

SUMMARY OF ERRORS AND DISTORTIONS IN NPR STORY ON EVOLUTION & MONTANA, May 2, 2004

Story was broadcast on the show "Weekend Edition" on May 3, 2004. Edition: Noon-1:00 PM.

NPR Web Summary:

Religious fundamentalists in Montana are trying to introduce the concept of "Intelligent Design" into school curricula, in addition to the study of the theory of evolution. Kathy Witkowsky reports.
<http://www.npr.org/features/feature.php?wfld=1867854>

Response:

The proposed policy in Darby does not deal with intelligent design, so this official "summary" offered by NPR is inaccurate. Also, the term "religious fundamentalists" is a pejorative term that misstates the actual content of NPR's story. The story merely described Curtis Brickley as a "born-again Christian," not that he is a "fundamentalist." These two terms are not the same. Former president Jimmy Carter describes himself as a "born again Christian," but he is definitely not a fundamentalist. Moreover, even if Brickley happens to be a "fundamentalist," he does not speak for the board of education nor for anyone else who supports the policy. No evidence is presented in the report that any other supporters of the policy are "fundamentalists," or to indicate what proportion of supporters of the policy might be "fundamentalists." For all of these reasons, NPR's purported claim that "religious fundamentalists in Montana are trying to introduce... 'Intelligent Design' into school curricula" is misleading and false.

NPR Transcript:

Analysis: New science program in Montana introduces public school students to the concept of intelligent design

Response:

Again, the proposed policy in Darby does not even mention intelligent design. It is taken almost verbatim from Montana's own science standards. Teaching intelligent design is not the issue in Darby.

NPR Transcript:

LIANE HANSEN, host: As the battle over the teaching of evolution simmers in the nation's public schools, an approach called intelligent design has been gaining popularity in some states. It suggests that some life forms are too complex to be explained by anything other than an intelligent designer. Some of its proponents say it should be taught alongside evolutionary theory, but critics say intelligent design is really just creationism in disguise...

Response:

Again, teaching intelligent design is not what is being proposed in Darby. Intelligent design is not even mentioned in the policy.

NPR Transcript:

KATHY WITKOWSKY reporting: Curtis Brickley is a born-again Christian, and an ordained minister who says that he has a divine calling to ensure that truth is communicated to public school students.

Response:

NPR highlights the religious beliefs of the supporter of the objective origins policy, but studiously avoids going into the religious or anti-religious beliefs of any of the policy's critics. For example, NPR neglects to mention that Barbara Forrest, who is quoted extensively in the story, is a long-time board member of a group called the "New Orleans Secular Humanist Association," which describes itself as "an affiliate of American Atheists, and [a] member of the Atheist Alliance International." (See <http://nosha.secularhumanism.net.>)

NPR Transcript:

Last month the Ohio state school board approved a controversial lesson plan called critical analysis of evolution, which opponents say incorporates elements of intelligent design..

Response:

The Ohio curriculum does not "incorporate elements of intelligent design," as the Ohio Board of Education has itself made clear. Why does NPR present this allegation without allowing anyone to present the other side?

NPR Transcript:

WITKOWSKY: But that's unfair to students because there is no genuine scientific controversy over the theory of evolution, says Barbara Forrest. She's a professor of philosophy at Southeastern Louisiana University. She's been following this issue as it's been debated in other places, including Alabama, Texas, Missouri and Ohio. Last month the Ohio state school board approved a controversial lesson plan called critical analysis of evolution, which opponents say incorporates elements of intelligent design. Forrest calls this a game of semantic subterfuge.

Professor BARBARA FORREST (Southeastern Louisiana University): These people started out peddling intelligent design, lit--you know, by name. And, of course, as that terminology becomes more well-known it has become a liability, because people who have studied it recognize it as creationism. And so what they're having to do to convince boards of education or to try to disguise, you know, their true intentions is to adopt euphemisms. Objective origins is one. Critical analysis is another one. It's code talk, is what it is.

WITKOWSKY: Code talk for what Forrest says is clearly a religious agenda. For instance, she points to a strategy laid out in a Discovery Institute fund-raising document known as the Wedge. According to that document, written in the late 1990s, the goals of the institute include replacing, quote, "materialistic explanations with a theistic understanding that nature and human beings are created by God," and, quote, "to see intelligent design theory as the dominant perspective in science." Again, Barbara Forrest.

Prof. FORREST: I think it's extraordinarily important that people recognize that the intelligent design movement should not be looked at in a vacuum. They should be looked at as an integral part of the religious right project to undermine the separation of church and state.

Response:

Barbara Forrest is given 290 words to attack and misrepresent the credibility and motives of those affiliated with Discovery Institute. Yet Discovery Institute's spokesperson John West is only given 73 words to respond, and he is not allowed to refute her vicious personal attacks on motives and credibility. Moreover, Forrest is clearly put forward by NPR as a neutral observer of this controversy. In fact, she is apolitical activist on the other side, one who is profoundly influenced by her own anti-religious beliefs (as mentioned before, she is a long-time leader in a group called the "New Orleans Secular Humanist Association"). Thus, Forrest is allowed to launch an attack on the credibility and motives of those she opposes, but no one is allowed to question the credibility or agenda of Forrest. This is blatant, egregious bias.

NPR Transcript:

The ACLU and Americans United for Separation of Church and State are considering whether to sue over the new lesson plan in Ohio.

Response:

More bias. NPR mentions liberal groups that are thinking of suing over the lesson plan in Ohio, but does not mention the views of the many legal scholars and Ohio board members who think the lesson plan is constitutional.