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## THIS MONTH'S FEATURE

### Science Update



*Science Update* is a daily, one-minute science feature hosted by Peabody Award-winning broadcaster and science writer Bob Hirshon, covering new discoveries in science, medicine and technology and answering listener questions phoned into its toll-free line (1-800-WHY-ISIT) or emailed through their website ([www.scienceupdate.com](http://www.scienceupdate.com)).

#### About the Creator:

Bob Hirshon is a writer, producer, actor, musician and game/app developer with a love of science. He is Program Director for Technology and Learning at the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), where he also produces and hosts *Science Update*.

He was executive producer and creative director for *Kinetic City Super Crew*, the Peabody Award-winning weekly science radio drama for children produced from 1993 to 1998, and the CODiE Award winning on-line *Kinetic City Cyberclub* and associated afterschool program.

He is currently an occasional guest on the Sirius/XM children's show *Absolutely Mindy*, where he discusses science and answers kids' call-in questions as Bob the Science Slob, and also appears as Denzel, the hyperactive alligator, in the new *Hooked on Phonics* app

“The Big Reading Show.”



## Q & A

SHOWCase spoke with *Science Update* creator Bob Hirshon.

### Can you tell us about how *Science Update* began?

*Science Update* was born in 1987, the joint idea of Ron Nessen—Vice President of News for Mutual Broadcasting at the time—and Carol Rogers, Director of Communications for the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). Mutual was launching a morning news program called *America in the Morning*. Since AAAS published the weekly journal *Science*—one of the world’s pre-eminent science publications—and had recently produced daily features for CBS Radio, why not set up a science desk at AAAS for *America in the Morning*? Nessen and Rogers agreed that the stories would be news-driven and not “science cheerleading.”



Michael Skoler—currently VP of Interactive Media for PRI and former NPR Science Correspondent—worked at AAAS at the time, but was leaving for a one-year fellowship in science broadcast journalism at WGBH in Boston. I was just completing the same fellowship, and Michael suggested that I apply for his now vacant position at AAAS, and take over creation of the new, as yet unnamed, science radio project with Mutual.

I got the gig at AAAS and wrote and produced the first *Science Update* shows, which aired in January of 1988. Many thousands of episodes later, the show is still on the air, and is now available to both commercial and public radio stations.

In the early 90’s, we added a toll-free call-in line—1-800-WHY-ISIT (949-4748)—so that listeners could ask science-related questions that we’d answer on the show. A few years later, we added a form to our website, so listeners could email questions as well. It’s still an occasional feature, though the lion’s share of our shows are news-based.

### So *Science Update* began in the commercial radio world? Have you had to change

## **your focus or adapt to appeal to public radio listeners?**

Not really. The show was originally developed for commercial talk/news stations, but honestly, public radio has become faster-paced over the years, so a show that was too "commercial-sounding" 28 years ago, when we began, now fits in nicely.

Regarding content, public radio is obviously a great fit for a show covering the latest science, technology and medical research, as opposed to celebrities, sports and conspiracy theories. And there is so much happening in this area; many stories don't get covered on *Morning Edition* and *All Things Considered*.

For example, just recently, we've reported on a virtual reality holodeck for spiders, a bioengineer building synthetic viruses to attack cancer cells, and how engineers are using cosmic rays from deep space to find defects in bridges and nuclear power plants. So you'll hear fascinating science research stories on *Science Update* that you might not hear on any other program— unusual, thought-provoking stories that appeal to a public radio audience.

Another possibly overlooked characteristic of *Science Update* that might add to its appeal for program directors is that we try to highlight research from all over the country— from labs in Seattle to Miami, Bangor to La Jolla, and everywhere in between. So there's an excellent chance that we'll feature scientists or research with local appeal.

## **Who is your primary target listener?**

Our goal is to appeal to curious people, regardless of their interest in science (or lack thereof). In our early days on *America in the Morning*, we were usually heard in the second half of the show, along with movie reviews, sports, and an entertainment feature. And we can't ask the producer to run a story about the wonders of the RNA polymerase chain reaction right after a feature on Jennifer Anniston's love life. So we learned to focus on science topics that would fit into a general news format.

## **Why should stations be interested in running your program?**

Science is both massively important and incredibly interesting. Recently, we reported on a drug that erases drug addiction, new rocket engine designs based on beetle butts, the facts behind human-induced earthquakes in the Midwest, and the answer to a listener's question about the New Horizons spacecraft that just visited Pluto. We report on the intersection of science and health, art, the environment, politics and even sports.

## **Can you give an overview on one particular show that you thought was especially good?**



At the NASA Goddard Spaceflight Center, scientist Donald Wegel explains how the comet harpoon works to Science Update host Bob Hirshon. (Susanne Bard/AAAS)

I like stories on topics that are new to listeners and that feature energetic, creative people doing work that they love. One story, titled Comet Harpoon, focused on a young engineer designing a device that could be shot into a comet to grab a sample of comet-stuff, and deliver it back to a spacecraft that would fly the sample back to Earth. And he was testing it using a giant bow made out of truck suspension parts and a cable for a bowstring. A motorized winch would draw the bowstring back and shoot the harpoon into large metal barrels of sand and gravel. So this is like demolition derby science, but done in an effort to find out how our solar system formed.

Right now, I'm producing a piece called My Virtual Dream about a scientist who hosts musical light show events in a giant dome. Audience members control the music and lights with their brainwaves via electronic headbands. By giving the audience various challenges, the researcher is learning how much control we have over our brainwaves, and how we might be able to treat various psychiatric conditions through biofeedback.

### **What are some topics or issues you plan to address in future episodes?**

This is a golden age of scientific research. We can't imagine what each week is going to bring. In general, I'd like to do more shows on location, where we visit labs with interesting things going on, rather than wait for studies published in science journals. Of course, those sorts of stories are more time consuming. But I do plan to get out of the studio more to visit more researchers working in their natural habitats.

### **Talk a little about some of the folks that appear on *Science Update*.**

*Science Update* writer/producer Susanne Bard works with us out of San Diego. Along with radio writing and production, she has worked on archaeological excavations in Central America, and as a science and nature film producer. Teal Burrell is a freelance science reporter with a Ph.D. in neuroscience; she covers a variety of topics from the Washington, D.C., area.



Susanne Bard, Writer/Producer

### **What are some ways that you engage public radio listeners?**

Primarily, we take questions from curious people through the 'Why Is It' answer line— 1-800-WHY-ISIT (949-4748) -- and also through our website. This allows listeners who have science questions they'd like answered to submit them to us. We send *Science Update* coffee mugs to people who submit questions we answer on the show. This is a feature

unique to *Science Update*, and one that we think will appeal to public radio listeners. This is also a great way to engage your listening audience with your station— always an important factor for public radio.

*Our listeners just can't get enough of science and technology, and "Science Update" certainly scratches that itch. Host Bob Hirshon stays on top of the latest developments in consistently produced, high-quality, :60 second packages. The long breaks in "Morning Edition" are perfect opportunities to schedule this timely content.*

*Also, I have to mention that unlike some programs that create more work for you with ridiculous FTP download schemes, "Science Update" utilizes the rock-solid reliability of ContentDepot to deliver fresh shows with no staff intervention or verification required. You can truly "set it and forget it" and be confident your listeners will be enjoying the latest episodes of "Science Update" each week.*

Wayne Coble

VP, Operations

Texas Public Radio

## CONTACT INFORMATION



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