

# State PIRGs Fool Journalists Into Reporting Plagiarized Quotes and Bogus Authorships

By David Seidemann — May 18, 2016



The American Council on Science and Health (ACSH) has

taken on the Public Interest Research Groups (PIRGs) in the past over their junk science on such issues as lead poisoning ([1](#) <sup>[1]</sup>), playground hazards ([2](#) <sup>[2]</sup>), and toy safety ([3](#) <sup>[3]</sup>, [4](#) <sup>[4]</sup>).

Further, as I have previously documented in articles for ACSH, 58 scientists at the City University of New York cited New York's PIRG (NYPIRG) for having engaged in scientific research misconduct in five of their studies (involving air pollution, water pollution, recycling, auto safety, and the SAT exam; [5](#) <sup>[5]</sup>, [6](#) <sup>[6]</sup>).

Gullible reporters often pass along the PIRGs' press release "research" in news articles, helping to mislead the public and distort public policy. But recently it was the reporters themselves who were burned by a PIRG deception: they were fooled into reporting plagiarized quotes and bogus authorships for USPIRG's annual toy safety survey and, thereby, into violating journalistic standards. Here are the details.

U.S. Public Interest Research Group (USPIRG) is the national umbrella for PIRG affiliates in various states. Every year, USPIRG performs an annual report on toy safety, and issues a press release. This year, as is typical, that release includes a quote from a USPIRG representative. ([7](#) <sup>[7]</sup>)

Various state PIRGs then issue similar press releases, but portray the toy safety study as their own. Further those releases attribute the words of the USPIRG representative to their own local representative.

News organizations from eight states were duped into both (1) falsely assigning authorship of the toy study to a state PIRG, and (2) falsely attributing a quote about that study to a local PIRG representative.

This identical quote appears in nine articles: "We should be able to trust that the toys we buy are safe. However, until that's the case, toy buyers need to watch out for common hazards when shopping for toys," but was attributed to Jason Pfeifle in California; Evan Preston in Connecticut; Michelle Surka in Massachusetts; Michael Basmajian, also in Massachusetts; Rachel Unger, also in Massachusetts; Lauren Hirsch in Missouri; Carli Jensen in New Jersey; Kat Lockwood in

Oregon; and Stephanie Monahan in Pennsylvania.

A slightly different version appears in a tenth article: the words “Parents and other consumers” are substituted for the word “we” in an otherwise identical quote attributed to Jennifer Wong in Arizona.

News organizations in two additional states assigned false authorship, but did not use the quote.

*(All of the examples are listed at the end)*

Each state PIRG, by falsely representing the toy reports as their own creation, exaggerates the work they do in their state and, thus, enhances their ability to raise funds locally through door-to-door solicitations and via student fee collections at the state’s universities.

Journalists who were fooled into portraying a study performed by a Washington DC lobbying group as the product of its local affiliate, unwittingly misled the public and aided the political agenda of those lobbyists.

The bottom line: in light of the PIRGs’ deceptive practices, past and present, journalists would do well to treat with more caution information originating from the PIRG network.

Reprinted from the American Council on Science and Health magazine *Priorities* [8], which is sent free to donors and available online at the link.

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**The following misattributed both authorship of the study and a quote about it:**

KTAR (Arizona) <http://ktar.com/story/781412/trouble-in-toyland-new-report-from-arizona-organization-details-childrens-toy-hazards/> [9]

MyNewsLA (California) <http://mynews1a.com/uncategorized/2015/11/24/is-your-childs-toy-safe-trouble-in-toyland-report-released/> [10]

WFSB (Connecticut) <http://www.wfsb.com/story/30597002/trouble-in-toyland-report-details-this-years-hazardous-holiday-gifts> [11]

NewBostonPost (Massachusetts) <http://newbostonpost.com/2015/11/24/hazardous-toys-still-found-on-stores-online/> [12]

The Berkshire Edge (Massachusetts) <http://theberkshireedge.com/news-briefs-dangerous-toys-public-conflict-survey/> [13]

Wicked Local Salem (Massachusetts)  
<http://salem.wickedlocal.com/article/20151128/NEWS/151127094> [14]

St. Louis American (Missouri) [http://www.stlamerican.com/news/local\\_news/article\\_5fde389c-92fa-11e5-bbc6-bbf1e0141ab8.html](http://www.stlamerican.com/news/local_news/article_5fde389c-92fa-11e5-bbc6-bbf1e0141ab8.html) [15]

Press of Atlantic City (New Jersey) [http://www.pressofatlanticcity.com/business/njpirg-releases-list-of-dangerous-toys/article\\_be2b4bd2-92f6-11e5-8f2f-abef04afec21.html](http://www.pressofatlanticcity.com/business/njpirg-releases-list-of-dangerous-toys/article_be2b4bd2-92f6-11e5-8f2f-abef04afec21.html) [16]

KEZI (Oregon) [http://www.kezi.com/news/Group\\_Finds\\_22\\_Potentially\\_Hazardous\\_Toys.html](http://www.kezi.com/news/Group_Finds_22_Potentially_Hazardous_Toys.html) [17]

WFMZ (Pennsylvania) <http://www.wfmz.com/news/news-regional-pennsylvania/Local/dangers-in-toyland-this-holiday-season/36655422> [18]

**The following misattributed only the authorship of the study:**

WTAX (Illinois) <http://wtax.com/news/101101-be-safe-while-shopping/> [19]

KPLU (Washington) <http://www.kplu.org/post/be-look-out-hidden-hazards-toys-you-buy> [20]

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**Source URL:** <https://www.acsh.org/news/2016/05/18/state-pirgs-fool-journalists-into-reporting-plagiarized-quotes-and-bogus-authorships>

**Links**

- [1] <http://acsh.org/1998/07/panel-of-scientists-call-nypirgs-statement-on-lead-poisoning-in-new-york-city-misleading/>
- [2] <http://acsh.org/2004/06/hazards-found-at-city-playgrounds/>
- [3] <http://acsh.org/2010/12/dont-let-trouble-in-toyland-spoil-your-holiday/>
- [4] <http://acsh.org/2011/11/toying-with-science-once-again/>
- [5] <http://naturalgasnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/ACSH-Health-Issues-Nader.pdf>
- [6] <http://naturalgasnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/ACSH-Health-Issues-.pdf>
- [7] <http://www.uspirg.org/news/usp/30th-annual-survey-finds-dangerous-toys-store-shelves>
- [8] <http://acsh.org/priorities-march-2016-issue/>
- [9] <http://ktar.com/story/781412/trouble-in-toyland-new-report-from-arizona-organization-details-childrens-toy-hazards/>
- [10] <http://mynewsla.com/uncategorized/2015/11/24/is-your-childs-toy-safe-trouble-in-toyland-report-released/>
- [11] <http://www.wfsb.com/story/30597002/trouble-in-toyland-report-details-this-years-hazardous-holiday-gifts>
- [12] <http://newbostonpost.com/2015/11/24/hazardous-toys-still-found-on-stores-online/>
- [13] <http://theberkshireedge.com/news-briefs-dangerous-toys-public-conflict-survey/>
- [14] <http://salem.wickedlocal.com/article/20151128/NEWS/151127094>
- [15] [http://www.stlamerican.com/news/local\\_news/article\\_5fde389c-92fa-11e5-bbc6-bbf1e0141ab8.html](http://www.stlamerican.com/news/local_news/article_5fde389c-92fa-11e5-bbc6-bbf1e0141ab8.html)
- [16] [http://www.pressofatlanticcity.com/business/njpirg-releases-list-of-dangerous-toys/article\\_be2b4bd2-92f6-11e5-8f2f-abef04afec21.html](http://www.pressofatlanticcity.com/business/njpirg-releases-list-of-dangerous-toys/article_be2b4bd2-92f6-11e5-8f2f-abef04afec21.html)
- [17] [http://www.kezi.com/news/Group\\_Finds\\_22\\_Potentially\\_Hazardous\\_Toys.html](http://www.kezi.com/news/Group_Finds_22_Potentially_Hazardous_Toys.html)
- [18] <http://www.wfmz.com/news/news-regional-pennsylvania/Local/dangers-in-toyland-this-holiday-season/36655422>
- [19] <http://wtax.com/news/101101-be-safe-while-shopping/>
- [20] <http://www.kplu.org/post/be-look-out-hidden-hazards-toys-you-buy>