

Ed Bradley's Mountain vs. John Stossel's Molehill

By ACSH Staff — August 15, 2000

Last week on the ABC program *20/20*, environmental and consumer reporter John Stossel offered a public apology to his viewers.

His transgression? He cited some ABC-generated statistics indicating that organically grown produce was no safer than conventionally grown varieties. Unfortunately for Mr. Stossel, the ABC statistics actually did not exist. But was this transgression anything more than an inconsequential misstatement? While any error by a reporter should be corrected, as Stossel's was, where did it fall in the range of media mistakes? One way to answer those questions is to compare the ABC Stossel incident with one 11 years ago involving CBS correspondent Ed Bradley of "60 Minutes" fame.

In February 1989, Ed Bradley and his colleagues at "60 Minutes" scared the wits out of American parents by telling them that children were at risk of developing cancer as a result of exposure to an agricultural chemical called Alar. Cameras transmitted frightening images of children in cancer wards. Self-appointed environmentalists from the Natural Resources Defense Council appeared to tell us that Alar was a "cancer causing agent" and that since children drank a considerable amount of apple juice for their size, the cancer risks of Alar were "intolerable." Panic ensued across the land. Schools discarded apple products. The apple industry, particularly in the northwestern portions of the United States, was devastated.

In the months and years following the "60 Minutes" Alar scare, scientists from around the world emerged to say that Alar, when used in its regulated approved form as it was in 1989, never posed a cancer or other health risk to children or adults. The World Health Organization, American Medical Association, American Council on Science and Health and the physician who was Surgeon General at the time of the Alar incident, Dr. C. Everett Koop, all went on record as saying that the CBS-inspired Alar-scare had no scientific basis whatsoever. At least one organization, the American Council on Science and Health, repeatedly appealed to "60 Minutes" producer Don Hewitt, and later to Ed Bradley himself, to correct the record and tell their viewers that they made a mistake. ACSH's most recent request for a CBS apology on Alar was transmitted in February of 1999, on the 10th anniversary of the food-scare-of-the-decade. CBS has repeatedly refused to apologize for this groundless scare.

Contrast this incident with the ABC one which was in the news last week.

John Stossel did not have his own survey data on pesticide residues to support his claim that organic produce offers no health benefits over conventional food. It is regrettable that he reported he did have such data.

But the big picture here is this: Stossel's statements, unlike the CBS Alar claims, were scientifically

correct. Ongoing FDA surveillance confirms that the vast majority (over 70%) of conventionally-produced fruits and vegetables have no measurable levels of pesticides, and where residue are detected they are almost always within the EPA's very conservative tolerance range. Studies by Consumers Union and others have also detected similar levels of very low level pesticide residues in organic food.

Many other studies have shown that organically-grown produce does indeed have a higher rate of bacterial contamination than conventionally-grown produce.

Thus, given that Stossel's conclusions were factual, no damage at all was done. If, as the organic industry claims, they did suffer loss of sales following the Stossel segment, that is only because consumers were relying on the factual reality that organic foods do NOT offer any health benefits. Yet media coverage critical of Stossel for what was basically a minor gaffe was substantial. And so Mr. Stossel apologized for his technical error.

Where is CBS's apology for promulgating completely false statements about the safety of apples? Ed Bradley and his colleagues have had 11 1/2 years to ponder the overwhelming evidence that their segment was based on bogus claims. We hope that a CBS apology is forthcoming. Better late than never.

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