The Telegraph

Forget Darwin, it's survival of the witless

By Jim White

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Last week, Charles Darwin's work was published in its entirety on the internet, to be downloaded for free.

Prof Richard Dawkins wrote in one newspaper that, in a society in which religious intolerance and New Age clap-trap are on the rise, this availability of Darwin in bite-sized chunks was not before time. The world view that Darwin posits, Dawkins suggested, is needed now more than ever. And what better way to disseminate that view than via the web, our greatest modern invention.

For Dawkins, the scientific evangelist, technology and rationality make the perfect marriage.

In which case we can only assume that the professor has not anticipated next week's live Hallowe'en edition of Most Haunted. For those unaware of Most Haunted, it can be found on something called Living TV, out in the wilder boondocks of satellite television, where it has proved a phenomenal success. Tickets to attend this year's live Hallowe'en event in Edinburgh sold out months ago. Hundreds of thousands of viewers will tune in. This is satellite television's biggest home-grown success, attracting an audience almost as big as that of The Simpsons.

If Dawkins reckons technology and rationality are ideal partners, then this is the place where technology and bonkers credulity are having a romping affair, and the sea-front hotel where they meet claims the ghost of a previous landlady stalks the bar.

Last year's Hallowe'en special is out on DVD, and I recommend it to any student of stupidity: you will not find a finer example of sustained nonsense. The show comes from a pub cellar in which a murderer's spirit supposedly lurks among the barrels. The show's presenter Yvette Fielding and the entertainer Paul O'Grady are dispatched into the pitch-dark basement, joined only by a cameraman with an infra-red lens. The idea is that they spend the evening down there, recording any unusual events. Meanwhile upstairs, an audience of paranormal enthusiasts gather to watch the unfolding action on closed-circuit monitors.

That action largely consists of Fielding and O'Grady scaring themselves witless, squealing at every gurgle in the pub's plumbing. Occasionally, Fielding's face is framed in the camera, red-eyed and terrified, earnestly asking if anyone else heard what she just heard. No one has, so she shrieks: "Shush, listen, what was that? Did you hear that?" You listen hard, but there is nothing to hear.

At one point, O'Grady is convinced he sees something emerging from a corner of the cellar. In high excitement, the camera dashes over to the corner and discovers precisely nothing. Soon, the two presenters are joined by a medium who, to no one's surprise, given that his livelihood

depends on sustaining the myth, quickly communes with the interloping spirit. As he flaps about the place woo-ing and moaning, the stupidity levels are cranked up so high that even Fielding has difficulty maintaining a straight face.

And yet, despite its obvious ridiculousness, Most Haunted has become the thing that sustains Living TV. Produced at roughly the same cost as the cappuccino budget on Simon Schama's Power of Art series for the BBC, it is cheapo TV at its extreme: hours of programming made possible by technological advances in cameras. In every show, those cameras reveal that there is nothing there. Despite this, every week, those behind the cameras brazenly imply there might be.

Of course, some of the audience tune in just to giggle at the shamelessness of the con. But if you read the programme's online message board, you discover that a huge number of viewers are taken in, convinced that what they are seeing is evidence of the paranormal.

Next Tuesday, when Fielding and her team yelp around Edinburgh, technology will deliver not enlightenment but obfuscation for those thousands of viewers. With every scream, they will undermine Prof Dawkins's assertion that scientific advance is necessarily a catalyst for reason.

In fact, the triumphant upward trajectory of Most Haunted suggests there are plenty of people out there who would never download The Origin of the Species for fear that their keyboards will become possessed by the ghost of Darwin himself.