

# The big story

C Kevin Geedey<sup>1</sup> and Jeffrey L Dudycha<sup>2</sup>

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Alex is a tenured professor at Nirvana College, a small private institution. A population ecologist by training, he studies the population dynamics of local wetland plants. Alex loves his teaching duties and the small-town feel of the local community.

One part of life in a small college town that Alex has come to accept is frequent interviews by the local media. Reporters want local angles and local reactions to environmental news. Since Alex is Nirvana's sole ecologist, his name has been in the newspaper in connection with stories about bioinvasions, mosquito control, and endangered species. Reporters usually ask basic ecological questions that Alex feels well qualified to answer. He believes that by granting these interviews he is making a positive contribution to the community and building goodwill towards Nirvana College.

Bill, a reporter for a local TV station, called just after Alex's morning class. He had more than a trace of urgency in his voice.

"Alex? Bill here from Channel 5. I've got a breaking story and I need your help. In fact, I'd like to get a crew to campus and interview you right away."

"Well...I'll help if I can", Alex replied. "What's up?"

"This morning the widget-processing plant accidentally released some chemical into the river. They don't know how it happened, but they've shut down operations until they figure it out. It's something called 1,2-dimethylbadguy. What I want from you is the environmental angle. Will this stuff kill the fish or make them unsafe to eat? Should people keep their kids from playing in the water? Will this hurt the river?"

Alex took a deep breath. He had no formal training in toxicology and had no idea what the chemical was or what it was used for. His mind raced as he scanned his bookshelf for reference books that might help.

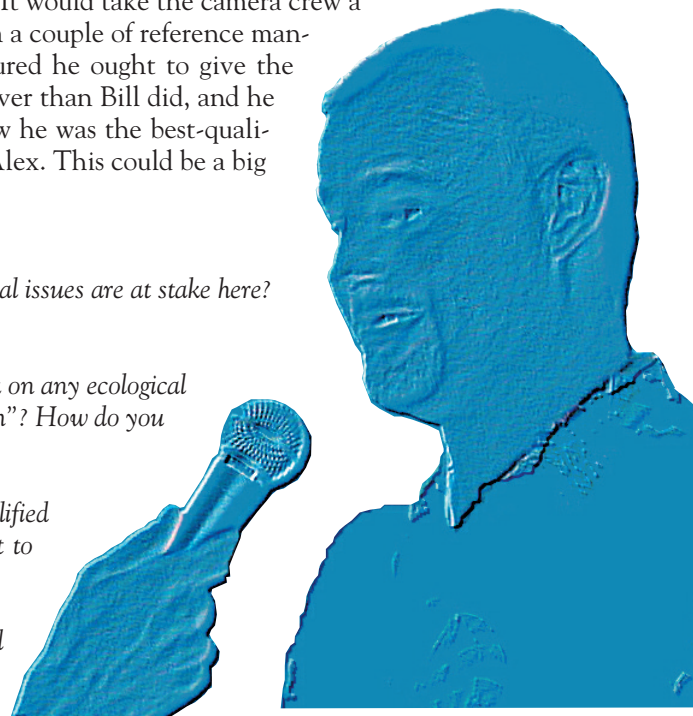
"Sure, come on over", said Alex. "I think I can help." It would take the camera crew a little while to get there. In the meantime, he could skim a couple of reference manuals and maybe do a quick bit of Web surfing. He figured he ought to give the interview; after all, he certainly knew more about the river than Bill did, and he could interpret the reference material better. Alex knew he was the best-qualified person in town to do such an interview. "Thanks, Alex. This could be a big story. See you in about half an hour."

**Q:** Should Alex have agreed to the interview? What ethical issues are at stake here?

**Q:** Does Alex's status as an ecologist qualify him to speak on any ecological matter? How much training and experience is "enough"? How do you define "expert"?

**Q:** Suppose Alex is correct in thinking he is the best-qualified person in town to give this interview. Is this relevant to whether or not he ought to give the interview?

**Q:** Would your answers to any of the above change if Bill was an undergraduate reporter for the Nirvana College newspaper? Why or why not?



<sup>1</sup>Dept of Biology, Augustana College, Rock Island, IL 61201 (bigeedey@augustana.edu); <sup>2</sup>Dept of Biology, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 47405 (jdudycha@bio.indiana.edu)

### ■ Commentary on “The Big Story”

In this scenario, Alex has to struggle with whether to grant an interview on a subject outside his area of research expertise. This case also raises the issue of ethical decision making under time constraints. The reporter needs to know immediately whether or not Alex is going to speak on camera. Alex doesn't have time to ask his colleagues for advice, or even to spend a few minutes considering the implications of his decision. He has to decide on the spot.

So just how much training makes one an “expert”? While some might be inclined to say that Alex is an expert only on the specific systems that are the subject of his active research, this definition seems too narrow. After all, he was qualified to answer basic ecological questions in past interviews. His background in population ecology ensures that he knows a great deal more than most about pollution and how it may impact the river. If he categorically refuses to be interviewed on this or any other subject besides wetland plant dynamics, he will be depriving the local community of his valuable knowledge.

A useful distinction here might be made between an expert opinion and an educated one. Ecology is a very broad and highly technical field. One would not consult a urologist for chest pains, even though urologists are physicians. But we would certainly expect a urologist, having been to medical school, to know a great deal more about chest pains than a mechanical engineer would. By the same reasoning, Alex may be able to give the reporter an educated opinion about how a suspected pollutant may impact the environment. For example, if his reference books said that dimethylbadguy is known to accumulate at higher trophic levels, he could certainly explain what this means on camera. However, the fact that he has never even heard of the chemical suggests that he is a bit outside his bailiwick in answering questions about human health and safety.

Should Alex grant this interview? He is not a toxicologist, and he should not attempt to play one on TV. In fact, he knows nothing about the chemical that a college-educated reporter could not look up for himself. If Alex unwittingly gives the reporter outdated information, he may put people's safety at risk – not to mention his own and Nirvana College's reputation. Suppose the latest research shows that dimethylbadguy is not all that dangerous. If Alex leads the reporter to believe that the chemical is more dangerous than it really is, then he could be accused of spreading environmental hype and scare tactics by the local community. If, on the other hand, dimethylbadguy is now known to be

worse than Alex's reference book suggests, then he may still put human health in danger (“That professor on TV said it's OK to eat the fish...”). Alex is simply not familiar enough with the relevant research to go on camera as an expert with regard to the human health questions that Bill is likely to ask. So how should Alex handle this situation?

He should make his qualifications clear over the phone, before the camera crew sets out. Although reporters typically do not know a great deal of ecology, they do often understand medicine. Explaining to the reporters that ecology has broad and complex subdisciplines, as does medicine, should help give the reporter a clear understanding of Alex's degree of expertise. Any quote that he gives to the reporter should be tempered by explicit reference to his own lack of direct expertise.

Alex could still offer to help with the story. There is no reason why he can't offer to help Bill out with some references. Perhaps he already has some quotes from a public health official, or reference material that he needs help interpreting or putting into perspective. Alex may be of assistance simply by explaining what sort of professional could offer an expert opinion in this case. Finally, Bill may really want the answers to some of the ecological questions that Alex can answer. He needs to be careful to answer only those to which he can respond knowledgeably. This may not give Bill the pithy sound bite he wants about whether locals can eat the fish, but it keeps Alex out of ethically dangerous waters.

In this scenario, there is no aquatic toxicologist at Nirvana College. Alex may be right in thinking that there is no one more qualified in town to do the interview. It is important, however, that he be right about this. At any college or university, a faculty member ought to know his or her colleague's areas of expertise well enough to know if there is someone better qualified to do an interview. This benefits both the public and the college. Collegiality is more than just social nicety. In this case there is an ethical dimension to understanding your colleagues' work.

What if Bill was an undergrad and the interview was for the Nirvana school paper? This is a very different situation. College and university professors owe their institution's undergrads their time and expertise. Alex should definitely grant the interview, but he should also carefully explain the limits of his knowledge and abilities. In fact, learning that professors don't have all the answers is an important part of the transition between high school and college-level thinking. In this case, offering to help with the story is more than a courtesy. It is Alex's professional obligation to educate the students.

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This is the second in our Ethical Issues series. For the introduction, please see the August issue (2003; 7: 330–333)