

Chemical Fallout: The Milwaukee *Journal Sentinel* and the BPA Story

Abstract

This case looks at the challenges that confront science reporters as they seek to determine what is the “truth” among competing scientific claims. In summer 2007, the Milwaukee *Journal Sentinel* launched an investigation into the chemical compound bisphenol A (BPA). An editor asks the reporters to determine for themselves whether BPA is safe or not. Accustomed to telling “balanced” he said/she said-style stories, this thrusts the reporting team—especially its science reporter—into unknown territory. Susanne Rust has to figure out how to identify relevant research, how to assess its credibility and findings, and how to summarize her own conclusions in ways that are not alarmist and sensational. In addition, the team uncovers governmental misbehavior and must integrate that into the scientific story.

Students will have an opportunity to consider the special trials of science reporting. What is the responsibility of the science journalist: to present both sides of an argument and let the reader decide; or draw conclusions of his own? Does a scientist’s desire to win publicity for her findings coincide in an unhealthy fashion with a journalist’s desire to get a front-page story? In reporting on science, who is a reliable source? What role do government oversight agencies play? The case also provides material for a class discussion of the dynamics of team reporting; the difficulties of getting access to reluctant sources; and the responsibility of a news organization to avoid alarming readers.

This case can be used in a class about science journalism, investigative reporting, team reporting, or journalistic specialization and skills.

Credits

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