

To: The BBC Trustees

22nd January 2009 (as email attachment)

Dear Sirs

I wish to make a formal complaint about a report by Susan Watts which was broadcast in the 20th Jan 2009 edition of Newsnight at approximately 22:40 mins into the programme. As this matter concerns impartiality, I am referring it to the BBC Trustees.

Susan Watts' report began with the following 'sound bite' from President Obama's inaugural speech:

We will restore science to its rightful place, [and] roll back the spectre of a warming planet. We will harness the sun and the winds and the soil to fuel our cars and run our factories.

Susan Watts then said:

President Obama couldn't have been clearer today. And for most scientists his vote of confidence would not have come a moment too soon.

In the eight years of the Bush presidency, the world saw Arctic ice caps shrink to a record summer low, the relentless rise of greenhouse gas emissions, and warnings from scientists shift from urgent to panicky.

The 'sound bite' referred to has apparently been created by merging clips from three different parts of the inaugural speech in the following way: the first part of a sentence in paragraph 16 has been joined to the last part of a sentence taken from paragraph 22, and then a sentence from a different part of paragraph 16 has been added. Therefor when Susan Watts said, 'President Obama couldn't have been clearer today', she was not referring to anything that the President had actually said in his speech, but to an ersatz concoction of phrases.

These are the paragraphs that have been used to create the 'sound bite', taken from the complete text published of the inaugural speech on The Independent's website (see link below)

Paragraph 16

For everywhere we look, there is work to be done. The state of the economy calls for action, bold and swift, and we will act – not only to create new jobs, but to lay a new foundation for growth. We will build the roads and bridges, the electric grids and digital lines that feed our commerce and bind us together. **We will restore science to its rightful place**, and wield technology's wonders to raise health care's quality and lower its cost. **We will harness the sun and the winds and the soil to fuel our cars and run our factories.** And we will transform our schools and colleges and universities to meet the demands of a new age. All this we can do. And all this we will do. *[My emphasis]*

Paragraph 22

We are the keepers of this legacy. Guided by these principles once more, we can meet those new threats that demand even greater effort – even greater cooperation and understanding between nations. We will begin to responsibly leave Iraq to its people,

and forge a hard-earned peace in Afghanistan. With old friends and former foes, we will work tirelessly to lessen the nuclear threat, **and roll back the spectre of a warming planet.** We will not apologise for our way of life, nor will we waver in its defense, and for those who seek to advance their aims by inducing terror and slaughtering innocents, we say to you now that our spirit is stronger and cannot be broken; you cannot outlast us, and we will defeat you. *[My emphasis]*

At no point in his speech did President Obama say:

We will restore science to its rightful place, [and] roll back the spectre of a warming planet. We will harness the sun and the winds and the soil to fuel our cars and run our factories.

By using this ‘sound bite’, the BBC has deceived viewers into thinking that this was an authentic quotation from the inaugural speech, whereas it has apparently been concocted digitally. Viewers were misled into thinking that the president had said something that he did not in fact say. Susan Watts then goes on to use this concocted version of the president’s words to substantiate the arguments in her report.

The authors of the inaugural speech would be aware that it would become an historic document from the moment that it was delivered, alongside the inaugural speeches of forty-three preceding presidents, but with the added distinction of being delivered by the first black president. They would also be aware that every word and nuance would be weighted and analysed worldwide. There can be no doubt that what was said in this speech was precisely what the president intended should be said, and expressed in precisely the way that he intended.

I can think of no justification for amalgamating fragments of the speech so that they appear to be an authentic representation of what the president said and, by so doing, putting the BBC’s version of something that he might have said into his mouth. This does not, in my view, conform to the standards of accurate reporting and impartiality that are required of the BBC, and would appear to be a premeditated act of deception.

I would like to know whether the BBC Trustees consider that this Newsnight report conforms with the guidelines which determine the presentation of news and current affairs at the BBC, and also request that a correction or explanation, together with an apology, is broadcast in a future edition of Newsnight.

I look forward to hearing from you.