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# 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.[[1]](#endnote-1)

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.[[2]](#endnote-2)

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.[[3]](#endnote-3)

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;
2. Australia makes a small contribution to the factors said to induce climate change;
3. The Commonwealth can influence that contribution;
4. The Commonwealth is unable to directly influence factors of igniting, spreading, fighting or recovery of fires except through the States.
5. The NSW fires commenced prior to the usual ‘official’ fire season.[[4]](#endnote-4)

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;[[5]](#endnote-5)
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.[[6]](#endnote-6)

### 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.[[7]](#endnote-7)

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.[[8]](#endnote-8)

### 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.[[9]](#endnote-9)

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.[[10]](#endnote-10)

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.*[[11]](#endnote-11)*

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.[[12]](#endnote-12)

### 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.[[13]](#endnote-13)

### 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’.[[14]](#endnote-14)

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.*[[15]](#endnote-15)*

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.[[16]](#endnote-16)

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.[[17]](#endnote-17)

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.[[18]](#endnote-18)

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.[[19]](#endnote-19)

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 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.[[20]](#endnote-20)

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.[[21]](#endnote-21)

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.[[22]](#endnote-22)

### 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’.[[23]](#endnote-23)

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.[[24]](#endnote-24)

No wonder.

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

J Austen

18 February 2020

## Appendix 1[[25]](#endnote-25)

### Fire haze: Powerful media commentators dismiss the link between climate change and fires.

**Broadcast:**Mon 25 Nov 2019, 9:15pm

*SALLY BOWREY: Our top story today is the bushfire emergency unfolding across the state. More than 90 fires are burning right now, a staggering 14 at emergency watch level. Something that has not been seen before …*

*CHRIS REASON: … as you say, this is unprecedented stuff — 96 active fire zones around the state at the moment. And I'm being told by RFS that they’re jumping up the number of emergency level fires to 16 now and, as you say, that is unprecedented.*

- Seven Afternoon News, 8 November, 2019

Hello, I’m Paul Barry, welcome to Media Watch.

And since that report on the New South Wales bushfires two weeks ago, Australia’s fire emergency has spread to five states and destroyed more than 630 homes.

And in the meantime our political leaders have been doing their best to avoid addressing the role of climate change in making those bushfires more severe:

*SCOTT MORRISON: My only thoughts today are with those who’ve lost their lives …*

- ABC News, 9 November, 2019

*GLADYS BEREJIKLIAN: … I certainly don’t think it’s appropriate to get into political argument …*

- ABC News Breakfast, 11 November, 2019

*JOHN BARILARO: … I tell you this, I’m not gonna cop it, and if that’s the rest of this interview, well you’ve lost me for the morning.*

- Sky News, 11 November, 2019

But 11 days ago, after four people died in those New South Wales fires, former fire chiefs of Queensland, Victoria and Tasmania tackled the issue head on:

*LEE JOHNSON: So there’s something going on and certainly climate change is exacerbating the very, very dry conditions that we’re all experiencing.*

*NEIL BIBBY: Bushfires are a symptom of climate change.*

*MIKE BROWN: I’ve had 39 years of Tasmanian Fire Service and I didn’t see too many dry lightning strikes earlier on in my career but now, and due to climate change, we’re seeing this as a regular event.*

- NewsDay, Sky News, 14 November, 2019

But leading the charge was a former New South Wales fire boss, Greg Mullins, who said in multiple interviews that a warmer climate was making it harder to fight our bushfires and reducing our ability to prepare for them:

*GREG MULLINS: … look, it’s very clear, any fire service will tell you, that the windows for hazard reduction through the winter are getting narrower and narrower. Now, a slight lift in temperature overall, average temperature, means the extremes are more extreme. The scientists are very clear, the numbers are very clear, more days of very high fire danger and above.*

- The Project, Channel Ten, 11 November, 2019

But some powerful media commentators are convinced that they know better. Like shock jock Alan Jones in this full-page column in News Corp’s Daily Telegraph:

*The ABC were at it again last week, fawning over 23 former fire and emergency leaders who commented, outside their area of expertise, about an alleged relationship between bushfires and climate change.*

- The Daily Telegraph, 19 November, 2019

And that was just the start of it, because Jones was also assuring readers:

*It is worth asking how the non-expert views of such people are even newsworthy.*

- The Daily Telegraph, 19 November, 2019

Yep, according to Jones, 23 former fire and emergency chiefs are not worth listening to when comes to bushfires. Unlike him, who’s paid millions of dollars to tell us, on repeat, that man-made global warming is a hoax.

But Jones is not the only one to rubbish or ignore the fire chiefs’ warning.

2GB’s news bulletins that day barely gave them a mention, even as the stations’s talk-show hosts, like Ray Hadley, had a crack at fireman Mullins with barbs like this:

*RAY HADLEY: He’s not an economist and that’s quite evident by his rantings just at the moment, Greg Mullins.*

- The Ray Hadley Morning Show, 2GB, 14 November, 2019

And 2GB’s Steve Price was even more scathing:

*STEVE PRICE: … Greg Mullins reckons he had a crystal ball, that he wanted to warn the government about what was coming ...*

*But if you listen carefully to his words you find his real game here — climate change ...*

*He’s now a fully-fledged member of the climate change hysteria brigade ...*

- The Steve Price Show, 2GB, 14 November, 2019

Price’s guest, Peter Gleeson, who’s employed as a commentator by Sky and The Courier-Mail to tell us what’s what, also got into Mullins — a firefighter with 39 years experience — to declare:

*PETER GLEESON: … he’s joined a cult. He’s been brainwashed ...*

- The Steve Price Show, 2GB, 14 November, 2019

And predictably, several other News Corp columnists and TV hosts were singing from the same song sheet, either attacking Mullins and his fellow chiefs or denying that climate change is making the bushfires worse.

Or claiming that increased Australian action to fight global warming is pointless:

*PETA CREDLIN: … climate change isn’t the cause of these bushfires. But there’s no doubt, and I’m not alone here, that two decades plus of climate change activism is making them worse.*

- Credlin, Sky News, 12 November, 2019

*CHRIS KENNY: … the bushfire and climate change debate. It’s dumb, it’s reckless, it’s offensive, we know that, but the Greens and others, so many cheerleaders in the media, are still doubling down on this stuff.*

- Kenny on Sunday, Sky News, 17 November, 2019

*ANDREW BOLT: There are, for instance, the retired fire chiefs today who actually claimed, actually claimed, forget blaming the fierceness of the fires on the fact that not enough burning off was done to keep fuel levels in the bush under control, no no no no. The real problem, it seems, was that the Morrison government hadn’t magically turned down the world’s temperature by cutting Australia’s tiny emissions.*

- The Bolt Report, Sky News, 14 November, 2019

And in the Herald Sun, veteran business columnist Terry McCrann went even further, by accusing the non-News Corp media of, quote, “dishonesty, distortion and hysteria”:

It has been unremitting, unrelenting, wall-to-wall coverage ...

*The fact none of these bushfires were in any way extraordinary compared to not just the last 50 years but indeed the last 150 years was an ‘inconvenient truth’ ...*

- The Herald Sun, 18 November, 2019

So, what is the truth? And is it actually inconvenient for all those know-it-alls?

Well, it’s certainly true that fires have devastated Australia since time began. But the CSIRO, the Bureau of Meteorology, fire chiefs and climate scientists all tell us the fires are getting worse.

The season’s growing longer, the fires are more extreme and what’s really unprecedented is so many are burning at the same time:

*SHANE FITZSIMMONS: Never before have we had 17 concurrent emergency warning fires burning at once, all competing desperately for resources, desperately for support, desperately for assistance. The reality is we simply couldn’t get to every individual.*

- ABC News Channel, 10 November, 2019

Last Thursday, the ABC was running emergency broadcasts for fires in South Australia, Victoria, Tasmania, New South Wales and Queensland, and we’re told that’s a record.

But what’s unfolding now is what we’ve all been warned of for years.

In 2007, the ABC reported on research from the CSIRO and Bureau of Meteorology, which predicted:

*TANYA NOLAN: Within the next 12 years, the number of extreme days of fire danger — that's the highest risk rating — could grow by more than 60 per cent.*

- The World Today, ABC Radio, 26 September, 2007

And three years before that, in 2004, the National Inquiry on Bushfire Management had warned state and federal governments that fires would become larger and more intense as rainfall patterns changed:

*The projected hotter, drier, windier conditions associated with climate change caused by greenhouse warming would extend the period of fuel drying and increase rates of fire spread.*

- National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management, COAG Report, 31 March, 2004

And the latest advice from the CSIRO, updated this month, confirms that’s already happening and will get worse:

*Over recent decades, we've seen an increase in the frequency and severity of fire weather in Australia.*

*We predict that many regions will see a significant increase in the probability of the highest levels of fire danger in the years ahead.*

- Bushfire Research, CSIRO, 6 November, 2019

And, to cap it all, according to Professor Ross Bradstock from Wollongong University’s Bushfire Research Centre, it’s all coming faster than expected:

*These unprecedented fires are an indication that a much-feared future under climate change may have arrived earlier than predicted.*

- The Conversation, 11 November, 2019

So, will this make any difference to the doubters and denialists? Almost certainly not.

If they can call the media’s acceptance of expert opinion “dishonest, reckless and offensive”, it’s likely no amount of science or fires or drought will ever make them change their tune.

So, what does the man who employs so many of these crusaders against the science have to say?

Last week, at News Corp’s AGM in New York, a proxy for Australian shareholder activist Stephen Mayne asked Rupert Murdoch this question:

*JESSICA CRAIG: If you do believe in climate change, Mr Mayne is interested to hear why News Corp gives climate deniers like Andrew Bolt and Terry McCrann so much airtime in Australia.*

- News Corp AGM, 20 November, 2019

And after detailing a 25 per cent reduction in the company’s carbon footprint, Rupert replied:

*RUPERT MURDOCH: There are no climate change deniers around, I can assure you.*

- News Corp AGM, 20 November, 2019

Rupert Murdoch is renowned for knowing what his papers and commentators are saying all across the world.

Seems he’s also adept at claiming black is white. Because denial is what News Corp’s campaign against the facts and the experts on climate change amounts to.

And two days after Rupert spoke came another example, from Ian Plimer in The Australian, urging us not to “pollute minds with carbon fears”, telling us:

*There are no carbon emissions. If there were, we could not see because most carbon is black.*

- The Australian, 22 November, 2019

Hard to believe, isn’t it?

## Appendix 2[[26]](#endnote-26)

### News Corp’s fire fight A Media Watch feature on the bushfire crisis

We examine how News Corp’s loudest voices denied or downplayed the role of climate change.

**Transcript**

*ROWAN DEAN: Unprecedented bushfires? Unprecedented drought? No, this Australian summer has been the summer of unprecedented stupidity. Never before have we had to suffer such idiocy in public debate and political commentary, nationally and internationally, in relation to two of the most common and predictable occurrences in Australia’s climate cycle, drought and bushfires.*

- Outsiders, Sky News, 26 January, 2020

Hello, I’m Paul Barry, welcome to Media Watch.

And 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.

And, as always, welcome back to News Corp’s team of hand-picked, highly-paid columnists and TV hosts on Sky, who are leading the chorus:

*PETA CREDLIN: So, let me deal with the issue head on. Does climate change cause these fires? No.*

- Credlin, Sky News, 20 January, 2020

*CHRIS KENNY: … So that’s the key. The drought. And if drought can’t be blamed on climate change you can’t blame the fires on climate change, especially when so many are deliberately lit ...*

- The Kenny Report, Sky News, 11 December, 2019

*ALAN JONES: What’s burning in Victoria are eucalypts. What’s burning in South Australia are eucalypts ... When are we going to wake up and stop using this as an excuse to justify the climate change hoax?*

- Richo & Jones, Sky News, 29 January, 2019

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.

But it’s also echoed by Murdoch’s Fox News in the US, as two former Prime Ministers noted last month:

*MALCOLM TURNBULL: If you go to any of the right-wing think tanks or you read the Murdoch press, it's just full of climate denialism and it’s, it is designed to deflect from the real objective which has to be to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions …*

- BBC News, 22 January, 2020

*KEVIN RUDD: … the politics of fear around, let’s call it the cost of climate change action, has been well mobilised by the conservatives and Murdoch in Australia just as it’s been well mobilised in the United States by the conservatives through the echo chamber of Fox News.*

- Fareed Zakaria GPS, CNN, 17 January, 2020

So why are Murdoch’s men and women so passionate in their protests? And what would it take to change their tune? Or, as Malcolm Turnbull asked the BBC:

*MALCOLM TURNBULL: You know, how many more lives and homes have to be lost before the climate change deniers acknowledge they are wrong?*

- BBC News, 22 January, 2020

It is a fair question. And it’s one that’s hard to answer.

But News Corp’s deniers claim, remarkably, that science is on their side:

*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.*

- Credlin, Sky News, 20 January, 2020

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:

*LEE JOHNSON: ... and certainly climate change is exacerbating the very, very dry conditions that we’re all experiencing.*

*NEIL BIBBY: Bushfires are a symptom of climate change.*

*MIKE BROWN: I’ve had 39 years of Tasmanian Fire Service and I didn’t see too many dry lightning strikes earlier on in my career but now, and due to climate change, we’re seeing this as a regular event.*

- NewsDay, Sky News, 14 November, 2019

The Bureau of Meteorology has also warned that climate change is making our fires worse, and made its verdict clear last month:

*Hottest, driest year on record led to extreme bushfire season*

- Bureau of Meteorology, press release, Annual Climate Statement 2019, 9 January, 2020

*And three weeks ago, the Australian Academy of Science piped up with a similar conclusion:*

*The scientific evidence base shows that as the world warms due to human induced climate change, we experience an increase in the frequency and severity of extreme weather events.*

- The Australian Academy of Science, 10 January, 2020

Countless climate scientists say the same.

Whether they’re at NASA or the Royal Society.

Or at Britain’s Met Office and the CSIRO, which have just reviewed 57 scientific studies on climate change and reached the same conclusion.

But no amount of expert opinion is enough to convince the know-it-alls on Sky and 2GB and in the News Corp papers who argue tirelessly that climate change isn’t happening, or isn’t to blame, and/or this summer’s fires are nothing new:

*ALAN JONES: From Black Saturday in 2009 to Ash Wednesday in 1983, Black Tuesday in 1967, Black Friday in 1939, Black Thursday in 1851. Millions of hectares were burnt …*

*… let me assure you, this is a long way from our worst-ever fire season.*

- Jones & Credlin, Sky News, 28 January, 2020

*PETA CREDLIN: … tragic, yes. Unprecedented, sadly no.*

- Credlin, Sky News, 20 January, 2020

The argument that we’ve seen it all before was laid out in The Australian on New Year’s Eve, just before the fires went nuclear on the New South Wales South Coast.

And it is that grass fires across remote Australia in 74 -75 burnt a far larger area, while 2009’s Black Saturday fires in Victoria killed far more people.

But did either really match the impact of what we’ve seen this year?

Mass evacuations, homes and businesses destroyed, 1 billion animals dead, an area 1.5 times the size of Tasmania burnt to ashes, our big cities choking with smoke and fires still raging.

It’s no wonder the Australian Academy of Science concludes -- for reasons you can read on our website:

*The scale of these bushfires is unprecedented anywhere in the world.*

- Australian Academy of Science, 10 January, 2020

Meanwhile, fire ecologist David Bowman told Media Watch that the scale, reach, duration and impact of this season’s inferno makes it like no other:

*… there has never been a fire event that has affected the forested rim of Australia stretching down from southeast Queensland to NSW to Victoria, some parts of South Australia and parts of Western Australia and Tasmania ...*

- Phone interview, Professor David Bowman, University of Tasmania, 30 January, 2020

Once again most bushfire experts agree.

Yet once again, the News Corp choir insists it knows better:

*CHRIS KENNY: … climate change exaggeration, alarmism and hysteria ...*

- The Kenny Report, Sky News, 22 January, 2020

*PETA CREDLIN: … hysteria or worse ...*

- Credlin, Sky News, 20 January, 2020

*ALAN JONES: … hysteria …*

- Jones & Credlin, Sky News, 28 January, 2020

*ROWAN DEAN: … the loonies in the climate cult ...*

- Outsiders, Sky News, 26 January, 2020

*ANDREW BOLT: Lunatic stuff.*

- The Bolt Report, Sky News, 27 January, 2020

News Corp’s ridicule of climate science is not unprecedented.

And Media Watch has ripped into its columnists and reporters many times.

But it’s been so bad this summer that insiders have condemned it too, like Rupert Murdoch’s son James and his wife Kathryn, who issued this public statement three weeks ago:

*“Kathryn and James’ views on climate are well established and their frustration with some of the News Corp and Fox coverage of the topic is also well known,” …*

*“They are particularly disappointed with the ongoing denial among the news outlets in Australia given obvious evidence to the contrary.”*

- Daily Beast, 14 January, 2020

Note the word ‘denial’ coming from a Murdoch and director of News Corp. An extraordinary public rebuke.

So what was News Corp’s reaction?

Total silence. Until today, as far as we can see, the group’s Australian papers had not even mentioned it.

But Rupert’s son wasn’t the only one. A few days earlier, outgoing finance manager at The Australian, Emily Townsend, sent this damning email, in which she told News Corp chairman Michael Miller:

*“I find it unconscionable to continue working for this company, knowing I am contributing to the spread of climate change denial and lies. The reporting I have witnessed in the Australian, the Daily Telegraph and the Herald Sun is not only irresponsible, but dangerous and damaging to our communities …”*

- The Guardian, 10 January, 2020

Townsend received huge support from colleagues for taking that stand. We’ve seen several of the messages.

But Michael Miller responded in a statement that News does not ‘deny climate change’ or its threat, and is proud of its journalists and columnists:

*“Our coverage has recognised that Australia is having a serious conversation about climate change and how to respond to it. However, it has also reflected there are a variety of views and opinions about the current fire crisis.”*

- The Guardian, 10 January, 2020

But the main variety News has offered has been in new angles on denial. Such as this news story in The Australian -- featuring favourite sceptic Jennifer Marohasy -- claiming the weatherman is lying to us:

*Bureau of Meteorology ‘cooling the past to declare record heat’*

- The Australian, 20 December, 2019

Yes, seriously. The Australian is happy to suggest that the BOM is part of a huge conspiracy.

But if that was peak stupid, News Corp’s front-line columnists have offered more of the same. And with this line-up, who could be surprised?

Sky’s big stars, featured in this ad in the Telegraph, Peta Credlin, Andrew Bolt, Paul Murray, Chris Kenny, and Alan Jones spread a similar message on man-made global warming and they don’t mince their words:

*ANDREW BOLT: The bottom line, global warming may actually not be all bad, at all.*

- The Bolt Report, Sky News, 27 January, 2020

*ALAN JONES: … apparently now there’s a pile-on on Scott Morrison, it’s all his fault, and it’s climate change. I mean these people deserve to be buried. It’s just appalling.*

- Richo & Jones, Sky News, 29 January, 2020

All these Sky hosts also write columns for the News Corp papers where like-minded souls like Miranda Devine and Piers Akerman sing a similar tune.

Their key theme this summer has been to blame the fires on the Greens and lack of hazard reduction to reduce the fuel load.

And on Sky and 2GB Alan Jones has pushed that line too:

*ALAN JONES: There’s one reason above all others for the fire catastrophe. You can’t start a fire without fuel.*

- Jones & Credlin, Sky News, 28 January, 2020

Greater hazard reduction must certainly be looked at but New South Wales Rural Fire Chief Shane Fitzsimmons insists it’s no panacea and has said publicly that this year’s fires have been so fierce it would have hardly held them back:

*SHANE FITZSIMMONS: … hazard reduction has a place and is a valuable tool for day-to-day fires, for normal seasons, but when you’ve got a really tough season, when you’ve got awful fire-weather conditions, so when you’re running fires under severe, extreme or worse conditions, hazard reduction has very little effect at all....*

- ABC News Breakfast, 8 January, 2020

Another key argument sparked by a story in The Australian has been that arson is to blame:

*Firebugs fuelling crisis as arson arrest toll hits 183*

- The Australian, 7 January, 2020

That claim in early January, with the inferno at its height, was picked up by the Murdochs’ London Sun, tweeted in America by Donald Trump Jr, rehashed by the Murdochs’ Fox News star Sean Hannity on his website and promoted on Fox as the real cause of the fires:

*TOMI LAHREN: … So I hate to break it to the Greta Thunbergs of the world ...*

*...the fact of the matter is this: Australia has an arson problem you can’t pin on global warming, climate change, or whatever title you’re giving your environmental boogeyman these days.*

- Final Thought with Tomi Lahren, Fox Nation, 10 January, 2020

Arson is a part of the bushfire story, of course, but the key issue is not what started the fires but why they’ve burned so fiercely.

And The Australian’s figures were wrong, because not all of those 183 arrests were for arson. Many included offences like breaching a fire ban or tossing a cigarette.

And 43 of the arrests came before the bushfire season started.

But there was plenty more online.

Like this Facebook post from PragerU, a conservative American video producer, which used the original Australian article to claim that 200 arsonists had been arrested and that arson was responsible for 50 per cent of the fires.

Those claims were wrong and the video’s now been flagged as false by Facebook.

But not before it was seen by 2 million people.

So, who is PragerU? It was set up 11 years ago by a conservative talk-show host, with funding from two Texan, evangelical, fracking billionaires. It now spends millions of dollars a year to spread conservative information, or in this case misinformation.

But the arson beat up was not just on Facebook, it was also trending on Twitter where the hashtag #arsonemergency was being spread by an army of bots, as the BBC explains:

*ROS ATKINS: 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 and he concluded: ‘The conspiracy theories going around, (including arson as the main cause of the fires) reflect an increased distrust in expertise and scepticism in the media.*

- BBC Outside Source, 9 January, 2020

So who is commanding this bot army?

QUT’s Professor Tim Graham, told Media Watch there was no evidence of them being run by a single controller, but their aim was clear:

*… the evidence indicates that (fringe) right-wing accounts around the globe have ‘jumped on the bandwagon’ to push and promote the narrative of #ArsonEmergency to counter the #ClimateEmergency narrative.*

- Email, Professor Tim Graham, Queensland University of Technology, 23 January, 2020

So was arson actually responsible for any of the big fires?

On 9 January, Victorian Police said no:

*“… there is no intelligence to indicate that the fires in East Gippsland and north-east Victoria have been caused by arson or any other suspicious behaviour”...*

- The Age, 9 January, 2020

And 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 …*

- ABC News, 18 January, 2020

Adding:

*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

Despite that, The Australian’s firebug beat up remains on its website with the headline virtually unchanged.

But as the political storm over the fires continues, News Corp is perhaps showing small signs of movement.

After James Murdoch’s criticism, the NT News declared on its front page:

*Now is the time to discuss climate change.*

- NT News, 16 January, 2020

And a few days earlier, The Australian conceded in this editorial:

*More intense fires are an observed reality consistent with the predictions of climate change science.*

- The Weekend Australian, 11 January, 2020

And even Andrew Bolt has flirted with that idea, telling viewers last week:

*ANDREW BOLT: I can understand some people saying, ‘Oh look I think global warming did play a big role in these fires’. I don’t personally believe it, or I think the role is minor if anything, but I can believe it.*

- The Bolt Report, 29 January, 2020

Is that real change or just lip service? We’ll have to wait and see.

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.

January’s IPSOS Monitor also shows a huge spike in concern over the environment, with it showing as the most important issue for the first time ever.

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.

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

*We publish hundreds of columnists across multiple mastheads and magazines, websites and  television and other platforms. These represent a wide range of views, opinions and positions on a range of topics. You identify a handful of columnists to suit your own agenda. 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.*

- Email, News Corp Australia spokesperson, 3 February, 2020

We don’t suggest that for a moment.

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.

The Science Media Centre told Media Watch that having influential voices which do not reflect the science:

*… creates confusion, uncertainty and apathy among the public, even when the science is quite clear.*

- Email, The Australian Science Media Centre, 30 January, 2020

Rupert Murdoch assured shareholders last year there are no climate change deniers at News Corp.

But sadly, that is just not true.

And here in Australia its most strident voices show no sign of piping down.

30 January 2020 Statement from the Australian Science Media Centre (AusSMC): *“These sorts of comments highlight the difference between opinion and science. News reporting on climate change is often factual and accurate, but what people see in the daily news agenda is a combination of news reports alongside other influential voices, which often do not reflect the scientific evidence. This creates confusion, uncertainty and apathy among the public, even when the science is quite clear. Experts repeatedly tell us that in recent decades there has been an increase in the length and intensity of the fire weather across much of Australia, and that climate change is contributing to this change (https://www.csiro.au/en/Research/OandA/Areas/Assessing-our-climate/State-of-theClimate-2018/Report-at-a-glance). We encourage the media to ensure that their narrative reflects the best available evidence.”*

Statement to ABC TV’s Media Watch Program The Australian bushfires – why they are unprecedented:

*In a statement on the Australian bushfires published on 10 January 2020, the President of the Australian Academy of Science, Professor John Shine, stated that ‘the scale of these bushfires is unprecedented anywhere in the world’. Australia has extraordinarily high levels of biodiversity and is one of seventeen countries with ‘megadiversity’ of plant, insect and animal life. Of the more than 600,000 predicted species in Australia, only 30% have so far been discovered, documented and named. In terms of hectares burnt the Australian fires are the largest to affect any of the mega diverse countries i.e. larger than the 2019 Amazon and 2019 Californian fires. Fires of greater geographical extent have occurred in Australia in the past (e.g. fires in central Australia in 1974-75 covered over 100 million hectares). However, these fires burned largely the grasslands of inland Australia. Unlike forest fires these grassland fires are less intense and the ecosystems can more rapidly recover. Also, there is far lower economic impacts or loss of life because these fires occur in vast remote landscapes. Australian Academy of Science Fellow Professor Chris Dickman has estimated that Australia has lost at least a billion birds, mammals and reptiles this bushfire season. This figure does not include insects, bats, fish and frogs. Australia is at risk of losing a significant proportion of its biodiversity as a result of these bushfires and because much of Australia’s biodiversity occurs only here in Australia, it’s a global loss. On this biodiversity measure alone, the scale of these bushfires is unprecedented anywhere in the world. With many species residing in already burnt or threatened areas, the impact of the fires on species extinction will be ongoing after the bushfire season. The combination of a number of factors including: the intensity of the fires early in Australia’s fire season; current dry warm and windy conditions; unusual fire behaviour and the indirect and direct impact on Australia’s environment, including greenhouse gas emissions and severe air pollution across population centres, also make this fire unprecedented in Australia’s history. Media contact: - M 0488 766 010 | E media@science.org.au*

## Appendix 3[[27]](#endnote-27)

### Blunders, bias and beat-ups – what readers really think of the media.

And it’s not just social media that is to blame, to judge by a depressing report published last month:

*In media's 'Wild West', news consumers struggle to find truth, trust and transparency*

- The Sydney Morning Herald, 18 January, 2020

Yes, Australian journalism everywhere is biased and full of beat-ups, plus polluted with opinion and commercial influence.

That is according to a survey of some 2000 news consumers by the broadcast watchdog, the ACMA.

Now, that will come as no great surprise to fans of Media Watch, which regularly reveals how bad news and current affairs coverage can be.

From campaigning front pages like these:

*THE GREAT DIVIDER*

- The Daily Telegraph, 15 May, 2019

*SCOMO READY TO GO*

- The Courier-Mail, 11 April, 2019

To trashy tabloid telly like this:

*VOICEOVER: Scandal.*

*LIZZIE CUNDY: She wanted a celebrity boyfriend.*

*VOICEOVER: Abuse.*

*ANDREW MORTON: She’s been called a fiend and a monster.*

*VOICEOVER: And bloody lies.*

- 60 Minutes promo, Channel Nine, 4 September, 2019

But what is shocking about ACMA’s finding is how much trust has been lost as a result.

On impartiality, almost 90 per cent of responders to the survey — yes, 90 per cent — think news is made more dramatic and sensational to attract audiences, while some 85 per cent reckon news is reported with a particular point of view.

Key culprits in that, according to ACMA, are “celebrity” presenters on current affairs shows who have an opinion on everything — from climate protesters to sports stars:

*KERRI-ANNE KENNERLEY: Personally, I’d leave them all super-glued to wherever they do it.*

*… and you just put little witches’ hats around them or use them as a speed bump.*

- Studio 10, Channel Ten, 9 October, 2019

*PRUE MACSWEEN: He should have been slapped as a child. He’s a spoilt little Greek brat who’s probably being treated like a Prince …*

*He is a little creep and I'm sad to say he’s Australian.*

- Today Extra, Channel Nine, 17 May, 2019

And when it comes to the important divide between news and advertising, consumers can barely see the line at all.

Over the years, we’ve shown you plenty of examples of that. Like when cash from a retailer:

*VOICEOVER: This back-to-school segment brought to you by Officeworks.*

- Nine News Now, Channel Nine, 22 January, 2018

Buys you a story in the bulletin:

*KATE CREEDON: School is back and that means going shopping for all those back-to-school essentials...Lisa’s using Officeworks’ school list service ...*

- Nine News Now, Channel Nine, 22 January, 2018

Or when Today crosses to a far-flung tech reporter without disclosing his all-expenses-paid junket:

*GEORGIE GARDNER: Our tech expert Trevor Long is at Apple headquarters ...*

*KARL STEFANOVIC: Of course he is.*

*GEORGIE GARDNER: ... in California. Trev, good morning to you. There are two new flagship models. Tell us about the iPhone XS and XS Max.*

*KARL STEFANOVIC: Nice.*

- Today, Channel Nine, 14 September, 2018

ACMA’s findings are stark.

More than 80 per cent of audiences say news is influenced by large advertisers.

Seventy-seven per cent say news bulletins feature commercial content without properly disclosing it.

Seventy-six per cent say the media push companies they have a stake in.

And 65 per cent reckon freebies buy news time.

And journalists are again shown to be no more trustworthy than snake oil salesmen.

Some 83 per cent of respondents to ACMA’s survey believe journalists do not take enough care to check facts and report accurately.

These are staggering numbers.

But, to be fair, they don’t apply to all journalism — the nightly TV news bulletins, for example, are seen as trustworthy, and the ABC is praised by several respondents.

But it’s clear the worst of journalism — on TV, radio, online, print and social media — is tarnishing every brand.

Sacha Molitorisz, a former Sydney Morning Herald journalist who helped compile research for ACMA in his role at UTS’ Centre for Media Transition, told Media Watch:

*This new research is deeply concerning. We already knew that Australians have major trust issues with the news. But what this research shows is the depth of the concern among Australians about bias and commercial influence.*

- Email, Sacha Molitorisz, UTS Centre for Media Transition, 7 February, 2020

So, given that it is so bad, what is the TV and radio regulator going to do about it?

Well, not much, because its only real power — as we’ve often pointed out — is to enforce weak codes of practice drawn up by the broadcasters.

Which is perhaps why it’s publishing the report. In the hope of shaming the industry to get tougher on itself.

What’s the chance of that? Not much.

1. <https://www.thejadebeagle.com/tinpot.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yp_l5ntikaU>

Here is part of a script:

*‘There are ways of telling whether she is a witch.
- Are there? What are they? Tell us. - Do they hurt?
- Tell me, what do you do with witches?
- Burn them!
- And what do you burn, apart from witches?
- More witches! - Wood!
- So why do witches burn?
- 'Cause they're made of wood? - Good!
- How do we tell if she is made of wood? - Build a bridge out of her.
- But can you not also make bridges out of stone?
- Oh, yeah.
- Does wood sink in water?
- No, it floats. - Throw her into the pond!
- What also floats in water?
- Bread. - Apples.- Very small rocks. - Cider! Great gravy.- Cherries. Mud. - Churches.- Lead.*

*- A duck!
- Exactly. So, logically--
- If she weighs the same as a duck...- she's made of wood.
- And therefore?
- A witch!......’*

And the punchline:

*‘- Who are you, who are so wise in the ways of science?’* [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/episodes/news-corp-fire/11925590> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/about-us/our-districts/cudgegong/latest-news/2019-20-fire-season-starts-early-fire-permit-suspended> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. According to the NSW Rural Fire Service Commissioner:

*‘Climate change, Fitzsimmons says, has been a consideration in the Rural Fire Service’s planning for more than a decade and the business is underpinned by that thinking.’*

<https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/2019/11/02/nsw-rural-fire-services-shane-fitzsimmons/15726132009007>

And [https://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-10-17/climate-change-forcing-rethink-on-fire-risk:-bushfire-chief/5821386](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-10-17/climate-change-forcing-rethink-on-fire-risk%3A-bushfire-chief/5821386) [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. <https://ecos.csiro.au/climate-change-and-extreme-events-quantifying-the-changing-odds/?fbclid=IwAR1QMCd-IRroiiNFpAKZYURxzKHCdAn3816vVK3hKdeatn5Vsnn3sWOsdm4>

Confirmed in December by <https://ecos.csiro.au/a-dry-landscape-and-a-dire-season-we-explain-the-current-bushfire-environment/>

 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. <https://www.abc.net.au/cm/lb/11926140/data/aussmc-data.pdf>

<https://www.abc.net.au/cm/lb/11926146/data/aas-data.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. <https://www.science.org.au/news-and-events/news-and-media-releases/statement-regarding-australian-bushfires> [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. This included:

‘(Questioner) Ok, so the science is complex in this space, but clearly climate change is playing a role.

(Expert) *That’s right, there are many complexities here, but this shouldn’t distract us from some very clear and confident findings……our management makes a difference, but the climate is a fundamental determinant of the fire risk we face, and Australia’s climate is changing as seen in our observed temperature, rainfall record and the long-term trends’*

<https://ecos.csiro.au/bushfires-and-climate-change-qa/> [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. From the transcript:

*‘….Australia’s fire emergency has spread to five states and destroyed more than 630 homes...*

*So, what is the truth? And is it actually inconvenient for all those know-it-alls?*

*Well, it’s certainly true that fires have devastated Australia since time began. But the CSIRO, the Bureau of Meteorology, fire chiefs and climate scientists all tell us the fires are getting worse……*

*in 2004, the National Inquiry on Bushfire Management had warned ‘The projected hotter, drier, windier conditions associated with climate change caused by greenhouse warming would extend the period of fuel drying and increase rates of fire spread.’*

*And the latest advice from the CSIRO, updated this month, confirms that’s already happening and will get worse: ‘Over recent decades, we've seen an increase in the frequency and severity of fire weather in Australia. We predict that many regions will see a significant increase in the probability of the highest levels of fire danger in the years ahead.’* [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. See note v above [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. <https://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/episodes/fires/11736656> [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. For example, the program cited 3 commentators – 2 quotes were relevant and deserved criticism. The other was beside the point:

*PETA CREDLIN: So, let me deal with the issue head on. Does climate change cause these fires? No.*

In my view, Ms Credlin was wrong to dismiss climate change as among possible causes of the fires. Media Watch was right to criticise this comment.

*CHRIS KENNY: … So that’s the key. The drought. And if drought can’t be blamed on climate change you can’t blame the fires on climate change, especially when so many are deliberately lit ...*

In my view Mr Kenny was wrong. Even if climate change did not contribute to the drought – which is unknown – it may have contributed to the fires other than through other mechanisms. Media watch was right to criticise this comment.

*ALAN JONES: What’s burning in Victoria are eucalypts. What’s burning in South Australia are eucalypts ... When are we going to wake up and stop using this as an excuse to justify the climate change hoax?*

Media Watch’s use of this comment misleads from the two issues. Mr Jones’ view of a climate change ‘hoax’ does not appear to be widely shared among the scientific establishment. However, he is correct in inferring the mere fact of fires in Victoria and South Australia does not prove climate change. Media Watch’s criticism of Mr Jones for this statement was unjustified. It was so focussed on Mr Jones scepticism of climate change it missed his point about the fires. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. <https://johnmenadue.com/ramesh-thakur-australian-bushfires-its-not-always-about-climate-change-straits-times-24-12-19/> [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. From the Media Watch transcript:

*‘NEIL BIBBY: Bushfires are a symptom of climate change.*

That is an exaggeration.

*MIKE BROWN: I’ve had 39 years of Tasmanian Fire Service and I didn’t see too many dry lightning strikes earlier on in my career but now, and due to climate change, we’re seeing this as a regular event.’*

This does not establish any particular expertise and the statement is a mere assertion. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. From the Media Watch transcript:

*“Kathryn and James’ views on climate are well established and their frustration with some of the News Corp and Fox coverage of the topic is also well known,” …*

*“They are particularly disappointed with the ongoing denial among the news outlets in Australia given obvious evidence to the contrary.”*

Yet this refers to views rather than facts about climate. And the ‘obvious’ evidence, if it is intended to mean bushfires, is not obvious at this time to formal science. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/science/bureau-of-meteorology-cooling-the-past-to-declare-record-heat/news-story/9f40e780eaf267471b35fd851f24b3fe> [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. From the Media Watch transcript:

*News Corp’s front-line columnists have offered more of the same….. spread a similar message on man-made global warming and they don’t mince their words:*

*ALAN JONES: … apparently now there’s a pile-on on Scott Morrison, it’s all his fault, and it’s climate change. I mean these people deserve to be buried. It’s just appalling.*

 In this Mr Jones principle point was about a pile-on to Mr Morrison regarding blame for the bushfires. This is a point well made. It is far different to the ‘similar message’ claimed by Media Watch. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. In note xv above. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. For example <https://www.macarthuradvertiser.com.au/story/6596932/police-boost-to-uncover-nsw-bushfire-cause/?cs=9397> [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-01-15/is-arson-mostly-to-blame-for-the-bushfire-crisis/11865724>

<https://factcheck.afp.com/police-figures-show-far-fewer-people-australia-have-been-charged-bushfire-arson> [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. See note xx above. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. The Conversation: <https://theconversation.com/media-impartiality-on-climate-change-is-ethically-misguided-and-downright-dangerous-130778>

The article noted the Conversation and the Guardian refuse to publish climate change ‘denialism’ on the ground it is harmful. It claimed this is consistent with a position of John Stuart Mill:

*‘who was a robust advocate for free speech but drew the line at harm ‘[…] the only purpose for which power can be exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.’ It follows that editors may exercise the power of refusing to publish climate-denialist material if doing so prevents harm to others, without violating fundamental free-speech principles.”*

The claim appears extraordinary and the idea it does not impinge on free speech is absurd. For one thing, editors do not have ‘power’ over citizens, rather they have power over what is published, their relationships with employees etc. are covered by consensual contracts, and are not expressions of state power. Publications are entitled to publish what they like, however, if they exclude material ‘on-principle’ by labelling they are neither independent or unbiassed.

Galileo: the implications of an idea contained in his book, that earth moves around the sun, were damaging i.e. would cause harm to, the Church. His book was banned: see <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/horizon/sept98/galileo.htm>

Nuremburg:

*‘by reducing the seeming complexities…..to concepts with which the average citizen of a nation is acquainted ….warn him of the dangers inherent in a totalitarian police state, dominated by the philosophy that the ends justifies the means used to attain it.’*

<https://books.google.com.au/books?id=lV8TAQAAMAAJ&pg=PA70&lpg=PA70&dq=ends+justifies+the+means+nuremberg&source=bl&ots=ATKs6QkWNj&sig=ACfU3U3zqpi7XBYxhv1hlHwg_-KtlxNvxg&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiTqMDSs9fnAhXoxzgGHSB9BQUQ6AEwEXoECAkQAQ#v=onepage&q=ends%20justifies%20the%20means%20nuremberg&f=false>

The same issue arose in an article by Dr Rivka T Witenberg about ‘moral disengagement’ and the ‘sports rorts’ fiasco:

‘*According to the social psychologist Albert Bandura individuals can convince themselves that ethical standards do not apply to them under certain circumstances. There are situations where we can convince ourselves that ethical or moral standards do not apply in a particular situation or for specific individuals. This he calls moral disengagement where a person cognitively justifies and reconstructs unethical or immoral behaviour as moral and serving the greater good, imbuing them with moral purpose in order to make it socially or politically acceptable…… You can hear again and again Mr Morison and his parliamentary colleagues using justifications, where they reconstruct dishonest conduct as serving the greater good, restructuring unacceptable conduct into socially acceptable behaviour which serves a higher moral purpose.’*

 in <https://johnmenadue.com/rivka-t-witenberg-moral-disengagement-honesty-transparency-accountability-and-the-sports-rort/> [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. <https://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/episodes/acma/11951582> [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. <https://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/episodes/fires/11736656> [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. <https://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/episodes/news-corp-fire/11925590> [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. <https://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/episodes/acma/11951582> [↑](#endnote-ref-27)