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.