

Campaign Strategy Newsletter No 35, 14 October: Spin by Construction – or should the BBC tell the truth?

A politician who complains about the media, said the British MP Enoch Powell, is like a captain who complains about the sea. So should campaigners complain about the media? Generally not – in my view – but there are limits. In my opinion there is now a case for those in a position to do so, to press the BBC to change the way it is reporting climate change.

The day before US former Vice President Al Gore received his Nobel Peace Prize for his awareness raising on climate change, UK media led with the story that a High Court judge had backed a complaint that Mr Gore's campaigning video *The Inconvenient Truth* contained 'nine errors'. As a result, the Judge ruled that the UK Government which (perhaps foolishly) had backed distribution of the film to schools, ought to issue new guidance putting, as the BBC put it [1], 'the other side of the argument'.

That night it fell to the BBC's Environmental Analyst Roger Harrabin to front a report about the ruling, including an extract of a previous report in which he too questioned Gore about one assertion in the film (the meaning of CO₂-temperature graphs). Harrabin's own view on this is posted in a subsequent story that's well worth reading, on the BBC website [2]. Harrabin says he felt a 'flutter of unease' when he first saw the Gore film because its inclusion of contentious material left it open to just such an attack.

In short, *The Inconvenient Truth* does have some errors or arguable assertions but its core argument is right. A UK MP put it to me the day afterwards that the detail of the Judge's ruling will "do more than anything else" to confirm that on four central points Gore was right about global warming. The problem is that very few people will read the ruling, or see the detail, whereas the reports of Gore's film being found wanting by a judge will be read as Gore being found "wrong".

BBC reporting not truthful

An aside in the BBC story about the case mentioned that the case had been triggered by Mr Stewart Dimmock, a school governor who was a member of the 'New Party'. When I looked up the New Party on Google I quickly found what presumably many politicians know but very few teachers or viewers of the BBC will know, that the 'New Party' is a fringe political party funded by a very rich businessman who has been campaigning against environmentalists (as well as drunk-driving laws and various other social restriction), and climate change campaigns in particular, since the 1990s.

So in terms of what viewers will understand – what they will see as truth – there are two problems here.

First, they may see it as evidence that Gore was wrong and possibly that climate change is not a threat. By kicking its criticism into a court of law, with a formulaic framing of a decision on 'right' or 'wrong', the New Party campaigners succeeded in marking Gore as "wrong" overall.

Second, viewers may see it as 'a school governor' – ie representing 'education' – opposing Gore's influence in schools. Whereas in fact it was a political campaign tactic. So in both these respects, the BBC's reporting of the High Court hearing was not truthful, in that it told less than the truth, and arguably, (as could be measured by what people "took from it"), may have reversed the truth.

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No doubt every word the BBC used was accurate and truthful – the problem is that the construction of the story, the meaning of the players, the actors, even the role of the BBC itself, created a different meaning. It failed to tell a truthful tale, to give a true picture.

Campaigners will recognize this, after all, much campaigning consists of introducing messengers or propositions or change contexts. But campaigning organisations are recognized and treated as such in the media – in this case Mr Dimmock was not – he was effectively portrayed as an ‘innocent’ member of the public, thereby inviting viewers to identify with him.

Of course is it not only NGO campaigners who try to get across meaning, influence people, outcomes and events by construction – spin by construction is the stuff of much PR and the techniques of modern politics. The techniques perfected by dog-whistle kennelmeister Frank Luntz and wedgemeister Karl Rove are far more manipulative than anything that campaigners generally get up to. When Luntz talks of ‘words that work’ he describes a process which often involves reformatting political propositions to mesh with gut prejudices.

BBC not telling the truth about the scientific consensus

On the climate issue, many observers have criticised the media for mis-constructing stories by pitching one advocate of change against one opponent of change: ie misleading ‘balance’.

Because the issue is generally framed by reference to ‘science’, this ‘balance’ implies that the ‘argument is unresolved’, the debate continues, climate change may not be happening, and so on. Roger Harrabin himself points out that a recent UK poll found high concern about climate change coupled with a wrong belief that climate scientists were still ‘split’, whereas in truth there is an overwhelming consensus that it is real. In the case of climate, this consensus is laboriously codified and institutionalised via the workings of the IPCC, the co-recipient of the Gore Nobel Prize. On TV news Harrabin pointed this out but his comment was framed in a construction which said something else. As George Lakoff has repeatedly demonstrated [3], this means that Harrabin’s explanatory words will be simply discarded as they don’t fit the frame.

So here’s a charge against the BBC which I think sticks: they are not telling the truth about the scientific consensus on climate change, because they are not constructing their news stories in a way which shows this consensus.

Of course the BBC has many times reported the strength of the consensus but then it goes on to run stories which are framed and constructed in ways which deny the consensus, and, as I tried to detail in the report *Sustaining Disbelief* discussed in the last issue of this newsletter, that in turn can have a real effect in stymieing action on climate change.

The BBC-Gore case is one where there are stories within stories as complex as any Shakespearean plot. Roger Harrabin himself has probably done more than anyone else to educate the BBC, its executives, journalists and managers, about the realities of climate change and the science. So far as I know, little of that has ever featured in the media but he deserves some sort of prize for it himself. Yet now he finds himself as one

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of the organisation's key interpreters of the issue, at a time when the BBC has made a high profile retreat from being an advocate of action on climate change.

BBC lacks clear editorial line

Unlike the privately owned Sky which has adopted an editorial line in favour of action against climate change, the BBC first became the best informed broadcaster handling the issue, then planned to run 'planet relief', a climate advocacy telethon, and has now retreated [4] to a position where it treats climate change as a contentious issue to be reported on from a distance. The problem for anyone who cares about trying to change how we live and run our economy so that we stand a real chance of curbing climate change, is that the BBC is now, perhaps inadvertently, providing a subsidised theatre for climate sceptic campaigning. This might not matter so much if the BBC had a clear editorial line on climate change itself but unlike newspapers, or even Murdoch's Sky, it does not.

Its editors certainly have views, and these must influence their decisions. For example as reported by John Plunkett in *The Guardian*:

'Asked whether the BBC should campaign on issues such as climate change, Mr. Horrocks [BBC TV News editor] told a session at the [Edinburgh] TV festival: "I absolutely don't think we should do that because it's not impartial. It's not our job to lead people and proselytize about it."

[Peter] Barron [editor of the flagship news programme Newsnight] added: "It is absolutely not the BBC's job to save the planet. I think there are a lot of people who think that, but it must be stopped."

Planet Relief would have given implicit if not explicit BBC endorsement to action on climate change. This is the position adopted by Sky, and all the many corporations who in their Corporate Social Responsibility programmes align themselves with action to cut their 'carbon footprint' or even overtly support political action to limit emissions by statute. They all agree it is part of 'their job to save the planet'. The BBC however denies this responsibility. If like Al Gore you see climate change as not even a political but a moral issue, then the BBC's position is more than strange.

As a 'public interest broadcaster' the BBC should at least explain its editorial view. By choosing which stories to run, how to frame them, and deciding who appears and does not appear, the BBC has a massive influence on the meaning, 'message' and 'truth' of a story even before a reporter speaks any words or an editor does any 'editing'. It cannot credibly pretend that its broadcasts are simply an objective window on the world and that any meaning they contain is assigned in the mind of the viewer.

On his blog for example [5], BBC TV News Editor Peter Horrocks wrote after Edinburgh that "there is an increasingly strong (although not overwhelming) weight of scientific opinion in favour of the proposition that climate change is happening and is being largely caused by man."

This 'not overwhelming' caveat is presumably what the BBC relies upon to give prominence, and often equal voice, to 'climate sceptics' as to those representing the 'orthodoxy' that climate change is real and we ought to take action to cut emissions.

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Having read this I wrote to Peter Horrocks pointing out that the IPCC says [6] in its Fourth Assessment Report that it has 'very high confidence that the global average net effect of human activities since 1750 has been one of warming'.

I asked him "Could you let me know if you still feel the same way ? ie that the weight of scientific opinion is not overwhelming ?" I have not yet had a reply.

Failure to explain politics

The BBC could adopt a clear editorial position that conclusive evidence was not in, and therefore the public interest was best served by continuing a debate on this basis. That would explain the prominence it gives to climate sceptics. Then we would know where we stand. It would of course find itself in a bit of a debate with the thousands of climate scientists who contribute to the IPCC but that would be the BBC's problem.

Or, it could organise its coverage to show the reality of the position which the climate sceptics occupy in relation to the science. Where would such programming fit ? It could be in fringe politics – similar to the coverage given by the BBC to parties such as the British National Party for example. Or it could be in a science strand, perhaps with a similar treatment to scepticism over tobacco causing cancer ? Or in programming about campaigns and social movements such as fringe religions. This is how the UK Government should now be pressed to treat the attack on the Gore movie – as an example to school children of how the media becomes involved in campaigns for attention and contested truths, not simply about 'science'.

The BBC's current position effectively creates an equal weight platform for the climate sceptics every time there is any news about climate change. This does not reflect the reality of the science, the consensus over the science, or the conclusions which politicians, NGOs and others have come to after informing themselves about the science. But it invites the viewers to see 'the truth of the issue' as 'equally balanced'. Tom Burke, an advisor to major corporations and a former director of Friends of the Earth commented recently:

"There is a bizarre notion of balance that is applied asymmetrically by broadcasters to this issue. Imagine a world in which the BBC or other broadcasters insisted that any explanation of how the global economy works should have a Marxist viewpoint as well as a capitalist perspective in order to preserve balance. There are about as many Marxist economists left as there are climate science sceptics so why are we not hearing from them when Evan Davies [BBC economics editor] speaks from a straight down the line, mixed-economy, OECD approved orthodoxy. Or, indeed, why do we not hear more from the Ayn Rand school of Objectivist economic theory – this view may have even more adherents than the climate sceptics but no-one thinks we should present it as part of a balanced view of the economy."

"The fact is that we have an infotainment industry where we used to have a free press. Ayn Rand and Karl Marx aren't news any more. Climate change is."

It's up to broadcasters what position they adopt. They can take the CSR view like Sky. That can mean you advocate action while reporting on those against it. Right now the BBC effectively lies further towards the 'sceptics' than the likes of BP, Marks and Spencer, Wal-Mart or Shell.

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Or they can take the interpreter-of-reality position, the ‘mission to explain’, once adopted by various broadcasters, emphasising understanding, not just reporters reporting what they ‘find’, or find put in front of them. In my view the present BBC position which makes ‘impartiality’ the cornerstone of its mission is causing it problems over climate change because it is failing to explain – not failing to explain the physics or chemistry of climate change but failing to explain its politics, including the politics which it is part of. It is allowing people to play politics with the science and becoming party to that itself by the prominence that it gives to fringe climate politicians, elected or unelected.

Another position would be to say we are at war – and that in conditions of war, the public interest changes. There are many who believe we should be at war with climate change, and that until we are better organised, we will lose. The BBC of course has, like other sections of the media, adjusted its procedures in times of war. Strangely enough the BBC is now somewhat to the sceptical side of the UK Government, which has at least declared a phoney war on climate change, even if it’s not doing much about it.

The magazine *New Scientist* can afford to take a more intellectually rarefied position – given its readership. A recent *New Scientist* editorial deplored the campaigning interventions of climate sceptic organisations disguised as contributions to science but concluded that we need climate scepticism: ‘No one wants to silence sceptics: we need scepticism. We just wish they were better at it’ [7]. Given its position, the BBC cannot afford to take such a sanguine view and still serve the public interest.

Nor is there any longer, if there ever was, any clear distinction between the roles of media and politics. As Tom Burke comments: “We used to live in a world in which politicians made the news and journalists reported it, now we live a world in which journalists make the policies and politicians repeat them.”

So what should climate campaigners do about the BBC ? Generally it is a very bad idea to pick an argument with the media: a pissing match with a skunk. It’s also not as if these issues aren’t debated by journalists, so there’s no shortage of ‘ideas’ but in my view at least, given the seriousness of climate change, the power of the media, and the urgency of doing something effective about it, the BBC should not be allowed to behave as if its own actions have so little impact.

At the very least, the BBC should have its own explicit editorial line on climate change – broadcast on air, where it might register with viewers. That might be a reasonable demand for campaigners to make.

Postscript: as of 14 October it is reported that the campaigners who helped fund the High Court challenge over the Gore movie are now proposing to circulate an ‘alternative view’ video to every school in the UK. Jonathan Leake reports in *The Sunday Times* [8]:
‘The distribution of *The Great Global Warming Swindle* is being funded by Viscount Monckton, who is part of a counter-campaign to undermine the scientific consensus on climate change. Monckton was one of the backers of Stewart Dimmock, the Kent lorry driver and school governor who took the government to court for sending copies of Gore’s film to schools. The two are connected through the New party, a right-wing group whose manifesto was written by Monckton and of which Dimmock is a member. ... Monckton has obtained funding from a right-wing Washington think tank, the Science and Public Policy Institute (SPPI), to create a second film that will also be sent to schools. Entitled *Apocalypse No*, it parodies Gore, showing Monckton presenting a slide show in a vitriolic attack on climate change science.’

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- [1] Gore climate film's 'nine errors' <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/education/7037671.stm>
- [2] The heat and light in global warming <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/7040370.stm>
- [3] See his online material and *Don't Think of An Elephant*, pub. Chelsea Green
- [4] BBC drops climate change special, John Plunkett, The Guardian, September 5, 2007
- [5] http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors/peter_horrocks/
- [6] IPCC, 2007: Summary for Policymakers. In: Climate Change 2007: The Physical Science Basis. Contribution of Working Group I to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [Solomon, S., D. Qin, M. Manning, Z. Chen, M. Marquis, K.B. Averyt, M.Tignor and H.L. Miller (eds.)]. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, United Kingdom and New York, NY, USA. "The understanding of anthropogenic warming and cooling influences on climate has improved since the TAR, leading to very high confidence that the global average net effect of human activities since 1750 has been one of warming, with a radiative forcing of +1.6 [+0.6 to +2.4] W m⁻² (see Figure SPM.2). {2.3., 6.5, 2.9}"
- [7] *Climate change sceptics employ dubious tactics*, <http://www.newscientist.com> 06-10-2007
- [8] Please, sir - Gore's got warming wrong, Jonathan Leake, Sunday Times 14 October 2007, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/education/article2652851.ece>

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