

Add the *BBC* to list of Bhopal victims

Activists deceive broadcaster in publicity stunt

By Carol Maniaci

Two decades after one of the world's worst industrial disasters in Bhopal, India, the area remains highly contaminated. Toxic chemicals continue to seep into groundwater, and tens of thousands of people are suffering from serious health problems related to the disaster, according to environmental organizations such as Greenpeace.

Dow Chemical Company is now taking full responsibility for the Bhopal disaster.

That's what an impostor told the *British Broadcasting Corp.* in a live TV interview on Dec. 3, 2004, the 20-year anniversary of the Bhopal disaster.

On Dec. 3, 1984, a Union Carbide chemical plant in Bhopal began leaking 27 tons of deadly methyl isocyanate gas. Estimates vary widely, but approximately four thousand people died that day, and approximately 15,000 more died in the years following the disaster.

In 2001, Dow Chemical purchased Union Carbide for \$11.6 billion, but did not take on any legal responsibility for the 1984 gas leak.

On Dec. 3, 2004, the anniversary of the Bhopal disaster, the *BBC* fell victim to an elaborate hoax.

Jude Finsisterra, a man using a pseudonym and claiming to be a Dow representative, said in a live *BBC* interview that Dow had set up a \$12 billion fund to compensate the victim's families and survivors.

Dow learned of the hoax shortly after it aired, and immediately demanded a retraction. The *BBC* pulled the interview and apologized to Dow.

So how does a news company like the *BBC* offer a megaphone to a charlatan?

"This hoax was not set up by a bunch of cowboys, the group responsible for this incident was educated and sophisticated," said Peter Rogers, *BBC* media relations representative.

The Yes Men, a France-based activist group put on the media stunt.

Mike Bonanno, a Yes Men representative said the hoax was "to make Dow Chemical and the general public aware of the crimes they are committing against the people of India. When Dow purchased Union Carbide they purchased the responsibility of cleaning up the site, and aiding victims and survivors."

The Yes Men created an imposter Web site (www.dowethics.com) designed to look like Dow's official site (www.dow.com).

"The Web site was identical to Dow's. We used the press contacts page to contact who we believed at the time to be a representative of Dow," Rogers said.



Photo by the Yes Men

The Yes Men provided contacts that the *BBC* assumed were legitimate. Rogers said the *BBC* followed up with verbal confirmation and then set up an interview for Dec. 3, 2004, on the anniversary.

"We had no reason to suspect these men were impostors.

What ended up giving them away was the amount of money they claimed Dow was putting in a fund," Rogers said.

Bonanno said that despite falling for the hoax, the *BBC* is not at fault.

"We set up this elaborate Web site and allowed the *BBC* to believe we were truly representatives from Dow. In the end we got what we wanted. More attention was paid to the anniversary as a result of the hoax and we hope that this raised awareness of the inadequate way Dow is handling the Bhopal situation."

Adam Muellerweiss, Dow Chemical representative, said the *BBC* missed many opportunities to validate the facts.

"Neither at the time of this tragic disaster nor subsequent to it has Dow had any connection with the Bhopal facility or its operations."

"The hoax serves as yet another reminder that facts must be checked before reporting them," Muellerweiss said.

But Muellerweiss said Dow has no obligation or plans to take responsibility.

"The accusation that we are failing to behave properly because we will not accept responsibility for an event and a site in which we did not have any involvement, is entirely without foundation," Muellerweiss said.

"What this boils down to is trust," said Michael Grade, *BBC* chairman. "If audiences have the confidence that...when it gets things wrong it will act honestly and transparently, then audiences will continue to place their trust in *BBC* journalism." 🌐

Resources

Will the real Dow Web site please stand up? See how the Yes Men's imposter Web site fooled the *BBC*. Compare the fine print on www.dow.com (Dow official corporate site) to www.dowethics.com (Yes Men site)