

The question of peer review

Editor's Note: Last month researcher David Rudiak discussed various aspects of the Ramey message, which he considers to be the Roswell "smoking gun." This month he concludes his observations with thoughts on "peer review" of work on the message.

By David Rudiak

Dick Hall has called for an "objective scientific" peer review of work on the Ramey memo, particularly my work. Hall also claims that such a peer review is the only way to validate the contents of the message.

I have the highest regard for Dick Hall's decades of work and sacrifice in this field, and I do not object to "peer review" per se. I just want those calling for peer review to be very explicit about what they have in mind.

I consider biased or poorly thought out peer review to be worse than no peer review. Like many others, I am aware of many agendas from various people in this field. Therefore, how do you keep things "objective" with such an emotionally charged topic?

Here are other major issues in any sort of peer review:

1. Who chooses the peer reviewers? How do you keep the choice of reviewers "objective"?
2. What are the necessary qualifications of the peer reviewers, and who decides this? Why, e.g., is a physical scientist better than an English major or a linguist, since this is primarily a linguistic task, not a physical measurement? How do you keep the peer reviewers objective?
3. How is this peer review going to be carried out? What is the protocol and methodology? Who decides this? How do you ensure the protocol is "objective" or properly designed?
4. How do you keep your peer reviewers motivated so that they persist for a reasonable time (meaning dozens of hours, not 15 minutes), other than paying them a lot of money? Who's going to pay them?

Hall responded vaguely to some of these points, but not others. E.g., he said the peer reviewers would be similarly knowledgeable people in the field and would choose themselves. He thought they would be self-motivated and money wasn't needed.

The devil is in the details

It sounds very simple and high minded to call for a peer review of independent scientists, but the devil is in the details.

Again we have to deal with the problems of who is doing the peer review, and do the individuals or the group have a hidden agenda? Here's another problem with "peer review." Do the people doing the peer review or designing the protocol really understand the problem?

Consider the peer review proposal of Houran and Randle in their paper. They suggested using at least three

separate groups and "triangulating" readings. These would be "independent and blind laboratories that specialize in the area of reading and transcribing archival documents. Their only motivation should be payment for providing professional and objective reports."

Thus to solve the objectivity problem, they suggested telling the groups nothing at all about what the message was about. To keep them even more "objective," the reviewers would also be completely Roswell ignorant. Unlike Hall, they weren't naïve enough to think that blind and disinterested readers would stay "motivated" and work on the task unless money was thrown at them.

This proposal sounds superficially reasonable, but it is full of problems. We are back to the very issues I raised above. E.g., experts like this do not come cheap. To keep them working at the problem for the necessary length of time to make a legitimate study could easily cost in the neighborhood of \$50,000 to \$100,000.

Further, no clear criteria are laid out for how they would be chosen, how long they would work to make the study valid, or why their readings would necessarily be more reliable than previous results.

The importance of proper context

But the more serious inherent problem has to do with keeping the groups completely in the dark in order to make the reading more "objective." In doing so, one has removed absolutely critical information needed to disambiguate the message.

Even the initial Houran and Randle study demonstrated great improvement in reading of certain words by the group knowing the correct Roswell context, though the authors chose to completely ignore this result.

It's somewhat like trying to work a crossword puzzle by providing some of the letters but removing most of the crossword clues. Without the clues, the words become ambiguous with possible multiple solutions. Therefore, the suggested Houran/Randle protocol virtually guarantees failure in reading most of the message.

This is basically a word puzzle. To properly solve it, one needs to know the proper context and apply it.

That is why I like to give the example of the possible matches for the "victims" word if one uses search letters "V I _ I _ S," letters that are almost certainly present. There are only 8 possibilities. But still one must choose amongst the possibilities, and that can only be done by applying proper context.

VIOLINS might be a viable choice if we knew the message was from a symphony conductor. VIRGINS might be viable if the message was from an anthropologist and concerned human sacrifice. But neither word seems very likely in the context of a military message at the height of the Roswell incident in the hand of the general trying to kill the story. (Other "matches" include