

**To Janet Babin, NPR  
CC NPR Ombudsman  
April 23, 2004**

Ms. Babin,

I was extremely disappointed in the report you delivered on Day To Day earlier this week titled, "Recent decision by the Ohio School Board to approve a new high school course that provides an alternative to Darwin's theory of evolution."

When you called me last week to set up an interview you said the story would be focusing solely on the legal issues surrounding Ohio's recent adoption of the model lesson plan Critical Analysis of Evolution. I suggested you interview scientists and biologists who testified in support of the lesson as well as advising in its development and you told me your story was not about the science, rather it would be about the legal issues and the possibility of a lawsuit.

So, we agreed and last week you interviewed the Center for Science & Culture's Dr. John West about Ohio, and spoke with me about it as well. Dr. West tells me that you asked no questions about the legalities of the lesson plan and there were no policy or legal questions at all about the Ohio issue. Instead you asked him about intelligent design theory, and things like the age of the earth and other totally unrelated issues. It seems then that you misrepresented the reason for your interview.

To make matters worse, you inaccurately reported what you learned in that interview and about the issue at hand in Ohio and completely mischaracterized Discovery Institute's position. And, this was after additionally having been clearly briefed in an e-mail by myself.

Why did you refuse to quote our insistence that this issue isn't about intelligent design, that intelligent design isn't in the standards? That's the central allegation you report from the other side. Why not allow us respond to that specifically? Actually, Dr. West says that much of what he said in the interview contradicted the following statement and should have been used to make the story objective and balanced.

From the NPR transcript: *"Unidentified Man: It is the basis of modern biology. And to suggest that we should put some ill-defined, poorly thought-out, quote, unquote, "alternative theory" out and give it equal time in science classes does a disservice to science as well as a disservice to biology."*

This is only an allegation, and yet leaving it un rebutted frames the entire rest of your report incorrectly, loading listeners to believe that some “alternative theory” is being included in the curriculum. Not so. Again, that is an allegation, one that Dr. West says he insistently and repeatedly contradicted in your interview with him. Did you not think that important enough to include in the story?

In addition, I wrote a lengthy e-mail to you about this very issue. I warned you that there would be those who claim the issue in Ohio is about intelligent design, when it is not. I asked you to please be clear in your reporting so that your listeners at least get both sides of the debate. You ignored that, just as you ignored the insistence of Dr. West on this issue in your interview.

Moments later you go on to say: “Macroevolutionary theory. That's a new term devised by those who embrace alternatives to evolution. Those who use the term reject the idea of big, evolutionary leaps such as man evolving from apes. They do, however, accept what they call microevolution, in which species undergo small changes over generations. They call their approach a theory of intelligent design, a view that life is so complex it must have been designed with the help of a higher power or god.”

This is factually inaccurate. Your reporting leads listeners to believe that macroevolution is some new idea “devised” to counter neo-Darwinian evolution, and is somehow unscientific. Well, that’s not the case. Macroevolutionary theory originated with Russian scientists in the 1920s, and was later introduced to English-speaking scientists by Theodosius Dobzhansky, and has been studied and researched in evolutionary biology as it relates to genetics for decades. No less a Darwinist than Stephen Jay Gould used the term. So, it is not the case that this is some unscientific idea “devised by those who embrace alternatives to evolution.” That is a clear mischaracterization that leaves the wrong impression with your listeners.

Then you go on to say: *“They call their approach a theory of intelligent design, a view that life is so complex it must have been designed with the help of a higher power or god. Intelligent design proponents say that belief doesn't make them creationists or those who believe the origin of man happened just like it did in the Bible. John West heads the Discovery Institute, an intelligent design think tank that's largely responsible for promoting intelligent design theories. He says Ohio's plan is a compromise.”*

How many mistakes can you make in one paragraph? Several apparently. You define intelligent design as *“a view that life is so complex it must have been designed with the help of a higher power or god.”* Not true. “The theory of intelligent design holds that certain features of the universe and of living things are best explained by an intelligent cause, not an undirected process such as natural selection.” Nowhere does Discovery Institute’s Center for Science & Culture say that life must have been *“designed with the help of a higher power or god.”* No intelligent design proponents say anything other than there is empirical evidence of design in nature. Proponents of the theory do not try to identify or name what the intelligent cause might be. Saying that is the case, is completely false.

Further, John West is not the director of the Discovery Institute. He is the associate director on one program of the Institute, the Center for Science & Culture. Discovery Institute is not an “intelligent design think tank.” If you’d bother to review the background materials I provided you would know that Discovery Institute is a public policy think tank with many programs dealing with economics, transportation, technology and a host of issues other than those related to science and science education. In fact, the largest program at the Institute has nothing to do with intelligent design theory. Large or small mistakes, it doesn’t matter, you need to be accurate and you were not.

But, the most egregious error here is your misrepresentation of Discovery Institute’s point of view on the situation in Ohio. You claim that Dr. West said, “*Ohio’s plan is a compromise.*” Another untruth.

Here’s what Dr. West said, from NPR’s own transcript: “*Mr. JOHN WEST (Discovery Institute): What students need to know is both the evidence for evolutionary theory; we think they should also know about some of the scientific criticism of parts of that theory that are being made in the scientific literature. And we think this is a moderate common ground approach that everyone on both sides of this contentious issue should be able to agree on.*”

Claiming something is a moderate common ground approach is much different from saying it is a compromise, as you reported. We do not believe that the current science standards or model curriculum in Ohio are in any way a compromise. We have always advocated for the inclusion of scientific challenges to evolutionary theory, the inclusion of all information including both the strengths and weaknesses of Darwin’s theory. We do not advocate including intelligent design. In fact, we recommended that Ohio not include intelligent design theory in the curriculum. The model lesson plan Critical Analysis of Evolution does exactly what we had hoped for – it provides both the scientific evidence for Darwin’s theory, as well as the scientific questions and challenges surrounding it. It does not include intelligent design. There is no compromise there.

Finally, you end your report with what you originally claimed to me it would be about, the legal issues. But rather than objectively report that part of the story, you present only one view, that of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State.

“*Mr. BARRY LYNN (Americans United for the Separation of Church and State): If we find out that this is simply religious doctrine being promoted by a small interest group, then this information would provide us with the basis for possible litigation, something we would take very seriously.*”

Instead of reporting what Dr. West told you about this very issue in your interview you just go ahead and end the story with Lynn’s comments un rebutted. You could have reported, in spite of your not even asking about it, that Dr. West told you that it is our belief there is no basis for a law suit, and there is no “religious doctrine” being promoted

here at all – because he told you this in the interview since we were under the belief that’s what your story would focus on.

I understand the near impossibility of a correction being aired. If that can’t be arranged then there are two things we expect. First, I would like is a copy of the tape of your interview with Dr. West so that he can review it himself. And, we would like to have the opportunity for someone from Discovery Institute to give a commentary during Morning Edition that presents our side of the issue, correctly, since you did not deem that important enough to include in your report.

If you have questions about this feel free to contact either myself or Dr. West:

Rob Crowther – [rob@discovery.org](mailto:rob@discovery.org), (206) 292-0401 x107

John West – [jwest@discovery.org](mailto:jwest@discovery.org), (206) 292-0401 x110

Sincerely,

Rob Crowther