



## Chemical Fallout: *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* and the BPA story

### Case Summary

Journalists—even beat reporters who specialize in a particular subject—often tackle issues that are unfamiliar and daunting in their apparent complexity. Science-related stories in particular can involve deciphering turgid jargon, wading through dense method and research sections, and speaking to scientists who are not necessarily skilled at reducing nuanced findings into media-friendly sound bites. In writing these articles, journalists must be mindful of the fact that most research is still contested within the scientific community, despite seeming authoritative at first glance.

This case focuses on the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, the largest newspaper in Wisconsin, as it launched an investigation into the chemical compound bisphenol A (BPA) in summer 2007. Commercially produced since the 1950s, BPA is ubiquitous in everyday life, used as the main ingredient in hard, translucent plastic called polycarbonate to make everything from eye lenses and food and drink containers, to computers, CDs and power tools. In fact, BPA was so prevalent that a 2003-2004 study by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that nearly 93 percent of people over the age of six had detectable levels in their urine. The health implications of bisphenol A were widely disputed by two main camps, one of which argued it was safe for humans, and the other that maintained it was not.

Three *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* reporters, Susanne Rust, Meg Kissinger and Cary Spivak, began investigating BPA, its history, the debate surrounding the compound, and the government's failed chemical screening program, eventually producing a story they felt was balanced and comprehensive. But Mark Katches, the assistant managing editor for projects and investigations,

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wanted a deeper look. Rather than provide an overview of BPA and a recapitulation of the debate that surrounded it, he asked them to reach their own conclusions about BPA's risks.

But how should they progress? The case follows the reporters through the investigative processes, which in addition to traditional reporting—such as interviews and document research—included developing their own methods for evaluating the research on BPA. The result, they hoped, would go beyond their first story, producing a piece that did not just frame the BPA issue but also evaluated it for readers.

## Teaching Objectives

This case presents students with some of the challenges involved in investigative research: following far-flung leads, piecing together seemingly disconnected bits of information, as well as wringing the most out of publicly available information and parties that may be reluctant to cooperate with reporters.

The role of journalists is central to the case. Should they act as conduits of information that give equal weight to all sides of an issue and leave readers to decide the relative strengths and weaknesses for themselves? Or should reporters use their own judgment, rooted in reporting, to evaluate evidence and arguments before presenting their findings to the public? The *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* team initially inclines towards the first approach, providing a “he-said, she-said” account of the BPA debate and an overview of endocrine disruptors. The two-part story that replaces it draws on Rust's analysis of existing BPA research and is far more assertive in its conclusions. Students should consider the advantages and disadvantages of both approaches, for scientists, journalists and their audiences.

A related angle concerns the training and skills that journalists bring to their jobs. Rust won the trust of her editors, and was able to embark on her own analysis of existing research, because of her background in biological anthropology. Relatively few journalists, however, have similarly strong academic backgrounds in the fields about which they write. Does it matter? To what extent, if any, should journalists supplement their practical skills with specialized study in a particular field? What are the potential drawbacks, if any, of such an academic grounding?

Class participants are also encouraged to examine the case within the context of journalistic responsibility. Publishing Rust's findings could generate panic amongst readers who, when warned of the dangers of bisphenol A, can do little to fully avoid it in their everyday lives. The *Journal Sentinel* has a duty to avoid sensationalism and aims to inform its audience responsibly, but also wants to grab readers with a compelling story—goals that are not necessarily consistent with one another. Students should discuss this conflict and options for resolving it.

Where does information come from and who provides it? The *Journal Sentinel's* investigation showed that the origins of BPA-related data mattered: industry-funded research invariably concluded that bisphenol A posed no risks, while studies from outside the chemical industry tended to conclude that health risks *did* exist. Typically journalists are expected to flag sources who may have a particular agenda, such as someone who was just laid off from the company about which they are commenting. But that rule of thumb can be harder to follow when it comes to science stories, which are often based on research with complex and murky ties to industry and interest groups. Is it always feasible to expect journalists to mine the provenance of their information, and to understand the particular allegiances and in-politics behind data? When thinking through their responses, students should consider factors such as the additional time and money involved in carrying out such work.

Characterized by nuance and incremental progress, science is often poorly suited to journalism's breezy generalizations and fast-paced style. Making matters worse, editors often gravitate toward science's splashiest debates and quirkiest findings, in the interest of drawing the broadest possible audience. The result can be a patchy and distorted account of scientific research, and an uneasy fit with journalism's ideals of "balance" and "objectivity." Journalists, for example, may want to give equal weight to global warming's believers and skeptics, skewing the reality of a scientific community comprised of mostly believers. Students should think of other examples in which journalistic "balance" has implied an equivalence of scientific views that does not really exist, and the implications of possible mismatches between science and journalistic norms and practices.

Most journalists, especially print reporters, work by themselves. But investigative work often requires a group effort, throwing journalists into a world of unfamiliar challenges, including how to divvy up work, mesh writing styles and manage competing egos. What are the pros and cons of group work in journalism, and when is it best utilized?

## Class Plan

Use the case in a class about science journalism, investigative reporting, team work, or journalistic specialization and skills.

*Pre-class.* Help students prepare for class by assigning the following question:

1) Should journalists provide readers with stark conclusions, or with evidence that allows them to make up their own minds?

We found it useful to engage students ahead of class by asking them to post brief responses (no more than 250 words) to questions in an online forum. Writing short comments

challenges students to distill their thoughts and express them succinctly. The posts also highlight talking points ahead of the class, and identify specific students to call upon during the discussion.

*In-class questions.* The online blog posts are a useful starting point for preliminary discussion, after which the instructor could pose any of the following questions to promote an 80-90 minute discussion. The choice of questions will be determined by what the instructor would like the students to learn from the class discussion. In general, choosing to discuss three or four questions in some depth is preferable to trying to cover them all.

Before class starts, write a timeline of key events on the board as a visual reference point for students.

- a) In September 2007, Katches asks his reporters to adopt a new approach to the story. Is he making a reasonable request? Assuming he is dissatisfied with the story, what other approach could he have taken?
- b) Should Katches, who could see the story as it progressed, have intervened earlier if he had doubts about its approach and depth?
- c) Should the team have come to the scientific angle of the story sooner?
- d) What do you think about the composition of the reporting team? Was it well balanced? Should it have been differently configured?
- e) Many journalists write about subjects in which they are neither trained nor experts. Does the complexity of science and its importance to public health, amongst other things, mean that science journalists should be held to a higher standard of training than journalists who cover other fields?
- f) How well did Rust analyze the scientific research on BPA? Could she have carried out her work differently or more effectively?
- g) Was too much responsibility put on Rust as a team member? Could Spivak and Kissinger have shouldered a larger load, and if so, should they have done so?
- h) Were the reporters right to press on after the *USA Today* article came out?
- i) A three-person investigation of this nature, which lasted more than six months, can cost thousands of dollars. (In this case, the *Journal Sentinel* spent around \$100,000, according to George Stanley.) Was it money well spent?

- j) Is it risky for a media outlet to take a stand that can be seen as advocating a particular view?

### **Suggested Readings:**

Jane Gregory and Steve Miller, *Science in Public: Communication, Culture, and Credibility*. New York: Plenum Trade, 1998.

SYNOPSIS: This book provides students with a broader context for the case by looking at the history of communicating about science from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. It examines the rationales behind encouraging greater public understanding of the field, and highlights the various interests that groups such as business, government and media have in communicating about science. Useful chapters include “Media Issues in the Public Understanding of Science,” “Case Studies in Public Science,” “Science in Museums,” and “Initiative and Activities in the Public Understanding of Science.”

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Sharon M. Friedman, Sharon Dunwoody, Carol L. Rogers, *Communicating Uncertainty: Media Coverage of New and Controversial Science*. Mahwah, N.J.: Erlbaum Associates, 1999.

SYNOPSIS: This book, a compilation of contributions from various authors, examines how well mass media convey to the public the complexities and debates that are part of scientific uncertainty. It approaches its subject from three perspectives: communication scholars who have studied uncertainty in a number of ways, science journalists, and scientists involved in researching uncertain science and talking to the press about it.

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Vincent Kiernan, *Embargoed Science*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006.

SYNOPSIS: In this book, the author sets out to reveal what he claims to be the flawed process behind science news. Kiernan shows how a handful of scholarly journals wield immense control over how the press covers science—and thus public knowledge of science and medical issues—through the practice of embargo. By insisting that media only publicize pre-distributed articles at a particular time when they lift their embargo, the journals effectively flood the market with particular information. The result, says Kiernan, is “pack” journalism that reduces healthy competition and critical journalistic thinking.

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Chris Mooney, "Blinded by Science: How Balanced Coverage Lets the Scientific Fringe Hack Reality," *Columbia Journalism Review*, November/December 2004.

SYNOPSIS: This article argues that the journalistic norm of balance has no parallel in the scientific world, and that reporters who attempt to apply it to science can distort or misrepresent information, generate false controversies or fall prey to interest groups who demand equal treatment for scientific claims. It suggests that when it comes to science, journalists should avoid "he said/she said" coverage and instead help readers evaluate the credibility of competing claims. In doing so, journalists should rely on the principle that extraordinary assertions require extraordinary proof to back them up, and bear in mind that the processes of scientific peer review and consensus building should not be discarded lightly, if at all.

<http://cjrarchives.org/issues/2004/6/mooney-science.asp>

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"Science Journalism," *Nieman Reports*, Vol. 56, No. 3, Fall 2002.

SYNOPSIS: This edition of the Harvard-produced *Nieman Reports* focuses exclusively on science journalism, and includes a range of articles useful to both students and teachers. These include: "The Difficulty of Finding Impartial Sources in Science," "Teaching Journalism Students to Report on Science," "New Complications in Reporting on Science," and "Graphics and Journalism." In another piece, "Reporting Science Means Looking for Cautionary Signals," Boyce Rensberger also provides two worthwhile sidebars, one of which lists "What Every Journalist Should Know About Science and Science Journalism," and another that highlights "Books Every Science Writer Should Read."

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M. Mitchell Waldrop, "Science 2.0—Is Open Access Science the Future?" *Scientific American*, April 21, 2008.

SYNOPSIS: The Internet has revolutionized people's ability to search, post and edit information online. This has significant implications for science, where a small but growing number of researchers have begun to upload raw results to the web for all to see as part of what has been called Science 2.0. This article explores whether open access science is the future, and whether posting results online represent a worthwhile opportunity or a dangerous risk.

<http://www.sciam.com/article.cfm?id=science-2-point-0&print=true>

\**Columbia Journalism Review* analyzes Waldrop's article in an online piece "Journalism 2.0 on Science 2.0: How the Web is shaping next-generation reporting." CJR's story is part of "The Observatory," the magazine's useful online critique of science and environmental reporting.

[http://www.cjr.org/the\\_observatory/journalism\\_20\\_on\\_science\\_20.php](http://www.cjr.org/the_observatory/journalism_20_on_science_20.php)