

The New Faces Of Young Skepticism: The Young Australian Skeptics Site Relaunch

Written by Kylie Sturgess

Friday, 21 December 2012 09:00

Back in November 2008 I stumbled across a new skepticism site, called the [Young Australian Skeptics](#)



Naturally I was curious and intrigued, and with a little investigation learned that they were a group of enthusiastic and supportive Melbourne scientists, science-lovers, artists and freethinkers who wanted to contribute to the growth of youth participation in skepticism - not just in their city but across the country.

While the podcast [The Pseudo-Scientists](#), has continued to release regular episodes over the years, the site itself has been in need of a revamp. Now at the end of 2012, the revitalisation of the Young Australian Skeptics is happening. I spoke to Jack Scanlan, Tom Lang, Belinda Nicholson and Rachael Skerritt about the changes to the site, the ambitions they have for skepticism, and even whether they think it's ageist to have a focus on promoting youth in skepticism.

Firstly, how did the Young Australian Skeptics come to be?

Jack Scanlan: Elliot Birch, our Dear Leader (who has sadly now passed to the other side - a life in Sydney, that is), created the site in late 2008, with the podcast, [The Pseudo-Scientists](#), following soon thereafter.

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Elliot wanted the site to be a place where young people could discuss issues relating to science and skepticism together, express their opinions and build a community. In order for this to happen, the two main features of the site were a blog and a forum. The forum was just a normal Internet forum board, but the blog, in what was a reasonably bold move by our Dear Leader, was open, meaning that anyone could contribute content by signing up for the site. Essentially, anyone and everyone could be an author, providing some basic editorial rules were followed.

For a long time, this worked well - there was regular content being written by a wide variety of authors, some regular, some less so, and most of this writing was drawing a significant audience and even some media attention. Our bold move was paying off.

However, after about two years of the open format, activity started to wind down. I'm not sure what started it, but blog submissions began to dry up. Without any sense of real responsibility (I guess that's one way to describe it) towards keeping the blog going, the authors slowly left. Sure, we had some stalwart regulars who remained - some of whom are on the new writing team - but by the start of 2011, content had dried up, compared to what had come before.

Things looked dire. Without posts, people weren't visiting the site, and without visitors, you can't have discussions or a community. The aim of the Young Australian Skeptics was being dashed upon the harsh and fickle rocks of the Internet.

This caught my attention in a big way [after attending The Amazing Meeting 9](#) last year - there didn't seem to be many

young

skeptical groups around, but clearly a lot of young skeptics! The YAS was a young skeptical group, I thought, but it's been effectively dead for a while now - how could I revive what once thrived?

By the middle of 2012, I'd figured out what needed to be done: a revamp. A relaunch. A reboot. If we couldn't get random people to write, we'd recruit a dedicated and enthusiastic team of young writers. We'd give the site a gorgeous new design. We'd champion young opinions and points of view. We'd lead the charge in online skeptical outreach for young people from the Southern Hemisphere.

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Tom Lang: Hopefully with a pretty entertaining podcast to boot!

Jack: Stop being so dramatic, Tom.

How would you describe your podcast; how does it differ from other skeptical shows out there?

Jack: Our podcast is *The Skeptic's Guide to the Universe* meets breakfast radio. Er, in a good way, I guess? Oh man, we're so zany! But I'm the boring, unfunny one. There's always got to be a boring, unfunny one.

Tom: Jack means he's the enthusiastic, sciencey one. I'm the one who makes jokes, diverts the conversation into pop-culture references, and tries to keep things moving along at a fair clip. Also I wrangle Jack when he starts to get too into specialist topics. I pretend I'm doing this for the benefit of the less sciencey members of the audience, but really it's for myself, because most of the time I have no idea what's going on. And I feel that's valuable.

Jack: Nonsense. Tom's the only one with real qualifications in science communication - the rest of us are just pretending. However, I like to believe that we pretend reasonably well.

Belinda Nicholson: While Tom might be the only one with the Sci Comm degree, I'm of the firm belief that you don't have to have a degree in science communication in order to do science communication, just like you don't need a science degree to do science or view the world in a scientific way. This is what I believe the podcast is about: encouraging people to enjoy and explore science and scientific thinking, whether or not they have a science degree; encouraging them to become pseudo-scientists.

Jack: But not the bad sort of pseudoscientists. The name's ironic, people. Or is it? To be honest, I really don't know at this point!

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What exactly does "Young" in "The Young Australian Skeptics" mean to you - is there an age limit for contributors, readers; what do you usually respond with when people question the implication of "youth only"?

Jack: This is probably the most controversial thing about the YAS - which is good, I guess - in that we've had a few people tell us that we're elitist or discriminatory because we only cater to young people. And it is a tough problem, defining what "young" actually means.

My answer is usually "anyone from high school to maybe late 20s," with an upwards inflection at the end to signify that I'm highly unsure of what I just said. The YAS exists to give a voice to skeptics who would otherwise be denied them based on their age - so if your ability to contribute to debate is limited by your age, then we're here for you.

Rachael Skerritt: Age is not something that impedes your ability to contribute to the skeptic movement, quite the opposite, but some people seem to dismiss what young people have to say merely on the basis of age. For this reason I think the YAS holds an important place in the online skeptical community, like Jack said, in giving a voice to younger skeptics.

Jack: My typical response to the critics points this out - the YAS isn't an organisation, we don't have formal members, and we're not here to exclude older voices from debate. Far from it! The more people of all ages that communicate with each other, the better! This means that the blog and podcast are intended for an audience of all ages - *except* for young children, because we sometimes talk about naughty things!

Rachael: My approach to defining "young" is "who cares?" As I recall, at the Young Skeptics Lunch at the recent 2012 Australian Skeptics Convention, James Randi was in attendance, and he's 84! I think that honestly, it's not something worth worrying about.

Tom: I think the important thing is just to be not set-in-your-ways. Young at heart? Young at brain? As long as you can look at things from different perspectives it's all good.

Belinda: I think the "young" is important as it gives focus for us as being a place for young

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people to have their voice about skeptical issues. There are no elders whose opinions matter more because they have more experience, or have simply been around longer.

Tom: Ooh, I like that.

Jack: Bottom line: our authors are "young" (whatever that means), but our audience is everyone. Yes, even you, dear JREF Swift readers!

You've all been involved in skepticism for a few years now - what have been the big changes that you've seen - any setbacks, inspirational moments? What would you say to someone like yourself back then, when you were starting, such as the big lessons you've learned?

Jack: Big changes? The recent - and not-so-recent - infighting and tribalism (do I have to name names?) is having a substantial impact on how skeptics communicate with each other, especially online. Don't talk to this person, don't talk about a certain topic like this, don't attend or promote these events... It's unhelpful - if your goal is effective skeptical activism, that is. People are always going to disagree, but personal attacks for the sake of personal attacks? It makes me pretty sad.

But of course, I'm a literal saint (wings and everything) and have *never* made a mistake in my life, so my opinion probably isn't worth much on this topic!

Rachael: I'm fairly new to the skeptic movement so I can't really comment on any changes that have occurred over the past few years. However, I think the online infighting that we're seeing is a result of skepticism growing larger as a movement, growing to include a wider range of people from different backgrounds with different opinions, which from time to time clash. In my opinion, personal attacks are always unnecessary, and are unhelpful to the skeptic movement.

Belinda: I would agree with Jack about the infighting. This is something that I have seen occurring over the past few years and has really put me off being involved in the skeptical movement, and has lead to me thinking of what the YAS does as a force for increased science

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communication and promotion of skeptical thought quite apart of any skeptical "movement" there might be. I think this is what skepticism should be: people being skeptical and doing skeptical things regardless of what another groups of people are doing.

Jack: That's not to say that we won't collaborate with other groups. Because we will. Totally up for it.

What are some of the goals for the new site - will we see more YAS on the scene and in what ways?

Jack: The main goals for the site are: promote discussion about topics important to young skeptics, especially those in Australia, and raise the awareness and visibility of young skeptics in the online skeptical community; promote relevant events, such as those put on by university student groups; create a community and online support network for young skeptics, especially non-religious young people who may feel ostracised from their families and friends; and of course make ourselves very famous. I don't get recognised on the street enough/ever!

We hope to hold some live events ourselves - in Melbourne, most likely - at some unspecified point in the future. We'll keep you posted on that front...!

Tom: Yes, if we can bring a light to just one life and all that. Personally I'm going to use it to launch my music career, but don't tell Jack! Also I believe that one of most important things to ensure a vaguely decent future for mankind is for the population to have a good grasp on not only science, but the ability to see things from perspectives other than your own. I think that's really the whole point of skepticism, to be able to be critical, but also open minded.

Belinda: ...but not so open minded that your brain falls out...

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Check out the site <http://www.youngausskeptics.com> over the next few days to see the brand new changes and subscribe to the

[The Pseudo-Scientists](#)

□ and □ don't forget to leave ratings and reviews to encourage their show.

Kylie Sturgess is the host of the [Token Skeptic](#) podcast, and regularly writes editorial for numerous publications and CSICOP's [Curiouser and Curiouser](#) online column. She holds Masters degrees in gifted and talented education and wrote her thesis on the educational measurement of paranormal beliefs. She is the co-host for the Global Atheist Convention in 2010 and 2012 and presented at the

[Sixth World Skeptics Congress](#)

in Berlin on pseudoscience in education. In addition,

[Kylie Sturgess is an award-winning secular activist](#)

, a member of the James Randi Educational Foundation Education Advisory Panel and writes at

[The Token Skeptic at FreeThought Blogs](#)

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