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

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

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;[[3]](#endnote-3)
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.[[4]](#endnote-4)

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’.[[5]](#endnote-5)

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

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

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

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

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’.[[10]](#endnote-10)

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

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.

J Austen

18 February 2020

1. <https://www.thejadebeagle.com/tinpot.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/episodes/news-corp-fire/11925590> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <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-3)
4. <https://ecos.csiro.au/climate-change-and-extreme-events-quantifying-the-changing-odds/?fbclid=IwAR1QMCd-IRroiiNFpAKZYURxzKHCdAn3816vVK3hKdeatn5Vsnn3sWOsdm4> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. <https://johnmenadue.com/ramesh-thakur-australian-bushfires-its-not-always-about-climate-change-straits-times-24-12-19/> [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/science/bureau-of-meteorology-cooling-the-past-to-declare-record-heat/news-story/9f40e780eaf267471b35fd851f24b3fe> [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. For example <https://www.macarthuradvertiser.com.au/story/6596932/police-boost-to-uncover-nsw-bushfire-cause/?cs=9397> [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Misrepresent climate change [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. The Conversation: <https://theconversation.com/media-impartiality-on-climate-change-is-ethically-misguided-and-downright-dangerous-130778>

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> [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See Tinpot note (i) above, section 3.11. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. <https://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/episodes/acma/11951582> [↑](#endnote-ref-11)