# **Acme**

Recall my complaint about the ABC’s Media Watch February 3, 2020 program? In summary it was:

‘*bias and infatuation with climate change.  This was evidenced by avoidance of reference to key information, inaccurate representation of facts, false analyses, unsubstantiated comments, misleading statements and suspect conclusions’.*

The complaint was backed by analysis of the transcript against published references, including from CSIRO and the Australian Academy of Science. It was sent to the ABC on 26 February. As a response was not received for several months, on 28 April it was forwarded to the Australian Communication and Media Authority (ACMA) – the acme for media complaints in Australia - which, after contacting the ABC, advised a response ‘*is on its way’*.

A response from the ABC was received on 18 June. The response indicated the substance of the complaint had not been read. ACMA was advised of that on 25 June via the attached.

On 24 July ACMA advised it was under consideration.

On 7 August ACMA advised it had decided not to proceed further with the investigation.

That advice said ACMA: considers a variety of factors; the context was criticism of certain opinions of high profile journalists; the program did not appear to be a deep analysis of fire causes or a climate change debate; the program did provide reasonable evidence climate change could have been a contributing factor; there are complexities in the issues the complaint raised; it will go on file.

All of which is fine, sort of – except the comment about complexities. There was nothing complex about the complaint or the issues it raised. The issues were simple. They were: the evidence at the time did not support what the program put - that climate change had largely caused (rather than probably later, after CSIRO completes its attribution studies, will be found to have contributed to) the fires, and; the program’s erroneous thesis was ‘supported’ by misleading information and omission of the most material facts.

Neither the ABC nor ACMA attempted to challenge any evidence or comment on the more than 40 points of concern of the complaint. Nor did they provide any contrary evidence.

So, before leaving others, if they wish, to judge whether the ABC and ACMA addressed the issues, among the implications of resolution of the complaint is: it is acceptable for such a program to;

. pose a question like: *‘So was arson actually responsible for any of the big fires?’;*

. answer this by: *‘On 9 January, Victorian Police said no’;*

*.* without mentioning police in NSW (the location of most of the big fires) had established a taskforce to investigate the causes of the fires i.e. suspicion of undetected arson;

. introduce the issue via ABC statistics of few ‘arson’ cases, wildly inconsistent with other data, without mentioning they were for only two months of a six-months fire season.

Etc. And before my betters say: ‘told you so’, the beagle says: case closed!

**J Austen**

**9 August 2020**

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## **1. The complaint**

The summary of the complaint, of 26 February (at Appendix A) was the program exhibited:

‘*bias and infatuation with climate change.  This was evidenced by avoidance of reference to key information, inaccurate representation of facts, false analyses, unsubstantiated comments, misleading statements and suspect conclusions.*

*In every such case Media Watch sought to present as fact an as yet unproven hypothesis: that the fires were caused by climate change.*

*Yet it failed to identify any of 3 facts reported in the media which warn against that conclusion at this time’[[1]](#endnote-1)*

The complaint argued the program breached several provisions of the ABC Code. It noted Media Watch was provided with two articles via e-mail on 18 February, outlining and seeking comments on the matters of concern. Those articles contained over 40 examples of concerns in addition to the ‘3 facts’. The two articles are at Appendix B (for reasons of length and clarity their appendices and references are omitted from this note).[[2]](#endnote-2)

After a Media Watch ‘update’ of its program on 24 February, but no reply to my e-mail, a complaint was made to the ABC on 25-26 February. A response was not received within 60 days, hence on 28 April, the complaint was forwarded to the Australian Communication and Media Authority who contacted the ABC. On 30 April, the Authority advised me the ABC had informed it a response ‘*is on its way’*.

An email problem appears to a delay in the response being received – on 18 June.

## **2. The ABC’s response**

The ABC’s response, from the Executive Producer Media Watch, is at Appendix C.[[3]](#endnote-3)

It said my complaint argued:

***‘Media Watch sought to present as fact an as yet unproven hypothesis: that the fires were caused by climate change***

*We did not do that. We showed evidence that climate change was a contributing factor and should not be dismissed as idiotic, stupid or irrelevant, as powerful News Corp commentators had done. That was the thrust of the program’*

That was not my complaint. My complaint was and is: bias, in breach of the ABC Code.

The response only considered the program’s omission of 3 facts (below) and not the complaint or the evidence underpinning it - outlined in the Media Botch articles – of one-sided: avoidance of reference to key information, inaccurate representation of facts, false analyses, unsubstantiated comments, misleading statements and suspect conclusions.

## **3. ABC response to the ‘3 facts’**

Three facts reported in the media warned against concluding, at the time of the program in early February, the fires were caused by climate change. These facts were:

a. CSIRO had not (then) attributed the fires to causes, and in particular their severity to climate change;

b. The Chief of the NSW Rural Fire Service had been reported as stating climate change had (long) been taken into account in his organisation’s bushfire plans;

c. A former Assistant Secretary General of the United Nations had argued the bushfires were not all about climate change and that international action was necessary to counter climate change.

### 3.a CSIRO

ABC’s response noted Media Watch’s program quoted some experts from various fields. That is true, although in some cases the cited views did not support inferences drawn.

The response did not comment on the program’s failure to refer to CSIRO’s work underway regarding attribution of bushfires to various causes, including climate change. The program did not inform the audience that CSIRO’s work was not complete, therefore it did not provide an essential caveat to the climate change-bushfire thesis. It was premature to draw robust conclusions about the role – and importance - of climate change to the 2019-20 fires.

The response referred to public comments made by CSIRO on 18 February. As those comments were made after the program, they are not relevant. It might also be noted the comments did not refer to results from the attribution analysis.

### 3.b Fire plans taking climate change into account

The ABC’s response queried what the Commissioner's reported statement - about fire plans taking climate change into account - proved/ disproved.

That query is beside the point. The Commissioner’s reported statement did not prove any fact about the fires, climate change or plans.  Rather, it raised the question of whether – and, if so, the extent to which - climate change contributed to fires and the damage caused.

The question is whether the plans adequately mitigated the fire-risks posed by climate change. If the reported statement was true, (unanticipated) damage from the bush-fires would not be attributable to climate change, but to other fire-risk factors. Climate change induced impacts of bushfires beyond those envisaged in plans would be inconsistent with the Commissioner’s reported statement. The validity of the reported statement is the central operational matter arising from the NSW bushfires and the most important issue regarding future planning.

The program highlighted comments made by and about former fire chiefs, some of whom are members of climate ‘activist’ groups. The media had prominently reported their views and their attempts to approach the Commonwealth Government. The media had not (as prominently) reported – or commented on the absence of - similar approaches by the former chiefs to Governments responsible for preventing and dealing with bushfires – the States. The program’s failure to note this unbalanced reporting was compounded by misrepresentation of Mr Jones’ claim of a ‘pile-on’ of the Prime Minister - as simply an example of ‘new angles of denial’ rather than its actuality as identifying a pivotal challenge to the heart of Australia’s system of government.[[4]](#endnote-4)

On the issue of climate change and fires, views of current fire chiefs are more relevant than those of former fire chiefs. The critical and obvious question is whether their organisations had taken climate change into account. If so, for the purposes of any reporting on the fires, the climate change ‘debate’ had been settled rendering most News Corp commentator (supposed) ‘denials’ redundant, making the program’s admonishment of their comments irrelevant if not misconceived.

That the program did refer to comments by the (then) current NSW Commissioner about the severity of fires makes its omission of his other reported comments even more extraordinary. The omission invites viewer bias against fire-fighting agencies and any cause or contribution to the fires other than climate change. In conjunction with 3.c (below), the omission also gives unreasonable weight towards arguments about reducing climate change at the expense of consideration of actions to combat the effects of climate change.

### 3.c Professor Thakur’s views

The ABC’s response said the omission of (reference to) Professor Thakur did not mislead the audience. It noted he is not a climate scientist but a professor in international relations etc.

The response did not address the issue raised - the failure of the program to deal with the content of Professor Thakur’s articles. Its comment about his specialisation is irrelevant.

The failure of the program to acknowledge either of the Professor’s two fundamental points likely misled the audience into believing Australian action to reduce climate change, via e.g. emission reductions, would directly have reduced fire risk in 2019-20 or later. Reference to Professor Thakur’s relevant articles, or to his two points, would have avoided this.

To explain, Australian emission reductions might be necessary to establish its bona fides in arguing for the international cooperation needed to reduce climate change. However, those reductions of themselves would not directly reduce global warming and, therefore, environmental bushfire risk. Especially not current risk, given the lags involved.

Rather, reduction of bushfire risk needs to take climate change into account via mitigation of direct hazards. This reinforces the recognising the question of 3.b (above) – had NSW bushfire plans properly considered climate change? As this was not recognised, the program could not be regarded as analysis of bushfires or climate change, nor as an unbiassed assessment of media presentations on the issues.

The response’s comments regarding Professor Thakur may also indicate the complaint was not read or comprehended by the ABC. The response said: *‘Thakur in this article (which I think you are referencing) accepts the link between climate change and a greater risk of extreme bushfires…..*[*https://johnmenadue.com/ramesh-thakur-australian-bushfires-its-not-always-about-climate-change-straits-times-24-12-19/*](https://johnmenadue.com/ramesh-thakur-australian-bushfires-its-not-always-about-climate-change-straits-times-24-12-19/)*.* There should have been no doubt I was referencing that article because its source is given at note (xiv) in Media Botch.

The term ‘*extreme bushfires*’ is coined by the response and not by Professor Thakur’s article - the quote referred only to the number of bushfires. Ironically, the word ‘extreme’ was used only once in the Professor’s article - in the term ‘*extreme rhetoric*’.

## **4. Issues not responded to**

The start of my complaint referred to: avoidance of reference to key information, inaccurate representation of facts, false analyses, unsubstantiated comments, misleading statements and suspect conclusions. These matters clearly extend beyond the omission of facts outlined in section 3 (above), but are not addressed in the ABC’s response.

Supporting information for these concerns was given by more than 40 examples in the articles provided to Media Watch and made available to the ABC. To illustrate, one example relates to the program downplaying potential arson. The program quoted Victoria police in early January 2020 saying arson was not responsible for any of the big fires. However, the program failed to mention a more recent substantial expansion of a police strikeforce into causes of the fires (like arson) in the worst affected State, NSW.

## **5. ABC explanation**

The response explained the thrust of the program was *‘evidence that climate change was a contributing factor and should not be dismissed as idiotic, stupid or irrelevant, as powerful News Corp commentators had done’*.

Much of that ‘evidence’ was irrelevant, anecdotal, unscientific or flawed. The program ignored matters which cast doubt on, or refuted, its views. No caveats were given for the opinions presented, and all were presented as if they had equal support.

It may have been Media Watch’s intention to point to evidence of climate change contributing to the fires. Yet, given the above, this was unlikely to have been properly achievable at the time. In any event, my complaint is not about intent but actuality.

The response implies an intention to rebut some commentators’ dismissals of climate change as a fire contributor. Those dismissals could only arise if others had previously made claims about climate change as a contributor. Implicit is: those making the (previous) claims used reports of bushfires to advance their views about climate change.

While Media Watch derided a ‘chorus’ of News Corp commentators, there was an equal if not greater chorus of opposing views - not merely about the facts of climate change but of opinions about causes of fires and about public policy responses.

At least one widely read media publication reportedly had a policy of refusing to publish material that did not accord with pre-conceived, unspecified climate change ‘activist’ views. Some ‘information’ promulgated by other members of that chorus was hyperbolic and misleading. It is probable the Australian Academy of Science’s extraordinary public warning about misinformation about the fires was partly motivated by this – its warning was made several days after maps falsely showing much of Australia to be on fire became internationally newsworthy.

Yet climate ‘activist’ censorship and mis-information – likely triggers for the New Corp commentators’ reaction – escaped mention in the program.[[5]](#endnote-5)

The ABC’s response asserted News Corp commentators to be ‘powerful’. Yet the Media Watch program indicated the opposite. It implied their relevant power - influence over popular views or policy – is (increasingly) ineffectual and less than those of opposing choruses. For example: *‘72 per cent of respondents to an Australia Institute poll last month saying the fires should be a wake-up call to the world.’* A further example could have been the NSW Commissioner’s comment about taking climate change into account in his organisation’s planning – were it mentioned in the program.

The response also argued Media Watch is a *‘program of comment, analysis and criticism and it prominently features the perspective of the presenter.  As an analysis program, Media Watch is not precluded from drawing conclusions including about how a topic is covered in the media’.* This is consistent with the view Media Watch aims to promote improvements in the standard and accuracy of reporting by the media.

That Media Watch presents criticism of other media reporting means it holds-out that its standards are superior to those others. Hence, while Media Watch might prominently feature ‘perspectives’ of – as distinct from analysis by - the presenter, its very nature must limit the extent to which singular perspectives, bias, should replace objectivity and balance. Similarly, the assertion Media Watch is not precluded from drawing conclusions, including about how a topic is covered, cannot mean it can draw unreasonable conclusions, or cover only one side of a debate in order to present ‘conclusions’ that would not be made from a balanced consideration. The program is not advertised as a bully pulpit or a modern ABC analogue of Mr B. A. Santamaria’s ‘Point of View’.

Hence, I do not consider the response’s explanations of Media Watch to expiate bias.

## **6. Conclusion**

In every matter raised in my complaint Media Watch’s program favoured the thesis that climate change caused the bushfires.

The program’s challenge to some people’ views - pejoratively labelled ‘denials’ - that the bushfires and climate change were not at the time demonstrably linked were unbalanced and unfair. It unfairly conflated denial of climate change with scepticism that a link with the 2019-20 bushfires had been demonstrated. The program offered no challenge – it accepted and presented – irrelevant, contentious and in some cases misleading claims that supposedly undermined ‘denial’ views.

The ABC’s response did not address my issues globally or specifically.

The consequences of such bias are serious and extend beyond Media Watch.

In my complaint, and elsewhere, I warned media hyperbole and fearmongering about the bushfires was contributing to problems in Australia’s democratic system - of Governments arrogating extraordinary and unjustified powers, and operating outside the law - in the name of ‘emergencies’. Outrageous propositions for what Governments should do so, such as unilaterally deploy the military to deal with civil matters unrelated even to social disorder, appeared in the mainstream media, including in the ABC and News Corp.

In the midst of this, Australia’s premiere media commentator, Media Watch, resorted to a tired beat-up of a segment of the media in which it essentially re-iterated its position on climate change – a debate most reasonable people, including the people responsible for bushfire control, have long considered to be settled. Its attempted extrapolation of those views to bushfires was premature – at best – and flawed by its one-sidedness.

More recent events, including media and Governments reactions to Covid-19, suggest warnings about hysteria and bias being used in anti-democratic machinations should be taken seriously by programs like Media Watch.

J Austen

1 July 2020

# **Appendix A: Complaint to ABC 26 February 2020**

*'My reason for complaint is the program’s bias and infatuation with climate change.  This was evidenced by avoidance of reference to key information, inaccurate representation of facts, false analyses, unsubstantiated comments, misleading statements and suspect conclusions.*

*In every such case Media Watch sought to present as fact an as yet unproven hypothesis: that the fires were caused by climate change.  Yet it failed to identify any of 3 facts reported in the media which warn against that conclusion at this time:*

*1. CSIRO had reported that the attribution of specific fires to climate change had not been done (it is underway)*

*2. the NSW Rural Fire Service Commissioner had said climate change was included in his organisation's plans for at least the past decade*

*3. Ramesh Thakur, former Assistant Secretary General of the UN had said bushfires were not all about climate change and that international action was needed to influence climate change.*

*The further conclusion Media Watch virtually invited its audience to draw is the Commonwealth, being responsible for policies that do not adequately address the avoidable causes of climate change, is blameworthy for the fires.  Such a conclusion is insupportable even if the fires were caused entirely by avoidable climate change.*

*On my reading the program breached the ABC Code: part 2 principles and the standards 2.1 and 2.2; part 4 principles and the standards 4.1 to 4.5 inclusive.*

*This bias has serious deleterious consequences extending beyond the reputation of the program and the ABC.*

*It diminishes the accountability of relevant parties - the States - thereby setting the stage for further similar disasters.*

*Worse, it creates confusion and supports an environment of unwarranted fear in the community about a ‘climate emergency’, and demands for Commonwealth responses.  This directly motivates the Commonwealth Government to seek to extend its powers in an unpredictable fashion and extent, not limited to addressing causes of climate change.*

*That the Commonwealth should not be accorded such reasons should be evident to all, especially the media, after, for example, recent Federal police raids on media outlets and journalists.  The arrogation by, or provision of new powers to, the Government – as distinct from Parliament – is likely to be an issue for the recently announced Royal Commission.*

*I forwarded two articles detailing the matter to Media Watch, seeking comments, on Tuesday 18 February 2020.*

*While no response has been received, Media Watch provided an ‘update’ of its bushfires/climate change opinions on 24 February.  To me this indicates the program has had sufficient time to consider the issues raised in the articles, however, I leave open the issue of compliance with ABC code part 3.*

*I am happy to forward those articles to you, if you tell me how*

*Thanking you for your attention'*

Regards

# **Appendix B: Articles provided to Media Watch 18 February 2020**

**(Short version)**

# **Media Botch: Who watches the watchers?**

*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* - Juvenal

## Introduction

A previous article on the 2019-20 NSW bushfires accused the ABC, and others, of bias. Of engaging in tinpot behaviour leading to a shift in political power to the right wing in Australia.

ABC TV’s Media Watch, 3 February, 2020 - advertised as dealing with the ‘bushfire crisis’ - is more evidence of this. The episode was about Media Watch’s views on climate change. Its charge of singing from the same sheet is apposite of the ABC and itself. That is the concern of this article.

The episode, like its November 2019 one ‘about bushfires’, was misleading. It overlooked the key facts, exaggerated, misreported significant matters and set up straw men arguments. It failed to note problems with ABC reporting.

It asserted a link between climate change and the fires yet ignored the key facts:

1. A report of 2 November 2019 of the NSW Rural Fire Service claiming its plans – for more than a decade – considered climate change;
2. A CSIRO claim of 27 November 2019 it is undertaking research to establish the strength of a link between climate change and the fires.

The former implies matters beyond climate change contributed to fire damage. The latter means a link between climate change and the fires is yet to be established.

## February episode

The episode started thus:

*‘welcome to Groundhog Day, where the loudest voices at News Corp are adamant that the summer’s terrifying bushfires have nothing to do with climate change.*

*Or, if they have, there’s nothing we can do about it.’*

This entails two questions:

1. Whether climate change played a part in the bushfires;
2. If so, whether Australians can do anything about it.

Media Watch referred to several ‘*hand-picked, highly-paid columnists and TV hosts on Sky’* as a ‘*chorus*’ denying climate change and a link with the fires. While perhaps so, it cited views irrelevant to that issue.

It set up a straw man: anybody who disagrees bushfires should make us ‘*act on climate change*’ is a chorister, and implicitly a ‘climate denier’.

Its use of the term *‘act on climate change’* was misleading. The term could mean actions to reduce the potential for climate change to occur. Or it could mean actions to mitigate the effects of climate change. The former requires enlisting widespread international action to reduce emissions. The latter need not refer to climate change and is independent of emissions. Failure to mention the meanings, and difference is, in effect, a denial of facts at least as certain as ‘the Science’.

In introducing ‘expert’ views, the episode said choir member Ms Credlin claimed the debate was full of misinformation and hysteria. It seemed to wish to create a charge of hypocrisy against her by opining experts would say she was spreading misinformation. It cited views of bushfire ‘experts’ – firefighters - about a link between the climate change and the fires. Yet it did not address a previous challenge to the relevance of ‘bushfire’ expertise on issues of climate change and any link with fires.

At least one ‘expert’ comment was an exaggeration. Another’s conclusion was downplayed later in the episode. More authoritative expertise was misreported. For example, the supposed ‘verdict’ of The Bureau of Meteorology *– ‘that climate change is making our fires worse’* – was only supported by a Bureau statement that didn’t mention climate change.

The episode referred to factually inaccurate views of a few members of Mr Murdoch’s family – little more than gossip. In a similar vein, it presented an email from an ‘outgoing’ employee of *The Australian* accusing that publication of spreading: *‘climate change denial and lies’.* The expertise or motivations, and accuracy of the allegations, were unquestioned. Media Watch simply endorsed the claim by reference to ‘*huge support*’ the sole evidence of which was *‘We’ve seen several of the messages’*.

It falsely claimed *The Australian* alleged a conspiracy involving the Bureau of Meteorology*.* Yet the cited article made no such claim. Rather the article reported a ‘climate scientist’s’ concerns with Bureau methodology including ‘adjustment’, downwards, to historic temperature data. Media Watch did not mention those concerns, nor offer any explanation for the adjustment.

The episode condemned suggestions in the Murdoch media about arson and the fires. It claimed *The Australian* exaggerated arson figures - which appears correct in principle. However, its statistics and reasons were misleading:

*‘according to the ABC, which crunched the numbers in mid-January: Only about 1 per cent of the land burnt in NSW this bushfire season can be officially attributed to arson … -NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) Inspector Ben Shepherd said earlier this week lightning was predominantly responsible for the bushfire crisis - ABC News, 18 January, 2020’.*

These observations were materially out of date and wrong.

The ABC’s arson charge figures – 25 in NSW – reported on 16 January, were for only a two-month period early November to early January. Media Watch noted the ABC’s claim *‘43 of the arrests came before the bushfire season started’.* Yet the fact that fires before the season is principal ‘evidence’ for the climate change-bushfires hypothesis was not mentioned in the program.

By 24 January there were claims: 1700 NSW fires of which 156 were due to natural events, 716 were deliberate. The number of deliberate fires will likely rise as unexplained cases are investigated. If 42% of fires have been found – so far - to be deliberate, the claims recited by Media Watch - the fires were predominately due to lightning, arson caused only 1 percent of land burnt - were grossly misleading nonsense.

The episode asked: *‘So was arson actually responsible for any of the big fires?’* It misled the audience by: *‘On 9 January, Victorian Police said no’.* It omitted opinions of police in NSW where most of the big fires were. It failed to say NSW police (re)established a taskforce to investigate the causes of the fires, suggesting suspicion of undetected arson.

Media Watch claimed an ‘*army of bots*’ was spreading false claim about arson via #ArsonEmergency. The presented evidence was less definite – a single comment there ‘*could be*’ some automated messaging. The episode suggested the bot ‘army’ was being controlled, but its only support for that claim was a sole comment that denied single control.

In the absence of evidence of a controlled army, Media Watch introduced a distraction – motive - said to be to counter #ClimateEmergency. Such a motive would be understandable. It implies the same degree of credibility to both Climate and Arson emergencies #s – an inference not mentioned.

To complete its ‘analysis’, Media Watch pointed to opinions from far and near:

‘*There’s no doubt that climate change activists across the world think the fires should be a tipping point.  …..many Australians agree …climate protests in Sydney by a couple of hundred so-called Quiet Australians. And more than twice that number of people lying outside News Corp….*’

However, such opinions are evidence only of socio-political movements rather than physical phenomena like climate. Its excuse for raising the matter was to frame a News Corp reaction:

‘*To suggest, as Media Watch is doing, that on major issues in Australia there cannot be many opinions aired across media platforms is contrary to the role of free and open media.”*

Media Watch suggested News Corp misunderstood its position:

*‘Our point is that News Corp’s star columnists, whom the group heavily promotes, all sing from the same song sheet on climate change.*

*And that matters. Because it stops the debate from moving on.’*

Which, in the circumstances of Media Watch’s evident bias – mistakes only favouring climate ‘alarmism’ - appears to be a fabrication to distract from the sloppy chorus it participates in.

That there is such a chorus was confirmed in an article in the Conversation 31 January 2020 – unmentioned by Media Watch. Its heading *‘Media ‘impartiality’ on climate change is ethically misguided and downright dangerous’* is another ‘ends justifies the means’ argument – a type used against Galileo and unsuccessfully raised at Nuremburg.

This chorus divides Australia and alienates support of the ABC. It is the cause of stalemate in ‘the fires debate’ which should be about what to do to mitigate observed and expected adverse environmental effects. Present ABC and ‘activist’ proselytise-until-they-repent is leading to a shift of power to the right wing. A shift overlooked because of infatuation with ‘winning the climate change debate’.

## Sequel

The subsequent February 10 Media Watch episode was ironic. It said readers believe media reports to be full of blunders, bias and beat ups. It showed public trust in journalists – of whom Media Watch seems inordinately proud – is descending rapidly.

No wonder.

It expressed disappointment the media ‘regulator’ had taken little action to address media transgression against the facts. It shouldn’t regret that too much.

**(Long Version)**

# **Media Botch: Who watches the watchers?**

*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* - Juvenal

## 1. Introduction

A previous article on the 2019-20 NSW bushfires accused the ABC, and others, of bias. Of engaging in tinpot behaviour leading to a shift in political power to the right wing in Australia.

ABC TV has a weekly show commenting on media reporting – Media Watch. The 3 February, 2020 episode was advertised as dealing with reporting on the ‘bushfire crisis’. It concluded:

*‘Our point is that News Corp’s star columnists, whom the group heavily promotes, all sing from the same song sheet on climate change. And that matters. Because it stops the debate from moving on.’*

That statement, and the episode, was about climate change. The bushfires merely provided a backdrop to well-known, often repeated opinions.

Media Watch’s charge of singing from the same sheet could more be said of itself and the ABC. Fixation with its own climate change chorus may negate any contribution it has to that issue and stop it contributing to other debates such as expansion of Government controls. Its reporting and ‘logic’ on the fires were a parody, similar to another case of burning - of witches.

Its ‘analysis’ of other media reporting is open to a charge of hypocrisy likely to turn people to sources of information previously considered less reliable than the national broadcaster.

That is the concern of this article.

Before turning to the most recent Media Watch episode, it is useful to review the climate change-bushfire hypothesis, some basic facts and an earlier episode on the topic.

## 2. Hypothesis and facts

In its February episode, Media Watch inferred Commonwealth inaction on mitigation of climate change contributed to the bushfires.

### 2.1 Hypothesis

The hypothesis of Commonwealth responsibility for the bushfires entails each of the following:

1. climate change occurred leading up to the bushfires;
2. this climate change was human induced;
3. the induced change was avoidable by actions of the Commonwealth;
4. the Commonwealth did not undertake those actions;
5. the bushfires were initiated / exacerbated by the induced climate change.

The hypothesis also requires that planning for fire prevention, mitigation and fighting activities do not take into account climate change.

Each of these aspects involves a question of degree. For example, if climate change (a) is accepted as fact, then human contributions (b) would be between say 1% and 100%.

Listing these elements permits differentiation between: ‘the Science’; policy; speculation; degrees of certainty. This would allow research and the debate - about what society should do - to focus on less certain or contentious matters. It should be expected that analysis, as distinct from commentary and reporting, focus on those matters.

### 2.2 Facts

Some basic facts should be borne in mind:

1. Climate change is assumed to be a global phenomenon;

ii. Australia makes a small contribution to the factors said to induce climate change;

1. The Commonwealth can influence that contribution;
2. The Commonwealth is unable to directly influence factors the igniting, spreading, fighting or recovery of fires except through the States.
3. The NSW fires commenced prior to the usual ‘official’ fire season.

For the purposes of analysing commentary on the bushfires two other ‘facts’ stand out:

1. A report of 2 November 2019 of the NSW Rural Fire Service claiming its plans – for more than a decade – have considered climate change;
2. A CSIRO claim of 27 November 2019 it is undertaking research to establish the strength of a link between climate change and the fires.

### 2.3 Reference documents

In February, two documents were provided on the Media Watch site: from the Australian Science Media Centre; from the Australian Academy of Science.

The former warned inaccurate reporting creates confusion, uncertainty and apathy among the public. The latter said the fires were unprecedented anywhere in the world.

Both said increased fire risk is associated with current climate change. However, neither went as far as to say what association climate change had with the 2019-20 fires. This is consistent with a prior statement from the Academy.

### 2.4 CSIRO question and answer

On 31 January 2020, CSIRO published a ‘question and answer’ session on climate change and bushfires with one of its senior climate researchers.

In that expert’s opinion, despite complexities, there is a link between climate change and fire risk. However, he did not go so far as to say there is a link – or a link of particular strength - between climate change and the 2019-2020 fires.

## 3. November Media Watch program

### 3.1 A program about fires?

Media Watch, 25 November 2019, considered Murdoch media reports on climate change and bushfires. The headline - *‘Powerful media commentators dismiss the link between climate change and fires’ -* presumed a link.

The episode purported to present ‘the truth’. However, by mixing fact with unsupported assertions, including about the views of ‘know it all’s, it failed to do so.

It presented certainty, citing CSIRO, to conclude current fires were caused by climate change and the situation would worsen. However, two days later this certainty was debunked by CSIRO, in a rebuke to speculation like that of Media Watch.

### 3.2 Episode debunked

CSIRO said while fire risk is being altered by climate change, the attribution of fire events to climate change is problematic. There may be other – possibly more important – contributory factors to a particular fire event. Attribution can only be done in hindsight when data from the event and all (likely) contributory factors is available and analysed.

Hence the November Media Watch episode was misleading in at least four respects:

* not citing the relevant CSIRO research;
* not differentiating between bushfire risk in general and the fires then in progress;
* not advising the question of a link can only be determined after the event;
* presenting a prediction (of worse conditions) as a fact.

It failed to mention a key fact - (2.2(vi) above) – the report of the NSW Rural Fire Service claiming its plans considered climate change.

That failure meant the critical question was ignored: why had the fires occurred, and been so bad, when the plans to mitigate and fight them had taken into account climate change?

Recognition of that fact would have led to questioning the veracity of the relevant report, the accuracy of statements from the Rural Fire Service and whether factors other than climate change were behind the ignition and severity of the fires.

### 3.3 Episode – assessment

At the time of the episode, November 2019, it would have been fair to criticise media reports that dismissed climate change or the possibility of a link between climate change and the bushfires.

However, Media Watch’s criticism went well beyond that. It presumed a link between climate change and the fires had been established. It failed to inform of essential caveats and whether ‘the link’ was strong or weak - failures likely to mislead its audience.

Media Watch’s November episode was based on a hunch. That hunch may prove right, but it was not fact at the time. Media Watch calls others ‘know-it-all’s’. It missed the two key facts about a link between climate change and the fires. It deserves the title ‘know-it-less’.

## 4. Media Watch 3 February 2020

### 4.1 Groundhog Day

Media Watch, 3 February 2020, was advertised as a program on the bushfires. However, its headline ‘*Action on climate change’* was otherwise. It presaged a discussion in which any doubt the fires were caused by avoidable climate change was portrayed as climate denialism. Groundhog Day.

### 4.2 Two issues

The February episode Watch started thus:

*‘welcome to Groundhog Day, where the loudest voices at News Corp are adamant that the summer’s terrifying bushfires have nothing to do with climate change.*

*Or, if they have, there’s nothing we can do about it.’*

This framed two separate issues:

1. Whether climate change played a part in the bushfires;
2. If so, whether Australians can do anything about it.

### 4.3 Climate-fire denial

Media Watch referred to several ‘*hand-picked, highly-paid columnists and TV hosts on Sky’* as a ‘*chorus*’ which denied climate change and dismissed a link between climate change and the fires.

While that argument may have merit, Media Watch’s presentation was distorted by citing views irrelevant to the issue, for example Mr Alan Jones’ comment about what was burning – eucalypts.

### 4.4 Acting on climate change

The episode continued:

*‘Passionate denial that the bushfires should make us act on climate change runs right across the Murdoch media in this country reaching an audience of millions.’*

In this Media Watch introduced a misleading non-sequitur and ambiguity.

The non-sequitur arises from the claim of a chorus of climate change ‘denial’. That is issue (1) in section 4.2 above. Such a view implies no need for action to stop climate change. However, the chorus did not address issue (2).

The juxtaposition of bushfires and climate change set up a straw man implying anybody who disagrees bushfires should make us act on climate change is a chorister. The use of ‘denial’ – a label used to denigrate those who doubt human induced climate change - was extended to those who presently are not satisfied about ‘the link’ between climate change and the fires.

The term *‘act on climate change’* is ambiguous. It could mean actions to reduce the potential for climate change to occur. Or it could mean actions to mitigate the effects of climate change.

The scope of actions to reduce climate change, issue (2), is highly contentious. Relevant Australian action would need to aim at having the rest of the world reduce man-made agents, in particular countries contributing most to those agents – United States, China, India etc. Australia may need to undertake some strong action to demonstrate bona fides to other countries. However, Australian action of itself – in the absence of international response – would have little global effect. This is the observation made by Mr Thakur, former Assistant Secretary General to the United Nations. Media Watch’s failure to mention this was, in effect, a denial of facts at least as certain as ‘the Science’.

The scope of actions to mitigate effects of climate change in Australia is independent of actions to reduce climate change. This scope can be considered and undertaken independent of views about climate change itself. For example, mitigation of the effects of sea level rises is not necessarily dependent on a belief as to whether those rises are due to climate change.

Similarly, expectations of progressively ‘worse fire seasons should induce some planning for fire mitigation and fighting whether or not the cause is climate change.

The episode’s failure to differentiate action to affect climate change from action to mitigate the effects of climate change is likely and/or intended to mislead its viewers to wrongly believe the primary policy response for Australia must be the former.

As was the case with the November episode, Media Watch in February omitted reference to the report of the NSW Rural Fire Service taking climate change into account in its planning for over a decade. Were this mentioned, the risk of misleading its audience would have been less. The omission led to a counterproductive bias – of paying substantially more attention to matters over which Australia has significantly less control.

### 4.5 Experts etc.

In introducing ‘expert’ opinions, Media Watch cited Ms Credlin claim’s the debate was full of misinformation and hysteria. It was an attempt to create a charge of hypocrisy:

*‘PETA CREDLIN: In this debate, like few others, fact is often replaced with misinformation, analysis with hysteria, evidence-based assessments with mere anecdote, or lectures from teenagers. And balance and sober discussions: they’re long dead.*

*It’s hard to disagree. But most bushfire experts would level that charge of ignoring the facts at Peta Credlin and her fellow climate sceptics, as this group of former fire chiefs made clear in November’:*

The February episode did not address the argument raised in its November episode about the relevance of the expertise of former fire chiefs, or bushfire experts, to issues surrounding climate change and a possible causal link with fires.

At least one comment of an ‘expert’ was an exaggeration. Another implied fires were ignited by lightning due to climate change – which later in the episode was downplayed.

Media Watch made claims not supported by comments it presented. For example, the supposed ‘verdict’ of The Bureau of Meteorology *– ‘that climate change is making our fires worse’* – was only supported by a Bureau statement that didn’t mention climate change: *“Hottest, driest year on record led to extreme bushfire season”’.*

Media Watch also cited members of Rupert Murdoch’s family implying they disagreed with the ‘chorus’. Such gossip has no place in a serious discussion. Particularly when the comments merely reflect personal views and are not factually accurate.

Similar was Media Watch’s presentation of an email from an ‘outgoing’ employee of The Australian: *‘the spread of climate change denial and lies’.* None of the expertise or motivations of the author nor the accuracy of the allegations were questioned. Indeed, Media Watch appeared to endorse the claim by reference to ‘*huge support*’, the sole presented evidence of which was limited to *‘We’ve seen several of the messages’*.

The episode continued: there were ‘*new angles on denial….Yes, seriously. The Australian is happy to suggest that the BOM is part of a huge conspiracy…..’.* However, The Australian article it cited made no such conspiracy claim.

Rather, that article reported a ‘climate scientist’s’ concerns with Bureau of Meteorology methodologies underlying claims of record temperatures. One of these concerns was recent ‘adjustment’, downwards, to some previous temperature data. Media Watch did not mention this, or offer any explanation for the adjustment.

The episode appeared to take a particular interest in Mr Alan Jones, at the expense of providing a logical or coherent discussion. For example, to demonstrate ‘new angles on denial’, it cited Mr Jones complaining there has been a pile-on on Prime Minister Morrison which - despite being entirely irrelevant to labels of ‘denial’ - there has been.

The appearance was of an episode out to settle personal scores rather than having an interest in expert views on matters or on analysing media commentary.

### 4.6 Arson

Media Watch condemned an arson argument identified in the Murdoch media. However, in so doing it made mistakes similar to those identified above.

Its claim The Australian reported exaggerated arson figures appears correct in principle. However, the statistics and reasons it cited were false, and the Australian’s exaggeration is not as great as made out.

Significantly, Media Watch did not refer to the ABC’s substantial underestimate of arson reports.

Media Watch’s arson argument conflicted with earlier parts of its report. For example, its claim: ‘*the key issue is not what started the fires but why they’ve burned so fiercely’* gives lie to the prominence it gave to a (claimed) expert’s view on lightning strikes.

The episode noted the ABC’s claim *‘43 of the arrests came before the bushfire season started.’* Yet it forgot to mention the bushfire season started early.

Its discussion of an ‘army of bots’ was inaccurate and biased. Presumably ‘bots’ are computers that generate messages for other computers – in this case, spreading claims of arson via #ArsonEmergency. The presented evidence for this ‘army’, hearsay, was less definite – ‘could be’ - than Media Watch made out: ‘*One researcher analysed over 300 accounts using this hashtag. He found a third of them displayed highly-automated and inauthentic behaviour, meaning they could be bots or trolls’*

Media Watch then suggested this (unsubstantiated, possible, army) was being controlled*: ‘ …..So who is commanding this bot army?’* . Yet its support for this referred to comments that denied single control. Rather than stay with on the issue of evidence of control, the episode introduced a distraction – of motive. The motive was said to be to counter #ClimateEmergency. Such a motive would be understandable. It implies the same degree of credibility to both Climate and Arson emergencies #s – an inference not mentioned.

Media Watch then asked: *‘So was arson actually responsible for any of the big fires?’* It misled the audience to believe ‘no’. It first cited: *‘On 9 January, Victorian Police said no’.*

This omitted the opinions of the police in NSW where most of the big fires were. That omission is significant because by the time of the February episode the NSW police had (re)established a taskforce to investigate the causes of the fire ignitions, suggesting suspicion there were undetected cases of arson. Despite this being widely reported, it escaped mention on Media Watch.

Media Watch then said:

*‘according to the ABC, which crunched the numbers in mid-January: Only about 1 per cent of the land burnt in NSW this bushfire season can be officially attributed to arson … -NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) Inspector Ben Shepherd said earlier this week lightning was predominantly responsible for the bushfire crisis - ABC News, 18 January, 2020’.*

Which apart from being materially out of date, was wrong. The ABC’s ‘number crunching’ related to charges laid in the two months 8 November 2019 to 6 January 2020. It is unclear whether there were charges laid prior to this. Charges laid in (around) the month between the fact check and Media Watch episode were not referred to. This is the same mistake Media Watch made in its claim of an established link between climate change and the bushfires – it piped up too early.

This can be seen by comparing the mid-January ABC and AFP fact checks on the matter – both claiming 24 charges for the period – and slightly later reports covering the time when bushfires started – 55 charges.

By 24 January, there was a claim: of 1700 NSW fires 156 were due to natural events and 716 were deliberate. The number not having natural causes is likely to rise as a result of the NSW police investigations into the 700 or so unexplained cases. Given that, it is hard to believe Mr Shepherd’s claim or the ABC’s claim that only 1 percent of land burnt can ‘officially’ be attributed to arson.[[6]](#endnote-6)

### 4.7 The majority

To complete its ‘analysis’ Media Watch embarked on a democratic rather than scientific or analytic approach. It pointed to opinions from far and near:

‘*There’s no doubt that climate change activists across the world think the fires should be a tipping point.  …..And many Australians agree, with 72 per cent of respondents to an Australia Institute poll last month saying the fires should be a wake-up call to the world…..*

*Add to that, last week, climate protests in Sydney by a couple of hundred so-called Quiet Australians. And more than twice that number of people lying outside News Corp, with banners saying, News Corp lies all the time so it’s OK for us to lie here.*’

However, it failed to say such opinions are evidence of socio-political rather than of physical phenomena. They do not reflect on the reality of climate change, on any link with fires or on the apolitical merit of attempts to mitigate climate change or its effects.

Media Watch’s pejorative use of the term ‘chorus’ for those disagreeing with climate change etc; of ‘deniers’ versus activists’; failure to refer to the climate protests substantiating Ms Credlin’s views of hysteria; intrusion of social factors into a discussion supposedly concerned with physical facts, indicates substantial bias.

### 4.8 Media Watch conclusion

Media Watch’s excuse for raising the socio-political point was to contrast this with a News Corp reaction:

‘*So, what’s News Corp’s answer to this chorus of criticism? It told us in a statement….*

*“To suggest, as Media Watch is doing, that on major issues in Australia there cannot be many opinions aired across media platforms is contrary to the role of free and open media.”*

Media Watch suggested NewsCorp misunderstood its position:

*‘Our point is that News Corp’s star columnists, whom the group heavily promotes, all sing from the same song sheet on climate change.*

*And that matters. Because it stops the debate from moving on.’*

Which, in the circumstances, of Media Watch’s bias and failure to even recognise two central reported facts in either of its two episodes on the fires:

* NSW Rural Fire Service implied fire mitigation and fighting plans considered climate change;
* CSIRO said the question of (the strength of) a link between climate change and the fires had not been answered;

appears to be a sloppy way to distract from the chorus in which it participates.

That there is a biased chorus was confirmed in an article in the Conversation 31 January 2020 – unmentioned by Media Watch. Its heading *‘Media ‘impartiality’ on climate change is ethically misguided and downright dangerous’* is another ‘ends justifies the means’ argument – similar to that used to suppress some of Galileo’s ideas and later unsuccessfully raised at Nuremburg. The article claimed *The Guardian* and *The Conversation* refuse to publish material on ‘climate denialism’.

This chorus divides Australia and alienates otherwise supporters of the ABC. It is the real cause of stalemate in ‘the fires debate’ which should be about what to do to mitigate observed and expected adverse environmental circumstances.

The debate should not be the present attempt to proselytise-until-repent which is leading to a shift of power to the right wing.

## 5. Sequel

The subsequent February 10 Media Watch episode was ironic. It included a segment claiming readers really believe the media to be full of blunders, bias and beat ups. It showed public trust in journalists – of which Media Watch seems inordinately proud – is descending rapidly.

No wonder.

It expressed disappointment the media ‘regulator’ had taken little action. It shouldn’t regret that too much.

# **Appendix C: Response from ABC received 18 June 2020**

Dear Mr Austen,

I write to you in response to your complaint regarding MW 3 Feb, 2020.

<https://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/episodes/news-corp-fire/11925590>

The summer bushfire crisis was the focus of major media coverage across Australia and the world.

At the same time, there was media debate over what role, if any, climate change played.

Was it making the fires more intense?

Was it making the fire season longer?

Is it causing more extreme fire weather?

In each case we presented evidence from former fire chiefs, major organisations and scientific experts that the answer was yes.

You argue that in each case:

***Media Watch sought to present as fact an as yet unproven hypothesis: that the fires were caused by climate change***

We did not do that. We showed evidence that climate change was a contributing factor and should not be dismissed as idiotic, stupid or irrelevant, as powerful News Corp commentators had done. That was the thrust of the program.

As evidence of Media Watch omission, and or, breach of Editorial Polices (2.1, 2.2, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, 4.5 ) you cite three references.

1. ***CSIRO had reported that the attribution of specific fires to climate change had not been done (it is underway)***

On the 18 Feb 2020, the CSIRO published a bushfire explainer which is consistent with our critique:

*Climate change doesn’t cause fires directly but has caused an increase in the occurrence of extreme fire weather and in the length of the fire season across large parts of Australia since the 1950s. In addition to 2019 being the driest year since records began in 1900, it was Australia’s warmest year. In 2019 the annual mean temperature was 1.52 °C above average1.*

*The impact of climate change has led to longer, more intense fire seasons and an increase in the average number of elevated fire weather days, as measured by the Forest Fire Danger Index (FFDI). Last year saw the highest annual accumulated FFDI on record.*

[https://www.csiro.au/en/Research/Environment/Extreme-Events/Bushfire/preparing-for-climate-change/2019-20-bushfires-explainer#](https://www.csiro.au/en/Research/Environment/Extreme-Events/Bushfire/preparing-for-climate-change/2019-20-bushfires-explainer)

***2. the NSW Rural Fire Service Commissioner had said climate change was included in his organisation's plans for at least the past decade***

I am unclear what this proves or disproves, except to say the RFS is factoring in climate change and its impact on fire behaviour.

***3. Ramesh Thakur, former Assistant Secretary General of the UN had said bushfires were not all about climate change and that international action was needed to influence climate change.***

Yes. I agree. There are many factors behind bushfires. I note Thakur in this article (which I think you are referencing) accepts the link between climate change and a greater risk of extreme bushfires.

*Meanwhile global warming is making Australia’s summers hotter, longer, more drought prone and therefore at risk of more frequent forest fires*

*A stop to global warming would help to reduce the numbers of bushfires in the future…*

<https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/australian-bush-fires-its-not-always-about-climate-change>

Republished here with no paywall.

<https://johnmenadue.com/ramesh-thakur-australian-bushfires-its-not-always-about-climate-change-straits-times-24-12-19/>

I don’t believe we misled the audience by not including Ramesh Thakur, who I note is not a climate scientist but a professor in international relations and nuclear disarmament.

Media Watch is a program of comment, analysis and criticism and it prominently features the perspective of the presenter.  As an analysis program, Media Watch is not precluded from drawing conclusions including about how a topic is covered in the media.

I believe we have complied with ABC editorial standards.

Kind regards,

Tim Latham

Executive Producer, Media Watch.

1. <https://www.thejadebeagle.com/media-botch.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Final versions, of 18 February, including appendices and references, are at Media Botch at

<https://www.thejadebeagle.com/media-botch.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Media Watch response Austen at <https://www.thejadebeagle.com/media-botch.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The ‘pile-on’ and its implications is described at: <https://www.thejadebeagle.com/tinpot.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.science.org.au/news-and-events/news-and-media-releases/statement-regarding-australian-bushfires>

And <https://www.thejadebeagle.com/tinpot.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)