



Australian Meteorological & Oceanographic Society

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Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
PO Box 6100
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To: Committee Secretary

Preamble

AMOS is an independent society representing the atmospheric and oceanographic sciences in Australia. It currently has over 500 members drawn from the Bureau of Meteorology (BoM), CSIRO, the university sector, other state and federal agencies, as well as the private sector. Most members of AMOS are actively employed in one of the scientific fields covered by the Society, but the membership also includes university students, retired scientists, school teachers and others from the general community with an interest in weather and climate.

AMOS has an important role as a credible, independent voice for the profession. As part of this role, it has established expert groups in areas such as climate variability, weather forecasting and physical oceanography and regularly represents the views of its members to governments, institutions and the public.

Major findings and recommendations

- AMOS has concerns about how our science, and particularly climate science, is often inaccurately portrayed by some individuals and media organisations.
- Both misinformation and disinformation on climate change have likely contributed to poor policy development, slowed climate action and created confusion within the Australian public.
- Too much of the reporting on climate change is opinion based and has a negative impact on public interest journalism and democracy and creates barriers for our public to access reliable and accurate news.
- Educating the public on climate science, and the tactics used by those that mislead, increases the chance that “alternative facts” do not gain traction
- Media accountability bodies (the Australian Press Council and the Australian Communications and Media Authority) would serve the profession and the public interest by developing specific standards to deal with the issue of climate change, and guidance about how to meet them.

Purpose

The Australian Meteorological and Oceanographic Society (AMOS) welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the Senate Inquiry into the State of Media Diversity, Independence and Reliability in Australia.

AMOS has concerns about how our science, and particularly climate science, is often inaccurately portrayed by some individuals and media organisations. This has a negative impact on public interest journalism and democracy and, with reference to (a) in the terms of reference, the barriers this creates for Australian voters' ability to access reliable, accurate and independent news. In providing support for these concerns, we provide examples of inaccurate and misleading media reporting on climate change, including recent examples.

The crucial role of the media in scientific reporting

Scientists often see the media as partners in the communication of scientific findings, scientific breakthroughs and works of public interest.

The COVID-19 experience provided many examples of the importance of the media in communicating scientific information. Less than a year ago, few would have imagined that reports focused on frequency distributions and statistical confidence would have captured such interest in the general public.

Unfortunately, 2020 also saw a spike in media disinformation and Muller (2020a) provides several examples where the media played an unhelpful role. As he states "COVID-19 is a huge story. It directly concerns the health and welfare of the public at large, puts great pressure on public resources, stretches the capacity of governments to respond, disrupts the economy and brings risks that so far are not fully understood ... it imposes a heavy obligation on journalists to apply the highest ethical standards in how they tell it".

AMOS views that these comments also apply to climate change.

The media reporting of climate change

While media reporting of climate change has improved in Australia in recent years, and there are some consistently high-quality reporters, both misinformation and disinformation have likely contributed to poor policy development, slowed climate action and created confusion within the Australian public.

Unlike with media reporting on COVID-19, inaccurate reporting on climate change has a long history. Part of the problem here is that many news outlets have abandoned factual coverage of climate, whilst choosing to politicise it, resulting in a divided media landscape. Many audiences think of climate change as a 'debate', in the community, or amongst politicians, rather than a matter of the physical world, that turns on science and not opinion.

As described in Brett (2020), Manne (2011) analysed articles and opinion pieces on climate change in *The Australian* newspaper between January 2004 and April 2011. Out of 880 articles, 700 were classified as unfavourable to climate change action. "Many of the unfavourable articles were written by people with no qualifications at all in any relevant discipline, but with 'a comical degree of self-confidence' in their ill-informed opinions and contempt for their opponents, whom they regularly mocked and denigrated." Readfearn (2014) describes the *The Australian* newspaper as providing a platform for climate science denialists and leading to headlines like "Australia Government Climate Office Accused of Manipulating Temperature Data" and "Australian Bureau of Meteorology Accused of Criminally Adjusting Global

Warming". The newspaper's criticism of the science and scientists continued despite the BoM providing the newspaper with evidence of the robustness of its work. Two subsequent independent reviews and several peer-reviewed science papers have upheld the high quality of BoM's data and science. Wilkinson (2020) describes an international campaign to undermine climate science and the urgency of the climate crisis. The author claims that the sustained 'success' over two decades of the "carbon club", which includes some in the media, explains why Australian governments have failed to deal with the challenge of climate change.

Evidence suggests that some media organisations are playing a strong role in misreporting climate science. A recent study by Fisher and Park (2020) shows that out of the 40 countries surveyed, Australia's eight per cent of "deniers" is more than double the global average of three per cent. They found a strong connection between the brands people use and whether they think climate change is serious. Thirty-five per cent of people who listen to commercial AM radio (such as *2GB*, *2UE*, *3AW*) or watch *Sky News* considered climate change to be "not at all" or "not very" serious, followed by *Fox News* consumers (32%). Fisher and Park concluded that, in general, there are low levels of trust in climate change reporting.

Recent examples of inaccurate reporting

Despite climate change being a major contributor to the unprecedented bushfire conditions in 2019-20, media disinformation continued.

Assisted by science from the BoM, CSIRO and our universities, the Commonwealth of Australia (2020) stated that as "the events of the 2019-2020 bushfire season show, what was unprecedented is now our future". The *Report of the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements* expressed no doubt about the role of climate change in the disastrous bushfires.

The Australian Institute (2020) polled 1,998 Australians and found the vast majority (79%) hold views in line with the best available scientific evidence. That is, four in five Australians agree climate change is occurring. This is the highest result since 2012. An even greater majority, 82%, is worried climate change will result in more bushfires, up from 76% in the 2019 report.

Joshi (2020) discusses how some media outlets responded to the recent bushfires by either refusing to give the story its due prominence or by spreading falsehoods; one of these being that many fires have been caused by arsonists or even climate activists. Most unfortunately, we also had prominent people in industry and some senior politicians promulgating this misinformation before it could be checked. Headlines included "Firebugs fuelling crisis as arson arrest toll hits 183" and "Police are now working on the premise arson is to blame for much of the devastation caused this bushfire season". In contrast to these reports, the NSW Bushfire Inquiry found that arson related fires were "a very small proportion of the area burnt" (NSW Government, 2020).

AMOS had hoped that the independent reviews of the national temperature dataset would have resolved any doubts about the veracity of these data and the strong warming trend for Australia it clearly showed. Unfortunately, the media again provided a platform for some politicians to continue this disinformation. An MP claimed that the BoM was publishing information on temperature records in NSW which were "completely and utterly false" (Sky News, 2020a). A Senator expressed several concerns over the BoM's data and methodologies and sent numerous questions to the organisation to respond to (Sky News, 2020b). He described the BoM as demonstrating "at the very least, incompetence".

It is very unfortunate that the discrediting of our scientific institutions and our scientists continue and publicly funded work gets diverted towards addressing the same old falsehoods.

Reducing the barriers for Australian voters' ability to access reliable and accurate news

With specific reference to the Committee's terms of reference, too much of the reporting on climate change is opinion based and has a negative impact on public interest journalism and democracy and creates barriers for our public to access reliable and accurate news.

Disinformation and misinformation on climate science continue and science institutions and our scientists continue to be discredited. There can be little doubt that addressing inaccurate media reporting and disinformation on climate change will help to avoid poor decision-making and foster improved climate policy development within Australia.

AMOS requests the Committee to provide recommendations on strengthening leadership within politics, industry and the media in holding those responsible for inaccurate and misleading reporting on climate change to account. While proposing specific solutions is beyond the remit of our organisation, others have suggested approaches that we consider useful to explore.

Lewandowsky and Hunter (2020) suggest that educating the public on climate science, and the tactics used by those that mislead, increases the chance that "alternative facts" do not gain traction and potentially banish disinformation to the background of public debate. An example of positive media coverage was with the recent release of the biennial State of the Climate report from CSIRO and the Bureau of Meteorology. This report was the number one news release on the day across traditional media and highly shared on social media. The media coverage was overwhelmingly straight reporting of the facts of the report and the large take-up by the public shows the appetite and need for this information.

Muller (2020b) proposes that media accountability bodies (the Australian Press Council and the Australian Communications and Media Authority) would serve the profession and the public interest by developing specific standards to deal with the issue of climate change, and guidance about how to meet them. We also recommend to formalise the standards enshrined by the Australian Press Council. Media outlets are supposed to adhere to a set of practise standards, that include:

accuracy and clarity;

fairness and balance;

privacy and avoidance of harm;

integrity and transparency.

If the council were to be provided with resources and autonomy to independently investigate contraventions of the standards, and suggest penalties or action, this might go some way to addressing the problems outlined here.

AMOS can provide further information in support of these matters to the Committee as it requires.

Submitted on behalf of the Australian Meteorological and Oceanographic Society by

Dr. Angela M. Maharaj (President)

Dr. Roger Dargaville (Vice-President)

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