

## A modern-day witch-hunt?

'The hounding of 'Psychic Sally' is becoming a modern-day witch-hunt', claimed the headline of a *Telegraph* piece by Brendan O'Neill (see [tinyurl.com/7h2b8o7](http://tinyurl.com/7h2b8o7)).

For those not familiar with the story, Sally Morgan is a TV psychic who is demanding damages of £150,000 from Associated Newspapers over a *Daily Mail* story by magician Paul Zenon, accusing her of scamming a vulnerable audience. The article, published on 22 September, was headlined: 'What a load of crystal balls!', and it alleged Morgan pretended to have psychic powers when she was in fact simply repeating information from members of her team via a microphone and hidden earpiece.

Morgan was subsequently invited to prove her supernatural powers in a Halloween test devised by psychologist Professor Chris French, Head of the Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit at Goldsmiths, University of London. When she inevitably failed to show, Morgan was heavily criticised on Twitter.

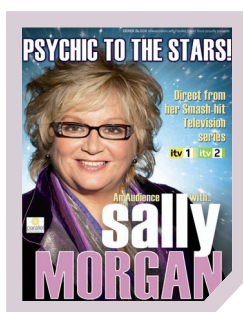
O'Neill appears to have taken issue with this, writing: 'Why are ostensibly intellectual people devoting so much time and energy to having a pop at a woman who claims to be psychic? ... The anti-Morgan lobby is motivated by the same impulses as those pointy-hatted witch-

hunters of old: first, by a desire to look big and impressive by shouting down an allegedly wicked woman; and second, by a desire to save the little people, who are daft and easily led, from having their minds warped and their lives wrecked by people who believe in things the rest of us don't believe in.'

I asked Professor French about this, and he said: 'There are crucial differences

between the persecution of innocent women falsely accused of being witches and criticism of a woman who has made millions of pounds by herself claiming to be able to talk to the dead. If she really does have such powers, it would be the most amazing discovery ever and she should be willing to be tested under controlled conditions. If she doesn't, she's a fraud exploiting the bereaved and nothing more.'

I am in complete agreement with Professor French here. Yet I do occasionally feel a twinge of unease at the speed, volume and ferocity of response the sceptical scientific community appear able to marshal. Perhaps there is a grain of truth in O'Neill's caution that 'the fashionable secular set seems incapable of asserting itself in any positive way', and we should be particularly wary of social media in this context. **JS**



'She should be willing to be tested'

## Memory bonanza

*The Guardian* and *Observer* held a themed Memory Week in January, part of the papers' Head Start self-help series for 2012 (see [tinyurl.com/maximem](http://tinyurl.com/maximem)). This included a mass participation online experiment run by psychologists Jon Simons, Zara Bergström and Charles Fernyhough, looking into long-term memory and how the similarity of events affects remembering. In three weeks, over 27,000 people took part. 'It was great fun collaborating with *The Guardian*,' Simons told us. 'Thanks to lots of publicity by them, and hundreds of people sharing and re-tweeting the weblink around the world, we had an extraordinary response. We're currently immersed in processing these data, and hope to publish a preliminary report on the findings soon.'

Another feature was a live, online Q&A session with Charles Fernyhough. 'That was a very new experience,' Fernyhough said. 'It showed me that a lot of people think of memory as a muscle that needs to be strengthened, rather than this fascinating and tricky process of self-editing that the research is telling us about.'

The week culminated in publication of a special two-part supplement coordinated by Fernyhough, which included contributions from him on autobiographical memory and shared memories; from Simons on the science of remembering; Hugo Spiers on the neurobiology of memory; Alice Bell on the effect of the internet; Ed Cooke with mnemonics and memory tests; and me on memory myths and glitches. **CJ**

### MEDIA CURIOSITY

New York – the city that never sleeps. Perhaps that's why taxis are to be fitted with 'honk-reduction technology' (<http://t.co/MeGiq1BA>).

It seems that enormous signs reading 'Don't Honk – \$350 fine' are not enough. 'Give someone a horn and they'll honk it,' writes Josh Max in *New York Daily News*. So why are New Yorkers such brats behind the wheel?

'It's frustration,' says environmental psychologist Dr Arline Bronzaft. 'Nothing moves if you're stuck at the back end of a line of cars and you honk your horn. Rationally, we know this. But are people rational beings? No – they're emotional.'

Yet despite the impact of noise on quality of life, most drivers like their horn nice and loud. During a press launch for the Hyundai's Sonata, there were overwhelming complaints about the car's wimpy horn. Within a week, Hyundai replaced the hardware with a 'more appropriate dual-shell unit that gives the car a louder presence when the owner needs to use the horn'.

Despite this, a new Nissan taxi is to be fitted with honk-reduction technology, 'specifically a so-called low-annoyance horn'. Bronzaft recommends training drivers to control their tempers. 'Take a deep breath, hum a song. Say to yourself, "How best could I deal with this situation?" Or why not see if we can come up with something imaginative? Why not a horn you can restrict? If you hit the horn, say, 2–3 times, then it quits. Or design a mechanism whereby when you put your hand down for any length of time, the horn simply stops. And then it won't go on again for a period of time. At least let's stop the horns from continuous, unrelenting blasts.' **JS**

### MEDIA TRAINING

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[www.bps.org.uk/events/media-training-introduction-working-media](http://www.bps.org.uk/events/media-training-introduction-working-media)  
£200 +VAT (BPS)

30 April Broadcast  
[www.bps.org.uk/events/media-training-broadcast-interview-skills](http://www.bps.org.uk/events/media-training-broadcast-interview-skills)  
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