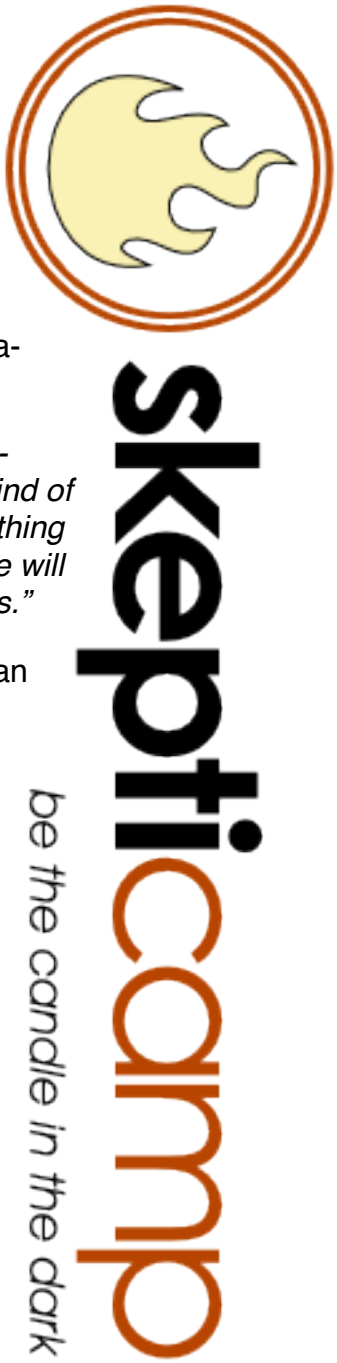
Raising our game

the rationale to embrace skepticamp

by Reed Esau, October 2008



Prologue

In his 2007 essay "*Where do we go from here?*"[1] Daniel Loxton asked skeptics to return to our roots and hinted at a role for the amateur skeptic in his closing remarks:

> *"There's burden enough to go around. Even our heroes need students, helpers—even, one day, heirs. Newbie enthusiasm is no kind of substitute for knowledge, experience and expertise, but it's something of value in its own right. If skepticism is a Sisyphean task, then we will always need more people who are enthusiastic about rolling rocks."*

Loxton hits the mark in recognizing that enthusiasm stands to play an essential role in the future of organized skepticism.

We are entering an exciting new era where emerging social technologies and new methods of outreach hint at an abundance of newbie enthusiasm the likes of which we have never seen. However, we risk squandering this windfall if we cannot provide good opportunities to engage and build upon that enthusiasm.

One approach to meet this challenge focuses on distributing knowledge within our community, particularly at the local level at informal events organized by ourselves where everyone can participate.

We call it 'skepticamp' though strangely it requires no camping.

The decline of the formal group

Until recently, starting a local skeptic group was both difficult and risky.

Typically organizers would form a non-profit corporation, elect officers, enlist volunteers, publish a newsletter, and set about acquiring dues-paying members. The model worked well so long as the leadership remained sufficiently effective and energetic in its activism to retain and attract new members.

That organizers accomplished so much with this model is to be admired. However, in all

[1] Loxton's essay can be found at http://www.skeptic.com/downloads/WhereDoWeGoFromHere.pdf

but a handful of cases it didn't prove to be sustainable. Organizer burnout, an aging membership and other problems led to a general decline in influence and participation.[2]

The cost of failure was high, leaving some areas with little or no organized skeptic presence for years.

And then something changed

The cost of group creation plummeted.

Recent adoption of social technologies like Meetup and Facebook have enabled new groups to form quickly at little or no cost. These new services ease the task of managing the group by providing tools for organizers to interact with members, such as hosting RSVP lists for events. In addition, new members tend to join up with little or no promotional effort, driven to the group by search engines and the recommendations of social networks.

Rocky Mountain Paranormal presenting at the inaugural skepticamp in Denver, Colorado in August 2007 *(photo by Rich Orman)*

These new groups share few characteristics with their predecessors. They generally fail more often and more quickly, but the cost of failure is comparatively negligible. New groups with different organizers and priorities can rise from their ashes.[3] This proves to be an accelerator, allowing for experimentation with new models at a rapid pace measured in months rather than years or decades.

These groups can be general in scope or highly specific. They can be geared towards longevity or towards a single event. They can limit who participates or keep it open to all. Their only reason for existence is to meet a need that can attract members.

The first successful model to emerge is the 'social skeptics group.' On Meetup alone

---

[2] Local groups (esp. campus groups) supported by the Center For Inquiry (CFI) have seen success in recent years. Though skepticism is advanced through CFI's affiliate organization, the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (CSI) and its magazine *The Skeptical Inquirer*, skepticism is only one component of CFI's much broader mission that also includes secular humanism, the critical examination of religion and the secularization of Islamic society.

[3] In the Denver/Boulder area, two skeptic groups on Meetup came and went before the present one took hold.

there is now an active presence of such groups in 40 cities in North America.[4]

With its modest goal of building community the social group can't readily be compared to the traditional skeptic group with its focus on activism. However, the ease at which a meet-up can be formed offers greater geographical reach and can eventually serve as a step towards bigger things later on.

Like their forebears these new social groups have their own unique challenges.

The disillusioned newbie

It's not pretty. Though we draw in enthusiastic new members with the help of these social technologies, those new members aren't sticking around.

Meetup bleeds members

For the meet-ups, roughly half (40-60%) of those who join will become inactive within a few months. In one sense this isn't surprising. Most non-skeptic groups at Meetup suffer a rate of attrition that is similar or even worse.

We may fault the fickle nature of the Meetup user base. But we can just as well fault ourselves in failing to understand and master this new medium.

We may appreciate losing the dead weight of 'poor-quality' members. But for every 9/11 conspiracy theorist who drops out, we lose others who could have become great contributors.

Attendees of Colorado Skepticamp 2008 in Castle Rock *(photo by Rich Orman)*

In any case we are failing to capture the imagination of those who make the effort to join. Worse yet, the constant infusion of new members tends to mask the attrition, making the problem seem less severe.[5]

The exact cause of such attrition isn't always clear, though it appears that the expectations of newcomers aren't being met. Performing exit interviews can help us understand

---

[4] See appendix for some detailed numbers about skeptics on Meetup. A similar network of groups, but even less structured is Drinking Skeptically (http://drinkingskeptically.org) which is geared towards a predictable schedule for their meetings. Another network, Skeptics In The Pub (http://www.skeptic.org.uk/pub), has a focus on speakers for events.

[5] Therein lies a great opportunity: a mother lode of growth is at hand for those groups that learn how to staunch the bleeding.

what factors may be at work. We can also look to see how other groups diagnose and treat such problems.

How churches maintain their numbers

Simple arithmetic demands that any group whose attrition outpaces its recruitment will eventually cease to exist. You must replenish your losses to merely survive.

Crystal Yates-White presenting on the Fund for Thought at a March 2008 event in Colorado *(photo by Rich Orman)*

We've seen this in some of our traditional skeptic groups. When the influx of new members fell off, the group aged and numbers dwindled.

Churches also face this problem, particularly in rural areas when the young migrate to the cities. The threat is taken seriously by nearly every congregation where church organizers employ time-tested practices as well as recent innovations to keep the pews filled every Sunday morning.

While a handful of the practices employed are specific to religious organizations, most are secular in nature and broadly applicable, such as one practice that will be the focus of this essay:

To provide a path for the individual to grow through meaningful opportunities for involvement.

Stated so simply, it may seem a cliché or a platitude. But within that carefully-worded sentence lies a challenge: those who can figure out ways to offer such opportunities in large numbers stand to change what it means to be a skeptic.

Before we can understand those future opportunities for involvement, we must first look to see how we presently contribute and the problems therein.

How skeptics contribute

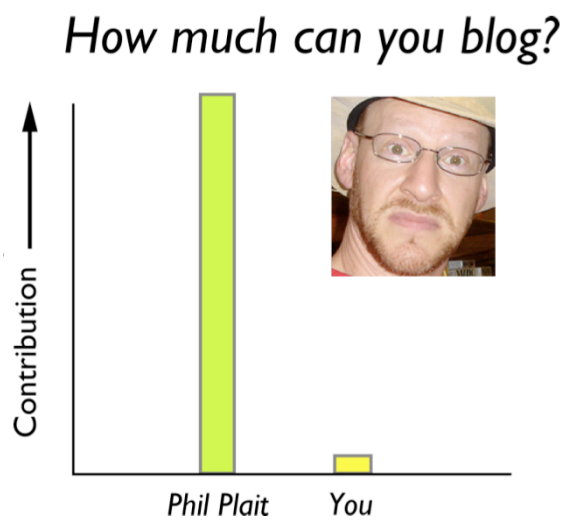
There is no such thing as an ‘average’ skeptic. We are all over the map in how we pitch in.

The level of contribution among skeptics varies considerably with the likes of Michael Shermer at the top end of the scale and the freshly-minted newbie at the bottom. To dig into the details of this imbalance reveals an intriguing opportunity.

The skeptical blogger

If you blog on skeptic-related topics, chances are the volume of your stronger material falls far short of that of the most prolific of skeptic bloggers such as Phil Plait of Bad Astronomy[6] fame.

Phil is a professional writer, a scientist and a well-connected skeptic who has the talent, time and inclination to sift through volumes of email and information each day to publish at a brisk pace. Remove any of those supporting pillars, such as time or inclination, and Phil’s output drops sharply.



A similar pattern holds as we scale up to include the entire community of skeptics.

How we contribute

According to social researchers, for any given population of interacting individuals the level of contribution varies considerably with a small group within the population contributing a disproportionate amount of the effort.[7]

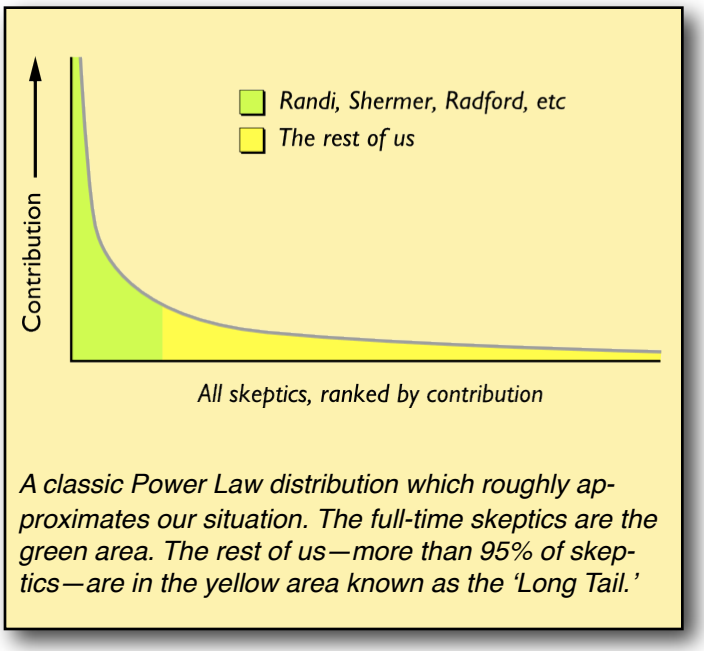
It should be no surprise that in our own community there are a few dozen individuals, many of them full-time skeptics, producing much of the value through writing, podcasting, activism, investigations and speaking.

But what about the rest of us—more than 95% of skeptics—who are producing the re-

---

[6] Though Phil’s blog is now hosted at Discover Magazine’s site, you can still reach it through http://badastronomy.com. Cropped photo via http://flickr.com/photos/badastronomy/2781702559/

[7] The Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto first observed this pattern while studying income distributions in the early 1900s. It was later observed in social interactions. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pareto_distribution



A classic Power Law distribution which roughly approximates our situation. The full-time skeptics are the green area. The rest of us—more than 95% of skeptics—are in the yellow area known as the 'Long Tail.'

mainder of the value? In the parlance of consumer demographics we are known collectively as the 'Long Tail'[8] and produce comparatively little in spite of our large numbers.

Living in the long tail

Those of us in the Long Tail of organized skepticism are contributing, but at relatively modest levels.

A handful of us are quite active, such as those who blog or podcast in our spare time. Some fight the woo-woo in online forums and wikis. Others volunteer at conferences. In cities around the world some organize local groups and others teach critical thinking to their students.

Beyond that, the vast majority of those of us in the Long Tail play a largely passive role and provide the minimum level of support, such as buying books, paying membership dues and perhaps attending a conference or local meet-up.

Why do we contribute so little?

Even when enthusiasm fuels a desire to be involved, the lack of quality opportunities results in a poor level of contribution. Compounding this problem is how our own culture sends discouraging messages.

A scarcity of good opportunities

Each opportunity has its own peculiar limits and rewards. For one to fit you, it must match the constraints of your life, your capabilities and your aspirations. If the opportunities available are too few and ill-fitting, we risk leaving otherwise valuable people and their contributions behind.

Many opportunities aren't sufficiently granular. The demands of life limit the ways and the degree to which we can each contribute. Family, work, and competing interests demand enough of our time and attention that skepticism loses out far more often than not.

An opportunity can require weighty commitments to be effective. We can be seduced by the low bar for entry into blogging, but to get to the high-traffic head of the curve where

[8] In 2004, writer Chris Anderson popularized The Long Tail as a way to understand consumer demographics. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Long_Tail for details.

one can have a substantial impact requires more than most of us can offer, at least as an individual effort.[9]

An opportunity can demand specific skills and expertise. While most of us can start a skeptic group, running it in a sustainable way requires careful attention to good practices, especially where there are aspirations to growth and activism.

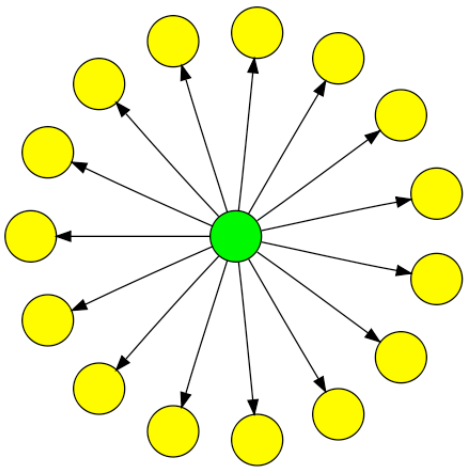
An opportunity can lack depth, such as volunteering to stuff folders at a conference. Of course one can take satisfaction that helping in these essential activities keeps costs down. However efforts as these are not likely to offer a sense of individual achievement.

And finally, an opportunity often doesn't suit one's personality or goals, such as those geared towards activist causes where few of us are interested or prepared to step into such a role.

In spite of these limitations some of us have managed to find something that fits our capabilities and aspirations. But we are nevertheless in a minority where many valuable people are routinely left behind. And it gets worse.

The pervasive broadcast pattern

Our large conferences, the most visible of our skeptic events, employ a 'broadcast pattern' where information flows in one direction from a single speaker on stage to the hundreds of listeners in the audience. Efficient information delivery is emphasized over interaction with only a few minutes of Q&A reserved at the end of each talk. This pattern can also be found with author and reader, podcaster and listener, and in any situation with very few producers and many consumers.



The broadcast pattern of distribution with the producer in green at the center and consumers at the periphery. Good for scaling but poor for interaction.

Which isn't to say that the broadcast pattern is bad. It works marvelously when the producer speaks with skill and the topic engages the mind. More importantly the pattern scales well, allowing for rapid growth in audience size at only the expense of sacrificing interaction.

However there's a danger. Once the broadcast pattern becomes our predominant means of distributing information we risk encouraging passive consump-

---

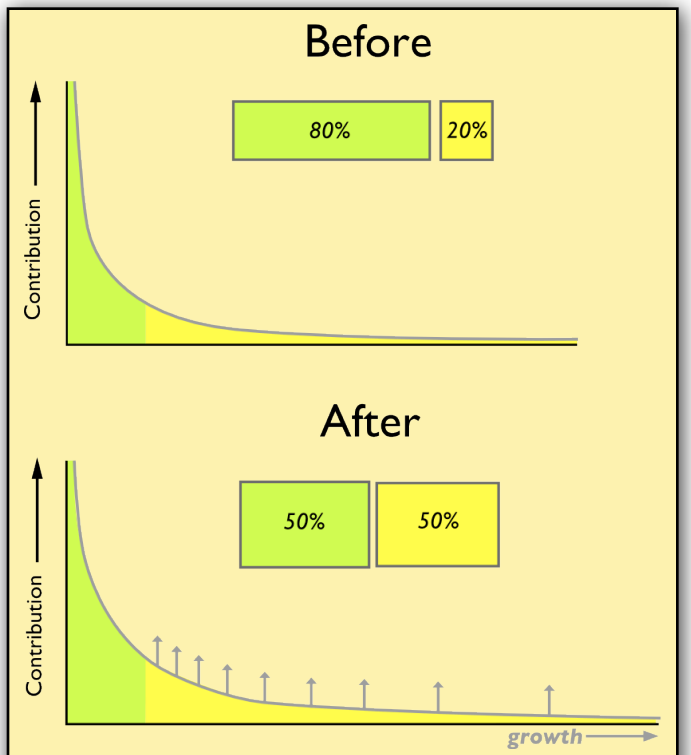
[9] There have been innovations to accommodate a slower pace of posting. Team blogs such as http://skepchick.org distribute the workload among a small number of team members. Roundups like The Skeptic's Circle scour the long tail of skeptic blogs for the stronger work that may otherwise go unnoticed. Nonetheless, having a blog that gains notoriety is the rare exception in this crowded medium. Most blogs never get beyond serving as a way to communicate among a small circle of friends. See Clay Shirky's *Here Comes Everybody* (Penguin 2008) for more analysis of the blogosphere.

tion to the expense of active involvement. We send the discouraging message to the Long Tail skeptic to merely consume where the opportunities to contribute are scarce, the medium over-saturated, and the bar too high for entry.

What can be done? We turn this distribution pattern upside down by looking to those of us in the Long Tail to become producers ourselves, dramatically expanding the opportunities to contribute where those contributions are sufficiently granular to fit into our busy lives. More importantly, those contributions can cater to our diverse interests, be individually rewarding and of value to skepticism at large.

The potential of the long tail

Those who figure out ways to tap into the Long Tail stand to win big.



An illustration showing the effects of a Long Tail expansion. Note how small changes in both the thickness and the length of the tail can aggregate to contribute to a larger overall area. In some cases the tail's area can be larger than that of the head, as in the case of Netflix where the 'unpopular' titles in aggregate outsell the popular titles. [See 70-80% of Netflix rentals are long tail (http://blogs.zdnet.com/ITFacts/?p=9986)]

Your local brick-and-mortar bookstore stocks only a small fraction of the titles that are available through its distributors. They will typically stock only those books that sell at a rate sufficient to overcome the cost of keeping them on the shelves. The popular is favored over the obscure. It's a very short tail.

In contrast an online vendor like Amazon employs a radically different business model that isn't subject to most of the limitations of retail stores. They offer millions of titles where each book, no matter how obscure, can contribute to the bottom line. As Amazon's revenues demonstrate, they are masters of the Long Tail.

To return to an earlier example, many churches are effective at providing a range of opportunities for their flocks to contribute, including missionary work, music programs, bake sales and innovative 'small groups.' Forms of participation even extend to frenzied dancing and speaking in tongues during revival services. The culture is far from passive where the deep level of participation enriches the experience for everyone involved. They too are masters of the Long Tail.

A fascinating pattern emerges where the key to exploiting the Long Tail is to allow for partial contributions where each has value and meaning, both at the most granular level and in aggregate.

While most of us in the Long Tail aren't interested in speaking in tongues as a way to contribute, there are avenues to explore that can build upon our unique strengths.

Taking a stab at a solution

Exploiting the Long Tail of organized skepticism can involve various approaches, ranging from formal conferences to *ad hoc* events. It may employ some of the new social technologies or shun the online world completely. It may create new types of groups or recast our struggling groups with new priorities. Some guidelines for ideas:

1. The idea's promise is sufficiently large to inspire interest among potential participants while being small enough in scope to inspire confidence that it can succeed.

2. The idea reduces the barriers to organizing, such as by distributing the effort among many people and reducing costs.

3. The idea exploits our greatest assets, including our enthusiasm, knowledge, experience and expertise as well as our inherent sociability and willingness to try new things.

4. The idea incorporates the entire community of skeptics and provides a range of rewarding opportunities for everyone to participate, including entry points for the newbies that won't scare them off.

This essay proposes an idea that meets these guidelines and has been wildly successful in a domain outside of organized skepticism. Its modest goal is to distribute knowledge within a community.

Introducing barcamp

Barcamp turns the traditional technology conference on its head with a focus on local *ad hoc* events, distributing knowledge and encouraging both participation and interaction at a level not approached by the typical conference.

Since the first barcamp in August of 2005 in Palo Alto, California there have been over 400 events around the world, from Milwaukee to Munich to Mumbai, each with content provided by the attendees themselves.

By the attendees? At a barcamp event, it's not a formal program of speakers, but rather the attendees themselves who produce the content for the event.

These events can be organized by anyone. Barcamp tears down barriers to organizing events, making it possible to host an event anywhere, even reaching beyond the devel-

oped world into the emerging world. As an example, the tech centers of India have hosted over 40 barcamps where Western-style conferences prove to be too infrequent and expensive. Barcamp simplifies organizing by relying on attendees for content and sponsors to cover the cost of the venue, lunch and extras like t-shirts.

Barcamp also focuses on tearing down the barriers to participation, asking each attendee to help in organizing the event or to speak on a topic of his or her choice.

This novel approach of the 'unconference' opens many doors, dramatically shrinking the financial risk and burden of hosting an event. But most interesting of all—and this is a core idea of barcamp—it transforms passive attendees into active participants where *everyone* contributes to the richness of the event.

What can barcamp offer skepticism?

No longer restricted to high technology, barcamp serves as a model for user-generated conferences in other fields such as photography and the creative arts.[10]

> ***"We figured there was much more expertise in the audience than there possibly could be onstage"***
> barcamp co-founder Ryan King, speaking about traditional events

Skeptics can look to barcamp to see how it benefits the tech community in order to glimpse what it may offer skepticism. Barcamp reaches around the world providing local and regional events with sizes ranging from a dozen participants into the hundreds.[11] The emphasis on user-generated content and participation leads to the distribution of knowledge on hundreds of topics within the community, including an eclectic mix of introductory, cutting-edge and niche topics often ignored by traditional conferences.

For those familiar with the history of organized skepticism, this is unlike anything that we have ever seen.

And it has begun. Skeptics started experimenting with this model with the first 'skepticamp' event in Denver in August of 2007.

The topics of talks given by skepticamp participants have ranged from serious subjects like addressing anti-vaccination arguments to lighter topics like deconstructing oddball

---

[10] Themes have included photography, public policy, political action, banking, the arts, education and recently science with the first SciBarCamp in Toronto in March 2008 (http://scibarcamp.org/). There was even a camp focused on UFO studies in Italy! See http://preview.tinyurl.com/ufo-barcamp-italy-2007 for a translated summary.

[11] MinneBar (http://barcamp.org/MinneBar) in Minnesota has drawn 400+ attendees for the past couple of years. The largest of them all, BarCampBlock (http://barcamp.org/BarCampBlock) had an estimated 800 attendees.

conspiracy theories. The spread of topics is expected to be both as deep and as wide as skepticism itself.

Talks can draw upon the participant's own experience and expertise. For example, an audio enthusiast might present on the snake oil sales tactics in marketing high-end audio products.

The format is sufficiently flexible to offer more than conventional talks. We have seen skeptic-themed trivia challenges, a demonstration of Therapeutic Touch and presentations by local paranormal investigators.

The challenges of skepticamp

Skepticamp is not without its challenges. Three stand above all in determining its viability: the first of fit, the second of quality, and the third of buy-in.

Challenge #1: Is the barcamp format a good fit for skepticism?

The tech community from which barcamp springs is quite different from the skeptic community in its distribution of expertise. The typical barcamp contributor is a professional or enthusiast with deep knowledge of the subject on which he or she is presenting.

Organizer Rich Ludwig gets things started at the 2008 event in Colorado *(photo by Rich Orman)*

By contrast, in the skeptic community deep knowledge on a topic is the exception rather than the rule, at least for those of us in the Long Tail.

By using skepticamp as a vehicle for individuals to gain proficiency we are asking barcamp to deliver something for which it was never designed. Thus skepticamp is an experiment, and an ambitious one at that, as it pulls barcamp into unexplored territory.

However, there is reason for cautious optimism because of the tools that skepticism itself brings to the table. Our capacity to critically evaluate ideas and evidence is our ace-in-the-hole in gaining that proficiency, especially when combined with the deep level of interaction of the format.

Challenge #2: Ensuring quality

Any event format that offers open enrollment for talks and encourages first-time speakers is asking for trouble. Skepticamp attendees should be informed and inspired without suffering excessive mediocrity or unchecked misinformation. These events are not dis-

cussion groups where anything goes. People attend with the expectation that the basic principles of modern skepticism be respected.

To ensure great events, we must understand the way they can fail and to encourage a set of lightweight practices that encourage participation while reducing the failures and combating the abuses.

Talks stumble in various ways, such as when a speaker fails to thoroughly research and understand his topic. Inadequate preparation too can kill what otherwise would have been a great presentation. Certain speakers may miss the point of the event, such as those looking for a captive audience to grind an axe.

Traditional quality control

The traditional approach to quality control is that of management oversight where an authority decides which speakers and talks are worthy of the event. It is the classic 'filter-then-publish' model that has been around forever.

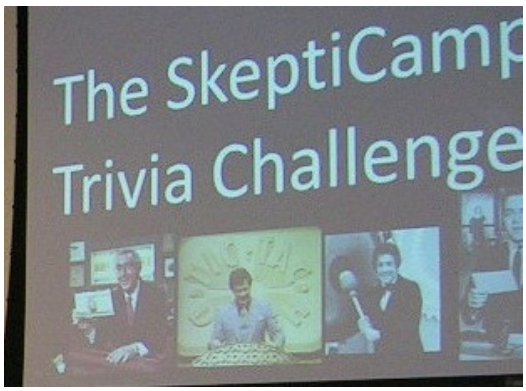
Skepticamp spurns that approach. At best it will produce a different kind of event. At worse it will kill the idea by raising yet another barrier to participation. There is an alternative, however.

Publish-then-filter

A second approach builds on the innovative 'publish-then-filter' model spearheaded by bloggers and wiki editors. When posting an entry, there is typically no editor other than the writer himself. It's only after the material is published that it meets its critics.

What makes this model possible is the interactivity provided by the tools of blogging and wikis. Commenters can critique and argue over the merits of the posting. In addition, other bloggers can post entries on their own blogs referencing the offending entry.

By ensuring that skepticamp is deeply interactive we can put those who will abuse the opportunity at a disadvantage over those who care about it.



Rich Orman's lunchtime skeptic-themed trivia challenge *(photo by author)*

The skepticamp 'rule'

Barcamp has a set of basic rules[12] that give one the flavor of an event. One of them is "no spectators, only participants." Skepticamp embraces this tradition and adds a rule of its own to combat misinformation. We ask that speakers be prepared to cite their sources on any

[12] The barcamp rules can be found at http://barcamp.org/TheRulesOfBarCamp. Note that these rules aren't universally followed and may better be considered guidelines, such as with large events where it's not practical for everyone to give a talk.

claim likely to be challenged.

Where it's possible for organizers to provide free wireless connectivity, questionable claims can be fact-checked on the spot by those with laptops and mobile Internet devices.

Learning from our mistakes

Problems will occur in spite of our best efforts. After the event, organizers should meet to discuss what went wrong and to brainstorm solutions. A wiki page, *Nine Steps to Organizing Your First Skepticamp*[13], is intended to serve as a repository to document these practices, to be consulted and updated by current and future organizers.

Challenge #3: Gaining buy-in

To attract curious onlookers to a skepticamp event is surprisingly easy. Most of us are drawn to novelty and will be intrigued at the prospect of a day of eclectic and interactive talks.[14]

While the curious are welcome, skepticamp needs more.

At its most basic, the task is to find speakers who will show up prepared to do great talks. To merely ask for speakers is a start, but to gain a strong and enthusiastic turnout requires that attendees step beyond the consumer mind-set—to switch from passive observer to active participant.

Some people will immediately recognize the value of a user-driven event and jump aboard with full participation. Most people, however, will be reluctant to do so.

Fred Bremmer presenting a recap of TAM6 at Vancouver's first skepticamp event in June 2008 *(photo by Graeme Kennedy)*

The reluctant will generally fall into two camps. The first composed of the inveterate spectator and second of the potential participant.

The first camp consists of those who aren't likely to do anything but sit and listen. Among them are those who doubt that a user-driven event has anything to offer them. Nevertheless encourage them to attend and to ac-

---

[13] The *Nine Steps* wiki document is at http://barcamp.org/OrganizeALocalSkeptiCamp

[14] These events will not appeal to everyone, especially those uncomfortable with open and interactive approaches that lack the formalities of a traditional event. The fast pace too may be a bit much for some, as the best-run barcamps are known to be intense events.

tively engage the speakers to see if their minds can be opened by experiencing an event first-hand.

It is from the second camp that you will draw participants, many of them offering up the most surprising and fascinating of talks. Members of this camp will initially decline the offer to speak. They may say they are too busy or that they have nothing of value to offer their fellow skeptics. In addition, they may fear speaking before a group. While their reasons may be genuine and sincere, there is nevertheless a countervailing force at play—a force that if sufficiently powerful can derail even the most persistent of excuses. That force is their enthusiasm for skepticism.

Patrick Bradford (aka *Dumb All Over*) presenting on conspiracies involving the Denver International Airport at the inaugural skepticamp in August 2007 *(photo by author)*

To gain their participation basically requires that you figure out how to tap into that enthusiasm by taking the time to understand where they are coming from and identifying the factors that will motivate that participation in a way that fits the constraints of their lives.

The rationale to participate

Motivations can be complex where the factors that encourage participation will vary by individual.

A person may be motivated to participate to build community, to have fun and get to know her fellow skeptics on an entirely different level.

Another person may wish to benefit not only his local group but also skepticism at large as the community becomes more articulate and better informed through these events. In addition, he may see them as a way to reach out and grow the population of skeptics.

The rationale to participate can be born of intellectual curiosity, to employ the interactive nature of the event to develop a compelling idea or explore a difficult question through group discussion.

A person may find reward in teaching others about the basics of modern skepticism while others will seek to advocate a cause related to skepticism.

Some motivations will be personal, such as when a person seeks to gain the respect and adulation of her peers by creating an outstanding presentation.

There can be a dark side, where participation serves one's own vanity and ambition. But

it can be selfless as well, where the motivation may be simply to reciprocate, to return some of the love given to you by the tools of skepticism and critical thinking.

The first-time speaker hurdle

For skepticamp to thrive, we must figure out ways to overcome the obstacles faced by the first-time speaker.

For those who have never spoken before a group, at least outside of a classroom or business setting, the prospect of doing so can be frightening as it engages one at a level so intense that few other experiences can rival. Any rationale to participate will be put to the test. For those in this difficult situation we must reassure them that they are among friends and not alone in carrying this burden.

In closing

Modern skepticism has a great story to tell, a story that is broadly applicable and empowering to those who learn to use its tools. Many of us first catch a glimpse of that story by hearing a podcast or reading a book on a skeptical topic. It opens the mind to the value of critical thinking and fuels enthusiasm.

Recent developments enabled by social technologies give us new tools to capitalize upon that enthusiasm. The opportunity afforded by skepticamp emphasizes sharing knowledge within local communities of skeptics. It reaches out to each one of us and provides a concrete path to grow as a skeptic and gain proficiency in those topics that drive our interests in this domain to the benefit of not only ourselves but our fellow skeptics as well.

For each of us that journey begins by asking oneself a simple question:

> *"So what's going to be the topic of my talk?"*

In its answer lies your claim to a stake in the future of skepticism.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Bibliography

Nine Steps to Organizing Your First Skepticamp (http://barcamp.org/OrganizeALocalSkeptiCamp) - a user-editable wiki page to reflect best practices in launching skepticamp in your community.

The Skepticamp Home Page (http://barcamp.org/SkeptiCamp), FaceBook Page (http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=9238697307) and Google Group (http://groups.google.com/group/skepticamp).

Clay Shirky's recent book *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations (Penguin, 2008)* (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Here_Comes_Everybody) -

explores the impact of new social technologies.

Clay Shirky on *Power Laws, Weblogs, and Inequality* (2003) (http://www.shirky.com/writings/powerlaw_weblog.html) - a groundbreaking article that explores the 'predictable imbalance' of choice-driven systems.

Chris Anderson on *The Long Tail* (2004) (http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/12.10/tail.html) - a groundbreaking article by the person who coined and popularized 'The Long Tail' to describe consumer demographics.

Daniel Loxton on *Where do we go from Here?* (2007) (http://www.skeptic.com/downloads/WhereDoWeGoFromHere.pdf) - an essay about the future of skepticism with a proposed reduction of scope towards "consumer protection in fringe science."

For criticism of these emerging trends, including ideas similar to those found in the barcamp culture, consult Andrew Keen's views in his book *The Cult of the Amateur* (2007) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Cult_of_the_Amateur)

Tim Farley's *SkepTools Web Site* (2008) (http://skeptools.wordpress.com/) - exploring how skeptics can best use the tools and open culture of the Internet. (Based upon his paper presentation at TAM6.)

Jim Lippard on *The Rise of Pentecostalism* (2007) (http://lippard.blogspot.com/2007/11/rise-of-pentecostalism-and-economist.html) - discussing some of the factors which led to the growth of a church 400 million strong.

Appendix 2: Barcamp and related event formats

Barcamp Main Site (http://barcamp.org) and Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barcamp)

Unconference (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unconference) - the umbrella term for a number of different conference formats including barcamp.

FooCamp (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foo_Camp) - the invite-only parent of barcamp. Gave birth to SciFoo (http://www.nature.com/nature/meetings/scifoo/index.html), the second of which both PZ Myers and James Randi attended (coincidentally on the day of the inaugural skepticamp in Denver in August of 2007.)

Pecha Kucha (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pecha_Kucha) - 20 slides of 20 seconds each; geared towards the creative community.

Ignite (http://ignite.oreilly.com/) - like Pecha Kucha but largely tech-oriented.

Small Group communication (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Small-group_communication) - employed with great success by churches.

Appendix 3: Skeptics on Meetup

This is not an endorsement of Meetup, but provided as an example of how skeptic groups can quickly form (and often fail.) These figures apply only to those groups on the skeptics.meetup.com domain as gathered in August 2008. (Note that a couple of 'atheist & skeptics' groups are excluded that live in the atheists.meetup.com domain.)

- Number of groups: 39 'active' and 143 'closed'
- Nations in which active groups exist: USA(33), Canada(4), UK(1) and Australia(1)
- Total members for all active groups: 2,281
- Average number of members per active group: 58
- Longest surviving groups: Skeptics of Tucson (http://skeptics.meetup.com/77/), founded October 2003. Maryland Science & Skepticism Meetup Group (http://skeptics.meetup.com/127/), founded on May 2006
- Largest Group: Denver Skeptics (http://skeptics.meetup.com/131/), with 324 members, about half of whom can be considered 'active' by Meetup's definition (i.e., having visited the website in the past two months)

Acknowledgements

The author flanked by Rich and Crystal after the inaugural event in 2007.

For their valuable feedback thanks to Aaron S. Kurland, Ben Radford, Daniel Loxton, Gary Barker, Graeme Kennedy, Jim Lippard, Joe Albietz, Kylie Sturgess and Tim Farley. Special thanks to Rich Orman for adapting the text and recording the audio version.

About the author: Reed Esau (reed@esau.org) is a software architect in Denver, Colorado. He is an assistant organizer of the largest of the Skeptic Meetup groups. He started thinking about barcamp and skepticism shortly after TAM5 in February of 2007. Along with Rich Ludwig and Crystal Yates-White he organized the inaugural skepticamp in August of that year.