 30-49, and 35 percent of those 50-64.

Why are these statistics important? The lack of critical thinking skills evidenced by these beliefs, when no credible proof exists that these phenomena are real, disturbs many scientists and skeptics. Greater credulity on the part of the public and the media puts both at risk for those who would take advantage of this credulity. Thirty-nine followers of the Heaven's Gate cult that committed suicide in their belief that a UFO was coming to take them away. With less drastic, but still serious consequences, we hear and read reports of con artists taking advantage of people in home-repair and phony contest scams. Belief in the paranormal opens the door to many more scams, especially those that would prey on people desperate for good news.

The psychic phone lines, though many carry "for entertainment purposes only" claims in small print in their advertisements, feed off this gullibility. Often those that can least afford the fees charged by these lines are those that call looking for that news that will save them financially. Corporations are now hiring "psychics" to help in hiring decisions when there is no proof that the so-called psychics offer any special skills (Hardin, 1995). I believe the media help encourage belief in psychic phenomena when they carry stories such as the report that ABC hired a psychic to pick new TV shows (*Star*, March 25, 1990). This story contained no qualifying language in describing the "psychic" consultant, and when the public sees that the media believe enough in this phenomena as to employ it, they also are tempted to believe in it.

People also are at risk for medical scams practiced by those who promise psychic healing. Heidi Lloyd-Price, a Calgary, Canada, biologist and secretary-treasurer of the Alberta Skeptics, sees danger in the addition of an astrology column to the *Globe*, calling it "part of a North America-wide 'resurgence in credulous thinking.'..." "People end up buying into New Age theories with less care than they take when they're buying a new car" (Johnson, 1995).

Also at risk are those families who may have a loved one missing or a victim of a crime. Many times these families are anguished and desperate for news. And occasionally, a "psychic" will appear on the scene offering his or her services to the family or police. A study on psychic ability conducted by Reiser, Ludwig, Saxe, and Wagner (1979) showed that "the research data does not support the contention that

psychics can provide significant additional information leading to the solution of major crime." Yet many of these families are given false hope by these "psychics" who offer to help. The *Express-News* carried a story in about a mother searching for her daughter, whom she believed was kidnapped by white slavers. The story said that the mother had talked with psychics as part of her search for her daughter (Crouse, March 14, 1990).

Equally disturbing is the fact that many people may be making decisions based on "the stars." Although some newspapers are beginning to run disclaimers that their astrology and horoscope features are for entertainment only, most do not. Dick Martin, editor of the *Kenosha News* in Wisconsin, reports, "Whenever the horoscope's accidentally left out, people call and say they don't know how to structure their day" (Baker, 1994). Also, more than once, when the *San Antonio Light* did not receive the syndicated horoscope feature over the wires, we on the copy desk simply made up the predictions. Did we have any special forecasting skills? No. Yet people including First Lady Nancy Reagan, Angie Dickinson, and Phyllis Diller regularly consult astrologers, who have no proven skills in foretelling the future by the position of the stars and planets.

Joan Quigley, the Reagans' astrology, received coverage in both the *Express-News* and the *Light* after her book was published. In none of the stories was qualifying language used in describing her or her supposed skills as a forecaster (*San Antonio Express-News*, March 15, 1990).

Astrology-related products sell very well despite the low number of people who say they believe in horoscopes. Svensen (1995) conducted a content analysis of horoscopes to follow-up the work done by Adorno and published in 1974. Among Svenson's findings were that horoscopes include veiled suggestions of anxiety and threat, and that astrology promotes dependence, helplessness, obedience, and irrationality.

The computer and digital technology that can be used to disprove paranormal claims also can be used to make hoaxes seem more plausible. The media need to be especially aware of this to avoid being taken in and taking their readers and viewers in as well. Digital cameras are now affordable, and through the use of software programs such



as Adobe Photoshop, images can be manipulated to create a false photograph that is difficult to spot. To determine what is a hoax, what is real and what is imagined, critical thinking skills are imperative.

A 1990 article in the *Express-News* offers an example of how the media might be cultivating an acceptance of paranormal phenomena. (Conroy, May 6, 1990). The story, a special to the *Express-News*, is a feature about a couple's supposed encounters with UFOs as documented in a new book. The reporter, though he uses some qualifying language about "aliens" and the possibility of a hoax, also offers positive language about the accounts' compelling nature and the "authorities" he chose to cite.

Conroy makes mention of the fact that the couple, Ed and Frances Walters, elected to have their encounters investigated by a retired Air Force officer, who then is identified as a former pilot and scientist and current head of the "Mutual UFO Network for the state of Florida." The reader may be lead to believe that this not only gives the former officer some special ability to judge the experiences but that there is a tie to the state government. The Mutual UFO Network (MUFON) is a private organization that has chapters in many states. Had the reporter chosen to report that the officer was the head of the Mutual UFO Network *in* Florida, he might have avoided some of this confusion. Conroy also offers credibility by including statements such as "Even more remarkably, the Walters reported a total of 18 photographic sessions that produced images (Polaroid, 35mm and video) of unparalleled quality." Though that sentence could be read as just an account of the photographic quality, its meaning is muddled by the following sentences: "Unlike Billy Meier, the Swiss caretaker-farmer whose 35mm color photos of 'beamships' have been called into question, the Walters cooperated fully with photographic experts called into examine their work. That, at least, is the report of Dr. Bruce Maccabee, a navy optical physicist who has done an extensive analysis of the photos (some of them shot with a camera he provided the Walters) and determined that they are not likely to be hoaxes."

While there is little empirical evidence that the seeming acceptance of paranormal phenomena by mass media outlets leads to a greater public acceptance of these claims, the media's impact on other aspects of society is well-documented (Sparks,

Hansen, & Shah, 1994). And although the link between exposure to violence on television and aggressive behavior may have more immediate serious social consequences, the decline in reasoning and investigative skills cannot be dismissed as unimportant.

The positive portrayal of paranormal phenomena also can sometimes lead to great embarrassment and loss of credibility for the media. CBS was the victim of a hoax when a key player in the “documentary” *The Incredible Discovery of Noah’s Ark* admitted he contrived the story to expose Sun International Pictures’ poor research (Frazier, 1994). An article in the *Los Angeles Times* uncovered the hoax in which George Jammal said he took a piece of California pine, fried it on his stove to harden it, and presented it as a piece of Noah’s ark that he allegedly found in Turkey. The film company had taken Jammal at his word and produced the movie, aired in February 1994 by CBS. Being exposed as having aired a hoax may have cost CBS credibility with its viewers who learned the documentary was a hoax.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

People have an increased number of media outlets from which to choose. With a blurring between news and entertainment and between serious news media and entertainment tabloids, it may be difficult for audience members to determine the difference between a serious news story and a work of fiction. This makes it hard for people to judge not only that story, but the body of the outlet's work.

In 1995, the 19th-century pseudoscience of phrenology was given a brief revival by the *San Francisco Chronicle* when it ran an Op/Ed article purporting to tell readers what mayoral candidates' faces revealed about the candidate (Frazier, 1996). The *Chronicle* relied on Rose Rosetree, who claimed to be a professional face reader since 1988. Rosetree presented 8 column inches on each of the candidates' personality and characteristics as determined by her reading of their faces. The article enraged some readers, and the *Chronicle* later said it was just trying to have fun with the mayoral race.

It is difficult to interpret whether the media present content about the paranormal with tongue-in-cheek and whether the audience understands that the content is not to be taken seriously. Therefore, we often are left to examine the content at face value. Roy Bragg's "Main Streets & Back Roads" feature story in the December 4, 1996 *Express-News* provides examples of positive paranormal content. The following statements are representative of the material in the article.

- "Troy and Lee Caffey thought all was normal when they opened their 13-room bed and breakfast in March. It wasn't until the couple and their two sons moved into the former summer camp, however, that they learned about the spooks that inhabit the grounds."
- "The apparitions started soon after the family moved into the ranch house, the Caffeys say."

- “The non-corporeal cowpoke disappeared when a flashlight was aimed at it, but reappeared when the beam was aimed away.”

The Dec. 21, 1995 broadcast of the Fox show *Sightings* provides another example. The following statements were made during the show (Farha, 1996).

- “There’s further proof of a dramatic UFO encounter over Iran.”
- “They spent everything they had trying to cope with the terrifying haunting in their rustic mountain home.”
- “This preliminary investigation confirms what the Lee family has felt for more than a year—that more work will have to be done to determine why their home is being targeted, and what it will take to appease the spirits here.”

What are readers to think? If the media are not always clear about what is entertainment and what is news, how is the audience to judge serious stories? Media cultivation studies have shown that exposure to entertainment programs showing dramatic events can lead audience members to make corresponding judgments about the frequency of such events in real life (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signoriellie, 1986).

A large number of people believe in the paranormal, according to surveys conducted by Gallup, Scripps-Howard/Ohio University, and *Newsweek*. Future polls are needed to continue to track this issue. In addition, more surveys and studies are needed to see if people attribute their beliefs to media stories as in the studies by Alcock (1981) and Evans (1973).

Additionally, more research such as that conducted by Sparks and Miller (2000) on the relationship between television programs and beliefs in the paranormal is needed. In that study, Sparks and Miller found that research supported their hypothesis that paranormal beliefs was positively correlated with television viewing, especially of paranormal programs. They caution, however, that their study, like other surveys, does

not allow them to state causal direction between viewing and belief. They note that there is experimental evidence that does show that beliefs are affected by viewing paranormal content on TV.

I believe that continued coverage of such phenomena will show an increase in belief among the American population. While a small portion of a reported increase could be due to increased social acceptability of belief in the paranormal, I think that the majority of the increased belief and the social acceptability itself would be due to the media cultivating the credibility of reports of paranormal phenomena.

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