

Submission to the Review of Impartiality and Accuracy of the BBC's Coverage of Science

From

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Background

- 1) During the last five years, anthropogenic global warming has occupied an increasingly important place in UK public policy and international politics. It is inevitable and appropriate that the BBC should have devoted considerable time and effort to covering this topic. It is acknowledged that this is a complex, highly charged, and polarised subject, and that maintaining impartiality and accuracy while reporting on the scientific evidence of anthropogenic global warming presents very real challenges. Nothing in this submission should be interpreted as suggesting that the BBC's task has been an easy one. However no difficulties the Corporation has faced in this respect absolve it from the legal obligations imposed by *The Charter*, *The Agreement with the Secretary of State for Culture Media and Sport (2006)* or the *Communications Act (2003)*.

Where there have been failings, it is essential that these should be publicly identified by the current review, their consequences addressed and where necessary rectified. Only by this process can the BBC's reputation be maintained.

- 2) The BBC Governors' report *From Seesaw to Wagon Wheel, Safeguarding Impartiality in the 21st Century*, which was formally adopted and published by the BBC Trustees in June 2007, is unequivocal about the importance it attaches to impartiality:

Impartiality should define the BBC brand...It is the foundation of its reputation around the world. In the ever greater fragmentation of the media kaleidoscope, broadcasters may struggle to maintain their distinct identity. This is not the moment for the BBC to compromise its brand. (Page 28)

The report also stresses that '*Impartiality is a process, about which the BBC should be honest and transparent with its audience*':

It is true that impartiality always used to be discussed behind closed doors at Broadcasting House and Television Centre...The reality is that you can't close the doors any more. Information has proliferated so fast in our broadband culture that audiences know almost as much about the decision-making process as the broadcasters. (Page 74)

If this was the case in 2007, then it is even more so now. The influence of blogs has greatly increased in the last three years, and so has the mainstream media's willingness to report stories originating in the blogosphere.

- 3) Major political action in the UK relating to anthropogenic global warming (AGW) can be dated to autumn 2004. At that time, the then Government Chief Scientific Adviser, Sir David King, persuaded prime minister Tony Blair that action on global warming should be a leading initiative during the prime minister's chairmanship of the G8 in the following year. As a result, a major conference entitled *Avoiding Dangerous Climate Change* was hastily arranged by Stephen Byers (former Transport Minister) at the Hadley Centre, Exeter, in the following February, to raise awareness of the problem in the UK. Although the prime minister's call for action on climate change during the July meeting of the G8 at Gleneagles was eclipsed by the London bombings, the decision to make global warming a priority in public policy had been taken, and far-reaching initiatives were launched throughout government.
- 4) The main problem facing government and policymakers was convincing the public that concern about anthropogenic global warming was well founded, and not just another scare story that would soon be forgotten. The *Climate Change Communications Working Group* (DEFRA, EST, UKCIP, Env. Agency, DTI, Carbon Trust) was set up, and in February 2005 received a *Short List of Recommendations* from Futerra, an environmental PR consultancy, on the means of conveying the required message to the media and the public. In August 2006, the IPPR produced a thirty-page report entitled *Warm Words: How are we telling the climate story and can we tell it better?* which developed Futerra's recommendations. This concluded that:

Many of the existing approaches to climate change communications clearly seem unproductive. And it is not enough simply to produce yet more messages, based on rational argument and top-down persuasion, aimed at convincing people of the reality of climate change and urging them to act. Instead, we need to work in a more shrewd and contemporary way, using subtle techniques of engagement.

To help address the chaotic nature of the climate change discourse in the UK today, interested agencies now need to treat the argument as having been won, *at least for popular communications*. This means simply *behaving as if climate change exists and is real*, and that individual actions are effective. The 'facts' need to be treated as being so taken-for-granted that they need not be spoken. (*emphasis added*)

Henceforth, communications from all government departments followed this template, which greatly influenced the way in which the UK media reported climate change.

(It is worth noting that this document, and the policy it instigated, predates the publication in 2007 of the IPCC's *Fourth Assessment Report*)

- 5) The government's climate change message was reinforced by Lord May of Oxford (Government Chief Scientific Adviser 1995-2000, president of the Royal Society 2000-05) who claimed that the science of climate change was settled and that the debate was over for all rational people, a position from which the Royal Society has since resiled.

- 6) By February 2007, *Newsnight* presenter Jeremy Paxman had this to say about the BBC's impartiality on the science of climate change:

I have neither the learning nor the experience to know whether the doomsayers are right about the human causes of climate change. But I am willing to acknowledge that people who know a lot more than I do may be right when they claim that it is the consequence of our own behaviour.

I assume that this is why the BBC's coverage of the issue abandoned the pretence of impartiality long ago.¹

Where did things go wrong in the BBC's coverage of climate science?

BBC Climate Change Seminar

- 7) In January 2006, the BBC held a seminar at Television Centre entitled *Climate Change – the Challenge to Broadcasting*, which was made up of '30 key BBC staff' and '30 invited guests'. The seminar was hosted by Jana Bennett and Helen Boaden, and chaired by Fergal Keane. The 'key speaker' was Lord May of Oxford, and the purpose of the seminar was described as:

- To offer a clear summary of the state of knowledge on the issue.
- To find where the main debates lie.
- To invoke imagination to allow the media to deal with the scope of the issue.
- To consider the BBC's role in public debate.

(Letter from the BBC 21st August 2007)

- 8) Although Lord May is unquestionably a distinguished scientist, he is not a climate scientist, and he has been a dedicated and vociferous environmental activist throughout his career. In recent years he has expressed strong opinions on global warming. He has been a trustee of the *World Wildlife Fund* – a leading environmental pressure group – and during his presidency of the Royal Society an attempt was made to disrupt funding to climate sceptics². It would not be reasonable to suppose that Lord May could provide the seminar with either an authoritative or impartial assessment of the current state of the scientific evidence supporting the AGW hypothesis.
- 9) This event was referred to in a major report on impartiality, *From Seesaw to Wagon Wheel, Safeguarding Impartiality in the 21st Century*, commissioned by the BBC Board of Governors and published by its successor, the BBC Trust, in June 2007

¹ [Jeremy Paxman, Newsnight Homepage](http://www.bbc.com/news/health-12345678) 02/02/2007

² The Guardian, 24th April 2006
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2006/apr/21/greenpolitics.environment>

The BBC has held a high-level seminar with some of the best scientific experts, and has come to the view that the weight of evidence no longer justifies equal space being given to the opponents of the consensus. (Page 40)

There is abundant evidence that this is not an accurate description of the seminar.

- 10) A submission to the Information Tribunal from the BBC Litigation Department (10th May 2010) describes the seminar as follows:

33. The requested information concerns the organisation, administration and content of a seminar concerning editorial challenges to the reporting of climate change. The seminar was held in order to provide attendees with an understanding of the existing state of knowledge on the issue of climate change, to identify where the main areas of debate lie, to provoke the imagination of the media to deal with the scope of the issue and to consider the role of the BBC in the public debate.

34. Essentially, the requested information consisted of information held by the BBC in connection with a seminar hosted by the BBC for the benefit of its editorial and journalistic staff to enhance knowledge and understanding of a key issue on the global news agenda, and to give editorial consideration to how that issue should be presented by the BBC in its journalism, in accordance with the BBC's obligations of accuracy and impartiality. Accordingly, the requested information was held by the BBC in the context of determining the BBC's editorial policy in order to contribute to and improve future programming, and as such is held for the purpose of journalism.

- 11) An email from Jana Bennett (Director of Television) to Professor John Naughton of Wolfson College and the Open University, shows that the deliberations at the seminar carried through into programme making. (30th April 2008, Obtained from Wolfson College under the Freedom of Information Act)

Past seminars have had enormously positive feedback, inspiring major programme seasons on the BBC: Africa in 2005, Climate Change in 2006 and last year's season on India & Pakistan, as well as other diverse individual projects. That said, the meetings are not about pitching ideas – they are about making space for fresh thinking about the way the world is, and how it might be represented more richly.

...

The seminars are organised jointly by the International Broadcasting Trust and the Cambridge Media & Environment Programme, in collaboration with BBC Television and BBC News.

- 12) The seminar clearly played an important part in BBC thinking at a time when climate change was becoming a major matter relating to current public policy and was beginning to receive prominent media coverage. As noted above, the BBC Trust described the invited guests as 'the best scientific experts'. This implies that they were selected to provide 'key BBC staff' with accurate and impartial information on

the state of the climate debate.

There is compelling evidence, however, that this was not the case and that those who attended were not in a position to offer an authoritative and impartial briefing on 'the existing state of knowledge on the issue of climate change'. It is also clear from 10 and 11 above that the seminar had a far-reaching impact on editorial policy.

- 13) Writing in *The Sunday Times* in January 2008, columnist Rachel Johnson describes an encounter with Andrew Simms, a leading environmental activist³, at the launch party for a book he had written with Dr Joe Smith, co-director with Roger Harrabin of the Cambridge Media and Environment Programme (CMEP), which organised the seminar:

'...I asked Andrew Simms when he thought that the greens finally started preaching to the choir.

'Well, I thought that the piece Susie Watt [sic] did for Newsnight last week, questioning whether economic growth is good, was a real marker,' he said, 'But I think the real conversion took place about 18 months ago ... when I was asked to attend a BBC seminar on climate change, and Fergal Keane was there.'⁴

Although Mr Simms' recollection of the date of the seminar is incorrect, the letter from the BBC (see 7 above) confirms that the seminar in question was chaired by Fergal Keane so there can be no doubt that he was referring to the January 2006 seminar.

Mr Simms reference to 'the real conversion' indicates that he was in no doubt about the radical impact that the seminar had on the BBC's attitude to climate change.

- 14) One of the invited guests at the seminar, the journalist Richard D North, has given an account of the seminar participants as follows:

I found the seminar frankly shocking. The BBC crew (senior executives from every branch of the corporation) were matched by an equal number of specialists, almost all (and maybe all) of whom could be said to have come from the 'we must support Kyoto' school of climate change activists.

So far as I can recall I was alone in being a climate change sceptic (nothing like a denier, by the way) on both the science and policy response.

I was frankly appalled by the level of ignorance of the issue which the BBC people showed. I mean that I heard nothing that made me think any of them read any broadsheet newspaper coverage of the topic (except maybe the Guardian and that lazily). Though they purported to be aware that this was an immensely important topic, it seemed to me that none of them had shown even a modicum of professional journalistic curiosity on the subject. I am not saying that I knew what they all knew or thought, but I can say that I

³ Andrew Simms is Policy Director and Head of Climate Change and Energy at the New Economics Foundation. In 2008 co-authored a book *Do Good Lives Have to Cost the Earth?* with Dr Joe Smith who is co-director of CMEP <http://www.neweconomics.org/about/andrew-simms>

⁴ http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/rachel_johnson/article3255912.ece

spent the day discussing the issue and don't recall anyone showing any sign of having read anything serious at all.⁵

If the 'key BBC staff' present were ill informed about climate change, which appears to be the case, and the '30 invited guests' were activists, and not 'the best scientific experts', then it would seem most unlikely that this seminar could serve the purpose of ensuring impartial and accurate coverage of climate change.

- 15) The account of Richard D North is confirmed by a well-placed source within the BBC who also attended the seminar. This source, who would only speak off the record, stated that the majority of attendees, other than Lord May, were not scientists.
- 16) On their website, the International Broadcasting Trust (IBT), who were joint organisers of the seminar with CMEP (see 11 above), describe the guests at the seminar neither as scientific experts, nor even as 'specialists in the area of climate change', but as 'policy experts'.⁶

The IBT describes its mission as 'lobbying Government, regulators and broadcasters'⁷ as well as 'dialogue with the main public service broadcasters'. They have represented Friends of the Earth, Christian Aid, Oxfam and Tearfund,⁸ all of which have played a high profile role in climate change activism. It is highly questionable whether an environmental lobby group would have had the expertise, or the motivation, to arrange a seminar of impartial scientific experts on this subject.

BBC management have modified the Trust's description of the seminar participants as 'the best scientific experts'. In a letter from the BBC to one of us (see 7 above) the attendees are cautiously described only as 'specialists in the area of climate change'.

- 17) An application made to the BBC under the Freedom of Information Act, in July 2007, for the names of the guests who attended the seminar was refused. This decision is the subject of litigation before the Information Tribunal, which is presently stayed pending the outcome of a request to the Supreme Court for clarification of the law concerning exemptions to the FOIA that the BBC has relied on in refusing this, and other requests, for information.
- 18) We have provided compelling evidence that the BBC Trust's description of the seminar participants was misleading. It is apparent that the seminar did not provide BBC staff with access to the views of the 'best scientific experts' in order to obtain '...a clear summary of the state of knowledge on the issue [of climate science]' or 'to find out where the main debates lie'. Instead, editorial policy appears to have been influenced by the opinions of NGO activists and the public was seriously misled by the BBC Trust's report on impartiality.

⁵ Harmless Sky blog <http://ccgi.newbery1.plus.com/blog/?p=142>

⁶ The IBT, joint organisers of the seminar: [http://www.ibt.org.uk/all_documents/dialogue/Real World Brainstorm update 30Jul08.pdf](http://www.ibt.org.uk/all_documents/dialogue/Real%20World%20Brainstorm%20update%2030Jul08.pdf)

⁷ http://www.ibt.org.uk/about_us.php

⁸ [http://www.ibt.org.uk/all_documents/Submissions Key/to Ofcom re Children%27s TV 20Dec07.pdf](http://www.ibt.org.uk/all_documents/Submissions%20Key%20to%20Ofcom%20re%20Children%27s%20TV%2020Dec07.pdf)

The BBC and the Cambridge Media and Environment Programme (CMEP)

- 19) The Cambridge Media and Environment Programme (CMEP) is apparently a private unincorporated association between the BBC's environment analyst, Roger Harrabin, and a geography lecturer and environmental activist from the Open University, Dr Joe Smith.

- 20) Roger Harrabin has described CMEP's aims in the Wolfson College Magazine.⁹

We...formed the Cambridge Media and Environment Programme with public and private funding to continue challenging the media to find ways of making news out of long-term, slow-moving environmental change. The seminars programme is still running under the auspices of John Naughton and the Wolfson Press Fellowship Programme and has attracted many of the UK's most influential journalists

Interestingly, Wolfson College have denied that they have any involvement with CMEP. A FOI application for information on their involvement received the following response:

We're not sure why Roger Harrabin would have written this. The idea may have been mooted, but certainly never followed through. So I can now confirm...that Wolfson College does not, nor has had, a relationship with the Cambridge Media and Environment Programme (CMEP).¹⁰

- 21) The BBC's Head of Editorial Compliance has stated that Roger Harrabin's involvement in CMEP forms a part of his BBC role. In a letter to one of us, it was stated that:

Roger [Harrabin] and Dr Smith co-directed the early seminars. *Roger undertook this entirely as part of his BBC work.* He has been made an Honorary Associate Press Fellow at Wolfson College, Cambridge, in recognition of his work.' (emphasis added)

- 22) As noted in Roger Harrabin's Wolfson College Magazine article, CMEP has been funded by a mixture of private and public sector bodies. It is of considerable concern to note that these bodies include:

- Defra, the ministry responsible for promoting government policy on global warming at the time of the seminar
- WWF, a leading environmental pressure group and vocal advocate of AGW

⁹ Wolfson College Magazine, 2005-2006 No 30, p56

<http://www.wolfson.cam.ac.uk/alumni/magazine/magazine-30.pdf>

¹⁰ Email in response to a request for information about CMEP's association with Wolfson College, 11th Feb 2009

- The Tyndall Centre, a major climate research institute based at the University of East Anglia.¹¹

It will no doubt be of concern to this review to see that the BBC's policies on global warming coverage are being driven by a private organisation run by one of its journalists together with a convinced AGW advocate, and that they have been funded by bodies including an environmental advocacy organisation, a government department, and by a leading climate research institute that would benefit from favourable, and uncritical, media converge of climate science. It is hard for the BBC to make a credible claim to impartiality or independence in these circumstances.

- 23) Roger Harrabin has made it clear that the seminars programme has had an important impact upon the BBC.

It has had a major impact on the willingness of the BBC to raise these issues for discussion. Joe Smith and I are now wondering whether we can help other journalists to perform a similar role in countries round the world.¹²

Climate coverage

- 24) There is considerable evidence that since 2006 the BBC's coverage has been highly biased against sceptics. While complete consideration of the issue would be the work of many weeks, we would draw your attention to the following programmes, which we feel are particularly memorable for their lack of bias.:

(a) *Climate Wars* was a four part television programme which purported to describe sceptic arguments. It could best be described as a four-part 'hit piece', with sceptic arguments caricatured by a confirmed 'warmist' presenter and in one case, some serious misrepresentation of widely agreed scientific evidence. Despite this, a member of the BBC Trust has described this programme to one of us as representing coverage that balanced the more normal mainstream coverage of global warming, suggesting that the BBC Trust have been misled about how unbalanced the corporation's coverage has been. We are unaware of any BBC programme that has allowed sceptics to present their own arguments without being filtered through a 'green' presenter or being subject to immediate rebuttal.

(b) David Attenborough's two part series *The Truth about Climate Change* was broadcast in May and June 2006 as part of the *Climate Chaos* season. At no point in the series was there any suggestion that there are scientists, albeit a minority, who do not support the majority view on this subject, or that scientific understanding of the climate system remains very limited with major uncertainties still unresolved. Therefore the use of the term 'Truth' in the title of the series suggests an exercise in indoctrination rather than education. No claim could reasonably be made that this series was impartial

¹¹ Information on funding from email correspondence with Dr Joe Smith, co-director of CMEP with Roger Harrabin. *The Tyndall Centre contributed £15k to CMEP between 2002 and 2004*

¹² Wolfson College Magazine, 2005-2006 No 30, p56
<http://www.wolfson.cam.ac.uk/alumni/magazine/magazine-30.pdf>

about the science of climate change, but the DVD of this series is still being offered for sale on the BBC Shop website.

(c) The BBC's partisan coverage of the IPCC's Fourth Assessment Report **(AR4)** was particularly egregious.

When the *Summary for Policy Makers of the Working Group 1 (The Physical Science Basis)* was launched on 2nd February 2007, the *10pm News* devoted most of the programme to this story. At no point was there any suggestion that anthropogenic CO₂ emissions may not be entirely responsible for climate change, a claim that the IPCC report did not make. All those interviewed on the subject, as 'experts', expressed complete certainty about this.

On the same evening, *Newsnight* went much further, with an assertion by Susan Watts that scientists were being offered thousands of pounds to challenge the IPCC report, and this claim was reiterated by the presenter, Martha Kearney. This was based on a report that had appeared in *The Guardian* on the same day. It later emerged that the story had no basis in fact and had probably originated from an environmental advocacy group in the US. The BBC would have discovered this if it checked out the story before using it; an example of very sloppy and inaccurate reporting or worse, a willingness to use a third party report because it appeared to confirm the BBC's position on climate change. During the programme Richard Lindzen, a professor of meteorology at MIT, and an authority on the physics of clouds, was introduced as a climate sceptic. He was then shown smoking a cigarette while a voice over explained that he had a lot of contrarian beliefs including on smoking. It is most unusual for anyone to be shown smoking on BBC programmes now and the sequence was clearly intended to discredit his sceptical views on climate change.

(d) It is also worth noting that the BBC website has a dedicated area for environmentalists: *The Green Room*. Searching its archives papers related to climate change gives the following list of contributors: Prof Mike Hulme (Tyndall Centre), Bryony Worthington (from an NGO involved in emissions trading, 'EU is not doing enough to deliver meaningful cuts'), Chris Smith 'Climate change is very real', Sir David King (green activist), Malini Mehra (green NGO), Andrew Simms ('economic growth cannot continue'), Richard Betts (Met Office), Greig Whitehead (NGO, 'For millions of people in Africa, climate change is a reality'), Tim Aldred (NGO. World leaders must listen to the people who put them in power and quickly make amends for failing to deliver a binding climate deal'). We have been unable to identify any sceptics invited to contradict mainstream environmentalist views on this site. The Green Room appears to exist only as an outlet for propaganda pieces by environmentalists.

(e) We have attached in an annexe a list of our blog posts that consider matters of BBC bias in particular programmes and News Website reports.

Conclusions, and recommendations to the review

- 25) The only evidence that is available to substantiate concerns that anthropogenic climate change is happening, and that it poses a significant problem, is the scientific research which is available. Therefore any programme or report that deals with climate change, even those that are concerned with public policy or lifestyle changes, is founded on the way in which the BBC responds to and interprets climate research. The responsibility for getting this right extends from the senior executives who oversee editorial policy to producers, editors, correspondents, reporters and staff in the newsroom who implement those policies.
- 26) Since its inception in 1922, the BBC has built a reputation – and a global brand – primarily based on impartial and accurate reporting. This has made it an immensely potent opinion-former throughout the English-speaking world and beyond. It is deeply disturbing that, at a time when climate change first became a front page story in the UK media, a major report on impartiality apparently misrepresented a seminar that was supposedly intended to brief '30 key staff' on the scientific evidence that underpins this immensely important and controversial matter.
- 27) We feel that, as a minimum, your review should:
- (i) investigate the seminar and ensure that the record is corrected in a suitably transparent fashion
 - (ii) investigate how it was that the public came to be misled on the nature of the seminar
 - (iii) report on the role of BBC journalists and senior decision-makers in the seminar series
 - (iv) report on the role of CMEP and its seminars in formulating BBC policy on environmental issues
 - (v) report on the appropriateness of a private organisation and NGOs formulating BBC policies
 - (v) consider the impact of the spurious conclusions of the seminar in the period since it took place.

It is clearly unacceptable for the BBC to use the description of the seminar published in its 2007 report as an example of the lengths it has gone to in order to ensure that its reporting of climate change, and the science that underpins it, is impartial and accurate, and then refuse to reveal who the 'best scientific experts' they consulted were.

Unless this matter is addressed in the present review, there is a grave danger that information about the seminar will emerge by other means. This would inflict even more serious damage to the BBC's reputation, as a sound source of impartial and accurate reporting of scientific research that impacts on public policy, because it has refused to be transparent about this very important event and the way in which it was organised.

- 28) If the invited guest at the seminar were not scientists, then the review should consider why the BBC chose to rely on the opinions of non-scientists in formulating editorial policy on the way in which this controversial branch of science should be covered.

- 29) It would appear that, through the activities of CMEP, BBC Newsgathering has got very much too close to government, environmental activism, and the climate research community for its reputation for impartiality and accuracy to be preserved with regard to the science of climate change.

Annexe: Links to blog posts identifying problems with the impartiality and accuracy of the BBC's coverage of the science of climate change

We request that the review consider these documents. The electronic version of this document incorporates hyperlinks.

From Harmless Sky

[Jeremy Paxman, the BBC, Impartiality, and Freedom of Information](#)

[Climate Change, BBC Impartiality, and 'Confessions of a Reformed BBC Producer'](#)

[Even Andrew Marr worries about groupthink at the BBC](#)

[The Freedom of Information Act and the BBC's willing little helpers](#)

[Freedom of information and hypocrisy at the BBC](#)

[BBC Newsnight - Warming up President Obama's inaugural speech?](#)

[BBC Newsnight - Susan Watts tries to get all the right answers](#)

[Is this the BBC's Climategate?](#)

[BBC re-wrote Obama's speech - but it doesn't matter](#)

[Environmental journalism after Climategate](#)

From Bishop Hill

[Ice sheet breakup – a biologist's view](#)

[BBC keeps the green flag flying](#)

[Remember this?](#)

[Planet relief redux](#)

[Peter Horrocks and the truth](#)

[Roger Harrabin](#)

[Irony alive and well at the BBC](#)

[Shameless BBC still peddling porkies for greens](#)