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[s.22] media manager Murray–Darling Basin Authority [s.22]

ABC Background Briefing Best laid plans: the Murray–Darling Basin crisis, broadcast on 29 April 2018, 8.05am <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/backgroundbriefing/murray-darling-basin-crisis/9687538>

AND

facebook <https://www.facebook.com/abcnews.au/videos/vb.72924719987/10156309948012378/?type=2&theater>

I write to complain about the Background Briefing program broadcast on 29 April, *Best laid plans: the Murray–Darling Basin in crisis*. This program, along with the Facebook video, provides listeners with a range of stakeholder perspectives that are accepted as factual and does not provide access to other relevant information so that the audience can make up their own minds. For example, the program asserts that taxpayer money used to pay to upgrade water infrastructure in the Murray–Darling Basin has achieved nothing. This is untrue for reasons outlined below.

I would like the Background Briefing program reviewed against the following in the Code of Practice.

Accuracy

- Make reasonable efforts to ensure that material facts are accurate and presented in context
- Do not present factual content in a way that will materially mislead the audience.

Impartiality and diversity of perspectives

- Gather and present news and information with due impartiality
- Do not state or imply that any perspective is the editorial opinion of the ABC
- Do not misrepresent any perspective
- Do not unduly favour one perspective over another

Corrections and clarifications

- Acknowledge and correct or clarify, in an appropriate manner as soon as reasonably practicable: information that is likely to significantly and materially mislead

I believe the journalist has not provided listeners with an accurate picture of the return flows issue, has misrepresented the MDBA's perspective and has not provided the audience with balance in line with the weight of evidence.

The program does not make reasonable efforts to ensure that facts are accurate and presented in context. For example, the explanation of return flows likens irrigation water to a swimming pool and says that half the water used is wasted. The journalist says the environment gets "a quarter of the swimming pool when it was getting half" (Facebook and Background Briefing). This is not an accurate reflection of the utilisation of irrigation water and it's my belief that it gives the audience an incorrect impression about the volume of water involved in return flows.

Similarly audiences were also told by the journalist that the government's \$3.5 billion investment in irrigation efficiency programs delivered nothing, "\$3.5 billion down the drain – ouch!" (Background Briefing). This assertion is based on the modelling provided exclusively to the ABC by Quentin Grafton and John Williams with no apparent effort given to validating the robustness of this work.

The Grafton and Williams modelling is treated as an authoritative source. Grafton and Williams have "actually done the numbers" (Background Briefing). "The Basin Authority claims [our emphasis] that the irrigation efficiencies have delivered 700 billion litres for the environment but this modelling shows when you take return flows into account at best the environment has gotten nothing" (Background Briefing).

By contrast, the basis for the MDBA's calculations and position is given no standing and there are repeated calls for return flows to be actually measured. "The staggering thing is that we've spent this without properly measuring return flow. If we don't know how much water was leaking in the first place, we can't say there's actually any extra water for the environment" (Facebook). "If we didn't know how much was leaking from irrigation before the cash splash we can't say it's actually given us any extra water for the environment" (Background Briefing). There does not appear to be any reasonable effort to verify the validity of this statement. This demonstrates a different standard of credibility ascribed by the journalist to the MDBA's work compared with that of Grafton and Williams.

The MDBA Chief Executive provided an hour-long interview to the journalist which included comments that explained many issues with return flows, including whether they do generally provide good environmental outcomes, and how the water recovered through efficiency programs is held and used for the environment. Mr Glyde also explained the modelling done in 2008 on return flows and the MDBA's assessment that 60 per cent of surface water return flows are accounted for in the water accounting regime.

Altogether Mr Glyde's comments featured for one minute 40 seconds in the 39 minute long program—significantly less than what was allowed for most others who were interviewed, such as David Paton. Mr Glyde's comments on return flows accounted for 49 seconds. While I accept that different perspectives do not necessarily deserve equal time I believe the presentation of the content, and the omission of relevant information provided by Mr Glyde to counter claims made by others materially misleads the audience, and preferences one side of the story.

Further, although the ABC's code of conduct requires it not to 'unduly favour one perspective over another', the journalist emphasised the supposed credentials of various interviewees, while downplaying those of the MDBA and its Chief Executive, in a way that manipulates the listener's perceptions of the information being offered by those interviewees.

For example, Quentin Grafton is described as "an eminent scientist" and "an economist who's spent a decade crunching the numbers on the Basin Plan"; John Williams as an "extremely senior hydrologist".

“You put Quentin and John together and suddenly you have the potential for some serious water accounting of the Basin Plan”, the reporter says in Background Briefing.

By contrast, the MDBA and Mr Glyde are introduced thus: “The Basin Plan is overseen by a government agency called the MDBA. Phillip Glyde has led the Authority since 2016” (Background Briefing).

In fact, the MDBA is an independent expertise-based statutory agency, made up of highly qualified hydrologists, economists, experts on river management and natural resource management policy; and Mr Glyde is a senior public servant with more than 35 years’ experience including in natural resource management, industry and environmental policies.

Similarly, Maryanne Slattery is described as a “softly spoken Brainiac” who was a “high-ranking public servant” at the MDBA, whose job was “to understand all of the Basin Plan, and to make sure its environmental outcomes were on track” (Background Briefing).

This is not the case. Ms Slattery was employed as a middle manager, with a limited purview, and did not have a role in decision-making.

Further, while the journalist refers to the information provided by the MDBA as “claims”, no similar qualifications are put on the views of others. For example, the journalist agrees unquestioningly with Ms Slattery’s assessment of the Basin Plan’s implementation. “This is bad” (Background Briefing), and promises that the listener will “hear more from Maryanne Slattery in the next episode of Background Briefing, when she takes us through the creative accounting in the Basin Plan”—not what she claims or believes is the creative accounting in the Basin Plan.

All this has the effect of bolstering the credibility of some perspectives, while undermining that of the MDBA, and therefore encourages the listener to favour the views of some as fact while treating the information provided by the MDBA as dubious by comparison.

Lastly, in closing her story the journalist claims that “in a fortnight, the Senate will vote on the future of the Murray–Darling Basin Plan. If the Senate agrees, there’ll be basically no extra water recovered for the environment, although we’re only halfway through the plan.”

This is a clear error of fact. If the amendment relating to the SDL Adjustment Mechanism is allowed to stand, it will involve the recovery of an additional 450 GL for the environment.

I look forward to your response.