The Journalism School
Knight Case Studies Initiative
Columbia University

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God and Darwin: The *York Daily Record* and the Intelligent Design Trial
Teaching Note

Case Summary

Traditional journalism prizes reportorial balance and even-handedness. But not all subjects lend themselves to such an approach. Scientific consensus has for decades favored evolution by natural selection as the best explanation for how life on earth developed. Still, a vocal minority has in recent years challenged that theory, explaining developments in the living world in terms of "intelligent design" by an unidentified external agent, widely understood to be God.

In fall 2004, a small group of parents in Dover, a conservative town in south Pennsylvania, sued their school district for mandating that ninth-graders be "made aware" that evolution was just one of several theories explaining the earth's development, and be encouraged to consider others—specifically intelligent design.

This case focuses on the struggles of Lauri Lebo, an education reporter at the local *York Daily Record* newspaper, as she covers the ensuing court case. The trial not only presented Lebo with a number of potential narrative frames, it also forced her to grapple with complex and unfamiliar science. Lebo's extensive research assured her that most serious scientists rejected intelligent design, a position that she felt increasingly comfortable reflecting in her coverage. But editors at the *Daily Record*, concerned about bias against intelligent design and its supporters, favored a different approach that paid more attention to the perceived weaknesses in evolutionary theory.

The case centers on the article that Lebo must file following a pivotal day in court, where Lehigh University microbiologist Michael Behe, a founding father of the intelligent design movement, testified for the defense. Under cross-examination, Behe struggled to explain the mechanisms of intelligent design in scientific terms. During the first week of the trial, Lebo had had little trouble covering the plaintiff's side of the case, which matched her own belief that

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Darwinism was grounded in solid science. But writing about the defense arguments put her in a quandary. Typically, in covering a court case she gave both sides of the legal argument equal weight. But here she felt the science on one side was flawed. On the other hand, she had clear signals from her editors not to slight in the newspaper views held by many *Daily Record* readers. Students step into Lebo's shoes as she struggles with how to write about what the defense said.

Teaching Objectives

This case highlights the challenges and limitations of "objective" reporting in general, and of science reporting in particular. Use the case as a vehicle for discussing reportorial balance, accuracy, fairness, and the difficulty of covering controversial issues for an opinionated audience. You may also choose to have students debate story frames, editorial disagreements, journalistic research, expertise and authority, and the influence that audiences can have on content.

A central focus of the case is editorial balance. According to the norm of objectivity, journalists are required to be detached, nonpartisan observers who present all sides of a story. But what if one side is weaker and more flawed than another? Should a minority opinion always receive the same amount of coverage as a majority one? What if the journalist believes that the minority opinion lacks legitimacy? Should the reporter, who may not be an expert in the field, make such a call? Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of journalistic "balance," particularly when it comes to science where presenting "all sides" may falsely imply an equivalence of views. Students should think of other examples in which journalistic "balance" has falsely implied an equivalence of views—scientific and otherwise. What are the implications of possible mismatches between science and journalism's standard practices?

Lebo is an education reporter, with no background in the scientific issues that surround the case. Does this undermine her ability to cover the story, or might it enhance it in some ways? Should journalists in general be trained in the fields about which they write? If so, how much training is enough? Is on-the-job research—Lebo immerses herself in scientific literature for over a year—sufficient? Students should discuss the importance of journalistic expertise, and its relative strengths and weaknesses.

Similarly, students should consider whether it is appropriate for journalists to assert their own views, rooted in original research, or whether they should instead remain impartial, serving primarily as the conduit for other people's views. For example, as Lebo covers the lawsuit, she begins to write with more authority, and did not feel she needed to back up as many assertions with quotes or with references to what "scientists say." Is she justified? What are the risks and benefits of her doing so?

Most journalists must answer to at least one editor. Navigating that relationship—knowing how to respond to requests and queries, when to compromise and when to stand one's

ground—can be a crucial part of a successful career. Before the trial, both Jim McClure and Randy Parker remind her to be "fair and balanced." While she initially shrugs off the advice, Lebo knows when she comes to write her story following Behe's testimony that her editors may object to her lede, and that she will have to defend her portrayal of the court proceedings. What is the most effective way for her to handle her editors? To what extent should she anticipate and adapt to their likely concerns, even if they conflict with her own judgments? Consider such questions as part of a broader conversation—especially applicable to younger journalists—about when to compromise and when to assert oneself in the newsroom.

Lebo's story has many potential angles: It's about education because it focuses on school curriculum; it's about politics thanks to the community's complex fault lines; and about religion because of intelligent design's Christian backers and its suggestion of a divine creator. At the same time, Lebo's story is about science—a challenge to Darwin's theory of evolution—and legal affairs because it revolves around a major court case. Its implications are simultaneously local and national, as similar conflicts have arisen in other states. The angle that reporters and editors select could result in significantly different stories. Students should consider narrative frames, and discuss how the lens through which a story is seen—both in this case and in general—can influence the final product.

Class Plan

Use this case in a course or class about science journalism; covering religion; or journalistic expertise, objectivity, and editorial balance.

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

1) To which section of the newspaper does this story belong: science, religion, education, politics, legal affairs or something else? Choose one and explain your answer.

We found it useful to engage students ahead of class by asking them to post brief responses (no more than 250 words) 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.

Write a timeline on the board of key events

2004

June 7: School board members say biology textbooks are "laced with Darwinism"
June 12: Shift in school board language from "creationism" to "intelligent design"
August 3: School board approves Darwin-laced textbook
October 18: Board requires a classroom statement about "gaps" in evolution theory
November 19: Board says press reports are wrong: no ID mandate
December 14: 11 parents sue board

2005

January 1: All but one science teacher refuses to read statement
January 6: Board depositions contradict news reports; deny trying to mandate creationism
January 18: Statement read to students; some teachers and students leave classroom
September 25: Trial begins
October 7: Dembski's ID theory presented in court; Lebo sends daily reports to YDR
October 18: Behe states ID does not propose a "mechanism" for biological development

a) After months of research, Lebo reaches definite conclusions about the validity of intelligent design. Is it her job to be objective, or does her research qualify her to insert her views and conclusions into the coverage?

b) What are Lebo's options as she prepares to write her story following Behe's testimony? Does she owe the defense the same benefit of the doubt that the judge does?

c) What are the stakes for the *York Daily Record* if it does not treat intelligent design as equal to evolution?

d) Evaluate Lebo's preparation for the story. What were the strengths and weaknesses of her reporting process? For example, at some points she draws on Maldonado's reporting rather than her own. Could or should she have done anything differently?

e) Lebo is an education reporter who admits that she has no background in science and is "acutely conscious of her own lack of expertise." Would it have been preferable to assign the story to a science reporter? To what extent is her non-scientific background a help or hindrance to her reporting?

f) In September, when Lebo decides to write a story explaining both sides of the debate, she questions whether to reflect the lopsidedness of the debate, or divide testimony evenly between intelligent design proponents and scientists who support evolution. What do you think? Do all subjects deserve "fair" treatment?

g) Lebo is aware that her coverage risks alienating a section of the *York Daily Record*'s readership. Religious readers may perceive her as biased in favor of evolution, while people on the opposite side of the debate may see her as too pro-intelligent design. To what extent should such concerns, and the sensibilities of her audience, factor into her

stories? What are the arguments for and against reflecting the values of the community for whom she writes?

h) At one point Lebo questions how, in a devout community skeptical about evolution, she can dispute the science of intelligent design without seeming to attack religion. Is there a way for her to do so?

i) John Staver, director of science education at Kansas State University, suggests that "ID [intelligent design] folks are appealing to a public that we know has a relatively low level of scientific literacy." If he is correct, should journalists be educators who explain science to their readers, or conduits for other people's views?

j) Much of the legal case revolves around whether intelligent design is no more than another name for creationism, which has long been banned from school science curriculums. To what extent should journalists be responsible for defining the terms in their coverage? Consider this case, as well as others—for example, "freedom fighter" versus "terrorist," "civil war" versus "sectarian violence"—in which the language of a story is itself in dispute.

Suggested Readings

Matthew Chapman, "God or Gorilla," *Harper's Magazine*, Feb. 2006. Vol. 312, Issue 1869, 54.

SYNOPSIS: Chapman, a great-great-grandson of Charles Darwin, discusses the Dover "monkey trial" and ultimately concludes: "One thing I know is that this small crusade in Pennsylvania was not a narrow assault on ninth-grade science education; it was a war on the scientific method and the value of evidence."

Nathaniel C. Comfort (ed.), *The Panda's Black Box: Opening up the Intelligent Design Controversy*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007.

SYNOPSIS: In this collection of essays, a number of leading public intellectuals seek to explain the roots of the intelligent design controversy and the social, political, and intellectual forces that shape it. The "Classroom Controversy: A History of the Dispute Over Teaching Evolution" chapter written by Pulitzer prize-winning historian and legal scholar Edward J. Larson is particularly relevant to the case.

Edward J. Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate over Science and Religion*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998.

SYNOPSIS: This book, for which Larson won a Pulitzer prize, offers the first full study of the Scopes trial to be published in 40 years. It examines the background to the trial, the legal issues involved, and some of the myths surrounding the court case. Larson argues that the popular 1950s play "Inherit the Wind," which was based on the Scopes case, misrepresented and "all but replaced the actual trial in the nation's memory."

A useful review by Yale History Professor Daniel Kevles summarizes the book. See: Daniel Kevles, "Darwin in Dayton," *New York Review of Books*, Nov. 19, 1998.

Lauri Lebo, *The Devil in Dover: An Insider's Story of Dogma v. Darwin in Small-town America*, New York: New Press, 2008.

SYNOPSIS: Lebo's book provides a more extensive account of the Dover battle over teaching intelligent design, fleshing out details, characters, and the issue of journalistic responsibility when covering such a story.

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.

"Science Journalism," *Nieman Reports*, Fall 2002, Vol. 56, Issue 3.

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. Among the best: "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 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."

Eugenie C. Scott and Glenn Branch, *Not in Our Classrooms: Why Intelligent Design is Wrong for Our Schools*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2006.

SYNOPSIS: Contributors to this book, edited by two directors of a non-profit that defends teaching evolution in public schools, consider the conflict between teaching religion and science in American schools.

Michael Schudson, "The Objectivity Norm in American Journalism," *Journalism*, 2001, Vol. 2, Issue 2, 149-170.

SYNOPSIS: This article by communication scholar Michael Schudson offers a clear and thoughtful grounding in the issue of objectivity. It examines objectivity's origins in American journalism, the reasons it became more popular in the United States than in Europe, and the conditions that led to its rise.

http://www.une.edu.py/maestriacs/schudson_the_objectiviy_norm_in_american_journalism_journalism_2.2.pdf

Other Resources

National Center for Science Education

This non-profit organization provides information and resources for "schools, parents and concerned citizens working to keep evolution in public school science education." Sections on "Creationism" and "Evolution"—including links to relevant documents, website and other relevant resources—are particularly relevant to the case. The site also has a section dedicated to the *Kitzmiller v. Dover* case, including selected legal documents from the trial, and suggested readings. The NCSE is openly partisan, noting that it opposes "efforts by creationists to weaken or block the teaching of evolution," and served as a pro bono consultant for the plaintiffs in the Dover case.

http://ncseweb.org/

Inherit The Wind (1960).

SYNOPSIS: This Oscar-nominated film featuring Spencer Tracy and Gene Kelly recalls the famous Scopes "Monkey Trial" of 1925, in which teacher John T. Scopes was prosecuted for violating Tennessee state law by teaching Darwin's theory of evolution rather than creationism. Three-time presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan headed the prosecution and famed attorney Clarence Darrow spoke for the defense during the trial—a pivotal episode in America's creation vs. evolution debate. Although Scopes was found guilty and fined $100, the Tennessee Supreme Court eventually overturned his conviction on a technicality.

Judgment Day: Intelligent Design on Trial (2007).

SYNOPSIS: Using court transcripts, actors, and actual trial participants, this PBS documentary recreates the contentious court battle at the heart of this case. It includes on-camera interviews with all the key players in the drama, including school board members, experts from the various scientific think tanks, and local newspaper staff.

http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/id/program.html