

7. Influences on a changed story and the new normal: media locks in the new narrative

It was the biggest, most powerful spin campaign in Australian media history—the strategy was to delay action on greenhouse gas emissions until ‘coal was ready’—with geo-sequestration (burying carbon gases) and tax support.

Alan Tate, ABC environment reporter 1990s

On 23 September 2013 the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) program *Media Watch* explored a textbook example of why too many Australians and their politicians continue to stumble through a fog of confusion and doubt in regard to climate change. The case under the microscope typified irresponsible journalism.

Media Watch host Paul Barry, with trademark irony, announced: ‘Yes it’s official at last ... those stupid scientists on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC] got it wrong’, in their latest assessment report. He quoted 2GB breakfast jock Chris Smith from a week earlier saying the IPCC had ‘fessed up’ that its computers had drastically overestimated rising temperatures. ‘That’s a relief,’ said Barry, and how do we know this? ‘Because Chris Smith read it on the front page of last Monday’s *Australian* newspaper. When it comes to rubbishing the dangers of man-made global warming the shock jocks certainly know who they can trust.’

But wait. *The Australian’s* story by Environment Editor Graham Lloyd—‘We got it wrong on warming says IPCC’ was not original either. According to *Media Watch*, Lloyd appeared to have based his story on a News Limited sister publication from the United Kingdom. Said Barry: ‘He’d read all about it in the previous day’s *Mail on Sunday*,’ which had a story headlined ‘The great green con’. That tabloid trumpeted about an ‘astonishing new admission’ and a ‘massive cut in the speed of global warming’. Relief indeed.

The only problem was that the error was not the IPCC’s but the Murdoch publications’ and the shock jocks’. This was pointed out by the University of Melbourne’s Professor David Karoly on the same day as *The Australian* story, via a media release through the Australian Science Media Centre. He was joined by John Cook from the Global Change Institute at the University of Queensland noting the dangers of sourcing scientific information from a UK tabloid. The error was due to comparing two sets of figures that were ‘apples and oranges’,

as *The Australian* admitted in its correction a week later. By that time the story had run wild in talkback radio land and in Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* (another News Limited stablemate), despite the expert corrections.

The Daily Telegraph quoted prominent sceptic Bob Carter, formerly a professor at James Cook University, who told the readers the public had been 'relentlessly misinformed'. To make a point, Barry then googled the US space agency NASA to learn that in fact '97% of climate scientists agree' on man-made global warming threats. And, he said, there are any number of other eminent sources *The Daily Telegraph* could have used.

While Carter (a geologist) is out of step with the vast majority of specialist scientists on climate change, the shock jocks regularly interview him to whip up outrage, and he has written a dozen sceptical columns in *The Australian* since 2004 and several in *The Daily Telegraph*, according to *Media Watch*.

Climate change information remains caught up in a manufactured frame of 'scientists don't agree', which matters because the public gets most of its science information from the mass media whether broadcast, in newspapers or on websites. How the media operates in Australia and elsewhere, therefore, has a significant influence on what audiences believe is 'real'. As we can see from this 2013 incident, the ignorant or deliberate sowing of misinformation and uncertainty has not ceased.

Academic studies in the past decade probing public understanding of climate change science and media communication, have tackled the question of what the public is 'getting' from media reports as they are commonly structured, even without deliberate misinformation. The frequent conclusion is public confusion about the causes, effects, risks, and reality of anthropogenic climate change (Corbett & Durfee 2004; Palfreman 2006).

The daily news agenda is an interplay between media and other influential voices—primarily political voices—that guide the dominant narrative for public consumption. Public confusion and apathy are influenced by this dominant narrative and also by public relations strategies applied by politicians and other players using deliberate sceptic language to foster uncertainty.

Mass communication as it has evolved in Australia targets the 'consumer' end of the interest spectrum, and political activity and public discussion have been organised around consumption/economic activity. Rhetoric about costs and hip pocket appeals are potent political tools. Studies have also shown Australian politics is treated by the public as a private choice between political leaders, who are 'consumed' at home via various platforms of media including radio, print, TV and now the internet (Johnson 1987). This is not a profile of an active body politic other than at election time.

Many democracies, including Australia, maintain minimal democratic standards by being accountable to 'the people' through periodic elections. Between elections, however, policy outcomes are determined by elite players in politics, the corporate world and the media.

It's not surprising, therefore, that there is little evidence that public views on climate change drive the agenda, rather the contrary. Australian political science studies since the 1970s have suggested that, in this country, with an elite and top-down political system of governance, the media and politicians together set the daily agenda of what is newsworthy, what is the dominant narrative and what we should accept as real or true. (In the timeframe of the 1990s and early 2000s the internet's main contribution was to allow more voices to add their beliefs and opinions but did not fundamentally change the agenda-setting structure. There has not been a recent body of research showing that has changed significantly).

The frames of commerce and consumption have trained passive consumers

To better understand how the media sets our daily agenda of what is real, a look backwards to influences and analyses from the United States is instructive.

In the late 1960s communications professor Herbert Shiller from the University of California wrote about the connection between mass media and American-style commerce and consumption. The connection is framed as the presence of freedom—in trade, speech, and enterprise. In the war of ideas that has accompanied the resurgence of neo-classical economics since the 1970s, this also came to be framed as freedom *from* government regulation of business on behalf of the public (Shiller 1992).

With global technology, these cultural frames spread, as did their ability to dictate what people perceive as 'reality'. As early as 1951, Canadian communications theorist Marshall McLuhan noted the commercial and propaganda value of the emerging audiovisual media (television broadcasting only gained traction in the 1950s), stating that they provide the viewer with a ready-made image of reality. McLuhan believed that the storytelling devices of mass communication conspired to lull audiences into being passive consumers of culture. He characterised newspapers as the daily 'book' of industrial man, telling thousands of stories to an anonymous audience.

Creating drama with embedded values, hallmark of modern media

Storytelling and personal drama are the mechanisms such that ‘even international politics are made a mirror for private passions—love, hate, deceit, ambition, disappointment are the persistent score backing national and international events’ (McLuhan 1967: 5). It’s not hard to recognise the storytelling features that have come to dominate journalistic practice as we know it: heroes and villains, two sides to every story, and thereby the creation of drama and conflict—with this kind of ‘balance’ being applied in the 1990s even to scientific stories.

What most journalists think they do for a living, notwithstanding, media companies mass-produce audiences and sell them to advertisers, and therefore they have a major stake in forming attitudes, values and buying behaviour. The public relations and advertising industry has flourished as the mass media turns issues into dramatic stories and, along the way, reinforces the dominant commercial or ideological agenda.

Looking at the image of environmental scientists (including climate scientists) since the late 1980s in this light, it has arguably swung from the more heroic, or at least elite and unquestioned, to that of a fair target of attack. A number of controversial science and society issues during the 1990s, including the science role in mad cow disease, the genetically modified crops debate, and the heated sceptic arguments over climate change, are likely to have been influential in such a shift. A 2010 study by Clive Hamilton exposed where that had led: to the uncivil language of some right-wing columnists towards climate scientists and a barrage of hate email directed against scientists and journalists involved with communicating anthropogenic climate change (Hamilton 2010).

Loss of media diversity equals more capacity to influence

Starting in the 1980s, Australian media became part of a multinational business context with a wave of media mergers resulting in a loss of diversity along with the spread in global business links (Wheelwright & Buckley 1987). Left-leaning economic analyses, like those collected by economist Ted Wheelwright and others into the 1990s, provide a useful historical perspective backed by the documentary record in newspapers and books. They reflect a transition from a more diverse economic and political spectrum of ideas, topics and media publications and programs—to a narrow bandwidth increasingly sounding the same, and dominated by free market conservative ideas.

This singing from the same ideological hymn sheet became more possible as commercial media concentrated in just a few hands (Murdoch, Packer, Stokes as well as the Fairfax family). Australia now has one of the least diverse media sectors in the world (Manne 2005), and it came to be viewed as the norm as the 1990s rolled into the 2000s. The role of News Limited, (the Murdoch press), has been particularly highlighted in this regard on a number of public interest issues, not least its negative position on climate change science and response. Influence is guaranteed with News Limited's near monopoly of print media. 'In terms of circulation, it has almost 70 per cent of the capital city and national newspaper market' (McKnight 2005a: 55–56).

The prominence of conservative commentators in print opinion pages has been matched by a troupe of radio talkback hosts, following John Laws and Alan Jones, who are hostile to climate science. By and large they are framed elsewhere in the media as just a fact of life, rather than as a confusing and misinforming agent in the public discussion whose power has contributed to a disoriented public. Meanwhile public broadcasters, particularly when their funding is in question from conservative governments as happened in the late 1990s and again in 2014, have not taken a leadership position in setting the record straight, but rather have followed the press gallery/political opinion machine in their daily news coverage.

The internet and digital media—losing or gaining common understanding of the world?

As you read this book, social media and digital media platforms have become a dominant factor in public communication. The levelling and democratising effect of the open internet is more evident as a result. With regard to climate change communication, research still needs to be undertaken on the specific effect of the internet on the national discussion. In particular, an open question is the extent to which new communication channels have changed the discussion from an elite and top-down framing exercise to a different paradigm of increasing pressure from the grassroots for change.

It's hard to believe now, but the internet was still in its infancy during much of the 1990s. The early opportunities offered with the entry of blogs, websites and wikis to the public discussion broadened the opportunity for gathering information and retrieving archived information, thereby getting around the limitations of the daily news cycle. It also, had its drawbacks. For every realclimate.org manned by scientists explaining the finer points of climate

science and demolishing myths and fabrications, more websites appeared with 'true science' names, manned by sceptics with alternate stories of sunspots and earth cooling, not warming.

How was the public to separate the wheat from the chaff? In the deregulated environment of free market capitalism and the politics to match, where leaders did not lead on this topic and where every citizen was to make up his or her own mind whether they believed in climate change, what did they take from the plethora of opinions that the internet offered? There are signs that audiences are increasingly fragmented as a result, in tandem with media concentration and related internally consistent worldviews.

People increasingly have settled into different information universes, as the adherents of the Murdoch-owned Fox News service in the United States exhibit or, similarly, the more devoted followers of Murdoch tabloids, Murdoch's satellite television channels and related websites, in Australia and the United Kingdom. All of this has made it more than ever a communication story of what people 'hear' and believe.

The extent of influence or competency of 'citizen journalists' afforded by social media applications, such as Facebook and Twitter, in the mid- to current 2000s requires more research. There is evidence of much activity undertaken by young people without waiting for formal engagement with mainstream media, and also by social networks of individuals interested in a particular area, like animal welfare.

One significant trend afforded by new media is the ability to organise global campaigns, like the 350.org disinvestment campaign against coal, involving a call to citizens to remove their funds from banks that support the coal industry. Or the GetUp campaigns to save the Great Barrier Reef from further industrial port development related to coal mining in northern Australia. Such communication avenues relate to news and information but empower citizen action in a way that old media did not.

The traditional model of news gathering and dissemination, however, did not disappear with the advent of the internet, although in 2014 it may be declining. At a 2013 conference in Beijing 'Climate Change Communication: Research and Practice', organised by the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication and the China Center for Climate Change Communication, Andrew Revkin, internet environment reporter for *The New York Times*, spoke on the topic of climate communication and digital media in the west.

His analysis is based on 30 years of experience and concurs with the diagnosis of fragmented messages and audiences:

Until a few years ago the pattern was the same. For a given issue, research was undertaken, papers were written, press releases were prepared, and a related story was composed by a reasonably trained science reporter. When news broke, whether it was the wreck of the Exxon Valdez or the release of a new report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, there was a decent chance someone who knew about oil toxicity or the heat-trapping properties of CO₂ would report the story.

That still happens, but less and less. Specialized professional journalists now occupy a shrinking wedge of a fast-growing pie of light-speed media. This reality threatens to erode the already limited public appreciation of science and the state of the planet. I grew up in a world where the media told you 'That's the way it is'. Literally. We all grew up with a common sense of the world. That's not the way it is now. If your concern is climate change, you can go onto the internet and find whatever spin or substance feels like the best fit for your worldview. (Revkin 2013)

He also points out that the world has become swamped with information and 'news', largely thanks to the internet, digital broadcast options and other technological advances, which limits the focus on a single topic like climate change. On the positive side, he uses his own blog *Dot Earth*, which since 2007 has gained several million annual hits, as an example of what can be delivered.

A related phenomenon is that internet technology has enabled information to be increasingly networked and collaborative as 'collective intelligence', linking established news websites like *Time* or the *Guardian* with environmental sites like *grist.org* or political sites like the *Huffington Post* or any number of individual bloggers as seen in Australia. Foundations also support websites; for example the US Center for Media and Democracy, which is focused on correcting the public record. And all of this information is internationally available thanks to the internet.

How mass media habits influence what you 'hear'

What you hear and read, whether in a newspaper or on a blog, can be changed and manipulated by influential political and corporate voices and their public relations advisers, and the task has been made simpler by the traditional news media practice of discovering an issue when politicians make it one. For example, the sudden and much-commented upon arrival of nuclear power in the climate change discourse became an instant issue in 2006 because Prime Minister John Howard and his Cabinet talked about it.

The dominant narrative and agenda of the day are also influenced by the media's internal workings, which are not value-free. News selection in recent decades has often been entwined with ideology related to free market ideas and agendas, according to those who have studied Australian media in the last two decades, particularly the influence of the Murdoch press (Manne 2005; McKnight 2005a).

Professional journalism as a whole has perfected low-risk approaches to newsgathering and called it objective and unbiased journalism. Some common practices have a direct bearing on the communication of science and society stories, and with it the communication of man-made climate change. Australian reporting and editing practices reflect: a reliance on official sources, contrived balance and drama and a lack of context of where the immediate story sits in a longer narrative. The record shows these practices became more pronounced after the mid-1990s in news framing of the climate change story.

The documentary evidence until the mid-1990s shows a more science-focused and contextual coverage of climate change. Thereafter, the predominant media focus in Australia, as in the United States, was the policy/economic debate about climate change response and its 'costs'. Political and economic reporters came to the forefront after 1996. Pulitzer Prize-winning American political journalist Ross Gelbspan, who has written several books on the evolving climate change story in a media context, suggests that the dominance of politics in the evolving climate change story had another internal logic: covering politics has been the perceived elite career path for journalists. Gelbspan sees this as removing scientists and their public interest messages from priority coverage (Gelbspan 2004).

Manufacturing balance

Political scientists Jules Boykoff and Maxwell Boykoff looked at coverage of global warming/climate change during 1988–2002 in nationally read US newspapers. They looked at the effect of 'balancing' an individual media report on this topic. They found, perhaps unsurprisingly, that this adherence to balance—i.e., finding two competing voices, but not necessarily with context—actually biased the coverage of anthropogenic climate change and issues related to response, and led to uncertainty (Boykoff & Boykoff 2004).

There are historical precedents for manufactured uncertainty and argument infecting controversial social issues from slavery to cigarette smoking. With this winning strategy, uncertainty exploited by sceptics in contact with media editors has met with gratifying success in recent decades (Oreskes & Conway 2012). The success has been to establish a need for scientific balance on climate change—requiring that dissenters from the mainstream science be given equal time, even if they only represent themselves or one per cent of a scientific field.

Frequently the sceptical voices have not been scientists—as in a September 2000 article in *The Australian Financial Review* by a ‘former senior public servant’ who quotes a small handful of armchair Australian sceptics, such as Tasmanian John Daly, and tells his readers that ‘scientifically the greenhouse scare is largely over’ (Scott 2000: 34).

Context avoided or used strategically

Context is often avoided in news reporting and thus is another confusing influence on climate change stories. This can happen to forestall a charge of bias against the reporter who might add the context. Applying context is also more time consuming, as it requires research and/or experience. Instead, the standard, ‘objective’ and balanced approach is reflected as a ‘he said’, ‘she said’ array of facts and opinions—possibly assembled in a number of consecutive news stories, but without background as to where this information fits in the ongoing evidence or science discovery process.

Context is often also missing for people quoted or interviewed—do they speak for a peer-reviewed research summary in the case of scientists, are they a relevant expert or are they a sceptic representing a non-peer reviewed minority opinion and come from a non-expert field? A related omission is an interviewee’s affiliation or research background. Rarely does a news report include either a sceptic’s or a mainstream scientist’s credentials or a relevant link to a particular interest group or think tank. These omissions encourage the common public notion that scientists are interchangeable. ‘Scientists say ...’ is a standard introduction.

Experimental work has shown that news consumption without context does not lead to better public understanding. In testing a sample audience with various treatments of a global warming story, a research team found controversy added to readers’ confusion—while context made people feel more certain that they understood global warming and that it was real but complex (Corbett & Durfee 2004). Only rarely is context used in modern news bulletins, as the journalism profession requires, for better understanding.

Fragmented news disabling

The fragmented format of modern news presentation of long-running stories disables good understanding of public issues. Thirty-second sound bites, and the belief that the public has no concentration span, have not helped.

Professional journalism tends to pummel people with facts, but rarely pummels people with a nuanced appreciation of what the facts might mean. This helps explain the numerous studies that show that sustained consumption of the news on a particular subject often does not lead to a better understanding of the subject and sometimes leads to more confusion. (Nichols & McChesney 2005: 19)

Instead of simultaneous analysis and context, drama and manufactured 'balance' have become the staple formula for news stories, and this has crept into reporting of some scientific and environmental issues, creating controversy. It's not a long step from creating balance to relying on duelling opinion. This appears to have happened with the two media organisations that I assessed.

They both changed their coverage incrementally, offering science and economic coverage of the climate change story that continued the risk and human agency understanding from the late 1980s story into the mid-1990s, as governments changed. They shed their editorial certainty on the matter by the end of the decade, however, to differing extents.

Thirty *Sydney Morning Herald* reports sampled from the second half of 1995 and the first half of 1996 on the topic of climate change almost all focused on the science and risk messages as well as on international negotiations or the Australian economy's dependence on coal exports. For example, headlines included: 'Malaria spread linked to climate change', 'Climate change a fact: experts'—a report syndicated from *The New York Times* about the 1995 IPCC assessment; and a January 1996 report with the headline 'Plummeting penguin numbers a crisis on Macquarie Island' explained wildlife losses as Antarctic waters warmed. There were no sceptic opinion pieces in these samples.

'Australian ploy fails to slow greenhouse action' by *Herald* technology writer Gavin Gilchrist, writing at the close of the Labor government under Paul Keating, is a noteworthy example of reporting that persisted to 1996. It gives a fair sense of the direct and unambiguous approach of an earlier phase of climate change journalism, which does include scientific context with a political report. Gilchrist wrote:

Australia has sought to weaken international efforts to tackle the greenhouse effect by trying to undermine a landmark scientific report that calls for immediate action to ward off global climate change.

It is the third time this year the Federal Government has tried to delay international action on the greenhouse effect: in March, a botched diplomatic strategy at the Berlin climate convention was not adopted, and in August it emerged that the same diplomatic strategy was being pursued using an economic study partly funded by the coal industry.

(three paragraphs later)

For the first time, the world's governments will be advised that the risk from climate change is so great that immediate action is warranted beyond measures which make economic sense, such as improving the efficiency of energy use by industry. (Gilchrist 1995a: 1)

In the same year, Gilchrist also wrote about a CSIRO report with the headline 'Greenhouse effect will cause havoc in NSW, study claims'. Increased risk of severe thunderstorms and torrential rains are a prominent theme of this report, again providing evidence that likely impacts were understood and reported early. Amongst the CSIRO findings Gilchrist wrote:

Sydney will suffer twice as many days of extreme heat, four times as many severe storms and far worse flooding from huge increases in torrential rain, according to the latest predictions of how NSW will fare under the greenhouse effect. (Gilchrist 1995b: 5)

Herald reporter Bob Beale examined the planning process for coalmine development in New South Wales and offered graphic statistics on the impact of Australia's coal focus. He wrote that, although 'it would take 420 million new trees to soak up the estimated 281 million tonnes of greenhouse gases produced by the Hunter Valley's proposed Bengalla coalmine, according to calculations by a Federal Government bureau', mine-lifetime greenhouse emissions were not being assessed as new mines were opened (Beale 1996: 9). In this case the information source was a government report that put coal mine development in a greenhouse gas context. In the the mid-1990s *Herald* sources generally were still scientists or politicians.

From 1996 and the government change to the conservative Liberal and National parties (the Coalition) for 11 years thereafter, the evidence indicates that climate change became increasingly framed as a political/economic story with a strong component of Australia blocking climate action internationally. Again we can turn to Gilchrist who reported in July 1996 that:

The Howard Government today steps up its diplomatic offensive opposing international efforts to protect the world's climate at the historic meeting of the Climate Change Convention in Geneva.

Australia, with its pro-industry stance, is set to be seen as a rebel nation out of step with mounting global concern about the threat of climate change from the greenhouse effect. (Gilchrist 1996b)

Unlike many later political stories, Gilchrist does not ignore the scientific context of risk inherent in heating up the planet with greenhouse gas emissions. Let's remember that science and environmental reporters up to this time did not treat

human agency in the warming as a debate, but rather as the fundamental cause. He cites the 1995 IPCC report, plus a background report on Australia's preferred economic direction of backing existing fossil fuel-based energy producers and users.

The article also flags the return to a traditional 'economy *versus* environment' policy framework that characterised the Howard government's pro-industry stance on downplaying greenhouse gas emissions. Gilchrist describes the revolving door of like-minded executives cycling between bureaucracy and industry and setting the political agenda, a story retold by Guy Pearse a decade later in his 2007 expose of the so-called 'Greenhouse Mafia' of lobbyists and policymakers.¹

The *Herald* continued to run well-informed and in-context science stories during the later 1990s, but a framing shift became apparent during this time. Along with the change of government in 1996, there began to be relatively more political/economic coverage in the lead-up to the Kyoto climate change summit. This can be seen starting from 7 June 1996 and during the following six months where a *Herald* editorial and five of six articles focused on international negotiations.

In comparison one finds that amongst 30 articles sampled from 1995–1996 for *The Australian Financial Review*, only four are focused on the science. One is on a technical issue and is an opinion piece (i.e., not written by a staff or freelance journalist) and three are opinion pieces by sceptics—by US scientist Michael Patrick, National Party politician John Stone and former Labor minister Peter Walsh (later to become a prominent member of the ultra sceptical Lavoisier Group).

The same sceptical approach to the science was not the case in sampling from 1987 to 1992, when the *Financial Review* ran a mix of straightforward science reporting (defined as quoting mainstream climate scientists), and political/economic stories, some of which were candid about Australian industry's inefficiencies.

By 1995, however, the economic concerns of energy producers and big electricity users, like aluminium producers, predominated in the coverage, along with the focus on international negotiations. Unlike Gilchrist's stories for *The Sydney Morning Herald*, the context of scientific assessments was no longer reported in this publication.

Besides politicians and sceptics, sources in these later *Financial Review* articles frequently include industry spokespeople urging the government to heed their

1 Gavin Gilchrist quit reporting in the late 1990s to promote sustainable energy, which he wrote about in an opinion piece in 2001. Several other reporters interviewed for this story had moved on by 2001 to private careers in sustainable energy promotion or state government. This is another influential structural feature of news media—the loss of experienced and well-informed personnel.

concerns or agreeing with government about what is in Australia's 'national interest'. Conservation group spokespeople are posed in opposition. By this time green groups rather than scientists were more often making the case that climate change is a problem.

Many *Financial Review* headlines in 1995 relate to fears of a carbon tax by mining and energy producers and providers, or indeed, of any tax or international regulation to limit emissions. Here is evidence that even before the change of government in 1996, industry and government had already been reframing Australia's position from the early ethical, response-focused and internationally cooperative stance to an economic self-interest stance that ignored the risk messages.

Headlines included: 'Business in last ditch bid to bar carbon tax', 'Australia takes strong line against greenhouse rules'; 'Business lines up to fight controls' with a 'party line' of quotes from industry spokespersons. Similar framing can be found in 'Macquarie fears a greenhouse handicap' (Callick 1996b) where the rhetoric of the investment sector is quoted and this is later countered by a Greenpeace spokesperson. Callick wrote:

Policy options on combatting climate change that are still before the Federal Government 'could destroy the competitive advantage of Australian mineral processing companies', according to Macquarie Equities Ltd ...

Australian energy and commodity producers would come under increasing pressure to conform to the policy stance of Europe and the US as negotiations proceeded. ... The Europeans' position was driven by trade competitiveness objectives, the Americans' by the presidential election.

The construction of a report featuring either an industry point of view or a federal government point of view or both countered by an environmental group later in the story is common amongst these *Financial Review* stories. This story formula reinforces the frame of the 'mainstream', which is represented by industry and government looking after the 'national interest', versus 'special interest', the environmental group opposing business and jobs.

The value frames are familiar and still being used today: the rhetoric about Australia's competitive advantage, that if action is taken industry will go offshore. This was often coupled with the idea that outsiders were working against us ('us and them'). European or United Nations attempts to progress emission reductions have been framed as self-serving and not in Australia's interests. In this way political and economic reporting was establishing the dominant narratives.

News is what powerful people say

The economic and political articles on climate change of the 1990s illustrate a common contemporary media practice: stories are framed as authoritative and 'objective' when they report on what people in power say and do. But those people in power change and with them often the narrative. Reporting political utterances is presented as removing bias from story selection, and it makes newsgathering less expensive. News companies set up reporters near powerful people; for example, in parliamentary press galleries. While this may reduce journalism to networking and scribing or opinion pieces, it is safe.

In Australia the federal parliamentary press gallery dominates the daily news coverage. On any given day political back and forth is the majority of what is relayed by the national broadcasters, the ABC and the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), which has a multicultural focus, as well as the major dailies. Understanding this political reporter–politician nexus makes the agenda-setting role of governments *with* the media more transparent. It also sheds light on why political leadership becomes so important in the will to action on a controversial science story.

In this media environment politicians are primary framers of the climate change topic. By the 2000s, when no politician was talking about climate change, editors were liable to assume there was no story, according to the accounts of two Fairfax journalists (one working at *The Sydney Morning Herald* and the other at *The Australian Financial Review*) who wrote separately about their on-the-job observations in the professional journal *The Walkley Magazine* (Frew 2006; Macken 2006).

The internal structure of newspapers also influences whether a story 'gets up'. This is related to the power of the editor and often is subject to the values of the editor. Editors are appointed because their values are coherent with the dominant ideological culture of the media group ownership and board. This coherence often extends to national policy as we see with the communication of global warming and climate change.

During the later 1990s and since, with the private media concentrated in only a few hands, and the often timid public media sticking close to the narrative set by the loudest voices from the press gallery, the public was getting a unified message from its news media: the main game was no longer avoiding catastrophic climate change by reducing emissions. That was uncertain and too costly. Now the story was all about Australia's (narrow) economic drivers and international 'comparative advantages' relating to resource extraction.

This refocus from a mainstream science story to a political focus of ‘can’t do’, because of costs and national interest, shows us how an ideological framework is imposed on a society through communication to change its sense of reality.

Under this new ‘normal’, the status quo fossil fuel industries—coal, oil, natural gas and their derivatives for industry—had assumed unquestioning ‘must have’ status. There was no more criticism of inefficient energy use by commerce and industry such as was seen up to the early 1990s. This perspective also overshadowed the earlier interest in alternative energy production. Those were now labelled an ineffective sideshow.

Defending fossil fuel exports and domestic ‘cheap’ coal power, led Australia to portray itself as exceptional in international climate negotiations. The 1997 Kyoto Protocol was the means for establishing proposed emission boundaries. But Australia positioned itself by the early 2000s as a principle opponent of *ratifying* the protocol with its mandatory targets for restricting emissions.

The inherent difficulty for conscientious reporters in that framework was noted by one environment reporter recounting the experience at *The Sydney Morning Herald* by the mid-2000s. She found that after the first decade of the federal Howard government, political correspondents and editors were uninterested in the topic except as an international battle (Frew 2006: 18).²

A similar observation comes from former ABC television environment reporter Alan Tate, who saw firsthand the changes that occurred in the 1990s: the influential (to editors) Canberra press gallery took its climate change information from the government. A former journalist from *The Age* metropolitan newspaper in Melbourne, who took the subject seriously and responsibly in the mid-1990s, told me that when she suggested a climate change story her editor responded: ‘haven’t we fixed that?’ She also said she was labelled a ‘greenie’. Another reporter who covered climate change for the *Herald* in the later 1990s, Murray Hogarth, said: ‘We were a lonely bunch in the 1990s—I knew of no editor who was committed to telling the story.’

2 The federal parliamentary press gallery in Australia generally ignored climate change in the late 1990s, as did the politicians, apart from the political battle over the Kyoto Protocol. This continued well into the 2000s, until recently (Sanderson 2006). How it might be different was shown with the avowed turnaround of News Limited owner Rupert Murdoch on the topic in 2007 (reported nationally and internationally in May 2007; e.g., Griscom Little 2007b). We suddenly find *The Australian’s* national affairs reporter cutting through the government rhetoric and giving a cogent account of the real economics attached to mitigation, although the headline ‘Green row will be decided on economic fear’ still makes it sound like a green sectoral issue (Steketee 2007). This understanding, however, did not last in the News Limited daily print media, which soon thereafter continued with a critical and sceptical public stance.

Opinion and uncertainty: media hallmarks by 2001

By the time of the 2000–2001 IPCC reports, 30 relevant articles sampled from both *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Australian Financial Review* for those two years document the shift to opinion pieces ‘balancing’ the science along with continued political coverage from the perspective of the new narrative. Content continued to change towards uncertainty.

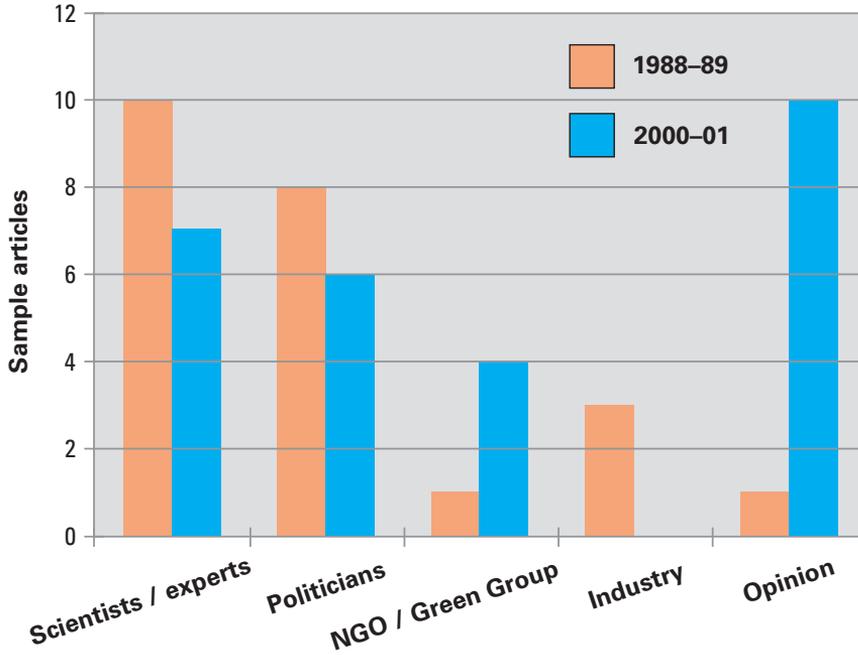
The *Financial Review* was regularly calling global warming/climate change ‘a debate’ in the 2000–2001 stories and continued to quote sceptics as the science context. The common trend by this time to dismiss alternative energy solutions as marginal and non-mainstream can be seen in *Financial Review* reporter Nick Hordern’s (2000) piece. He describes renewable energy as a manifestation of ‘green politics’ and ‘subjectivity’ that ‘few energy analysts’ agree with.

I compared 30 *Herald* articles from 1988–1989 with 30 articles from 2000–2001. I found that the number of opinion pieces had gone up tenfold by 2001 from a level close to zero a decade earlier. Journalists’ reports about climate science in the period 2000–2001 were at times placed on or near the opinion pages, where sceptical tracts also appeared, if not always on the same day. This emphasised debate, opinion, and uncertainty about who to believe. The samples also suggested that by the end of 2001 the newspaper was quoting green groups and non-government organisations (NGOs) three times as often as in the early days.

The use of scientists and experts as sources declined by about 20 per cent from the early comparison period. This is consistent with the impression that green groups were quoted more often in an adversarial role to the government’s position. Named politicians and industry spokespeople as sources had, however, also gone down based on this sample, with industry comment showing up as statistically negligible in the sampling periods. This was not so for *The Australian Financial Review*, in which the industry point of view increasingly set the agenda, as articles from 1996 on show.³

3 Sceptical treatment was not consistent in *The Australian Financial Review*, despite the general trend in that direction from the mid-1990s, possibly adding to reader confusion. At the time of the 2001 IPCC report, several stories appeared, including about the insurance industry’s concerns, that were framed as certain about climate change and its connection to the fossil fuel-based economy. For example *Fossil Fools* (Huck & Macken 2001).

7. Influences on a changed story and the new normal: media locks in the new narrative



Comparison of sources for *Sydney Morning Herald* articles 1988-1989 and 2000-2001.

Source: author's compilation.

Sydney Morning Herald science reporter Deborah Smith's story on the draft 2001 IPCC assessment on 13 November 2000 was notable as a science update placed in the paper next to the op-ed features section, where sceptic pieces also were placed. Furthermore, Smith's article was introduced with the words 'The relations column will return next week'. The subject matter was not opinion but a straight report on the 2001 IPCC assessment. Smith wrote:

(The IPCC) tone has toughened considerably since (1995), based on new studies. The latest draft report by the 3,000 scientists who make up the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, IPCC, to be finalised early next year, warns that mankind has 'contributed substantially to observed warming over the last 50 years'. (Smith 2000: 13)

Smith also interviewed Graeme Pearman then chief of the CSIRO Division of Atmospheric Research who stressed that the underpinning science was solid and response action should not be delayed on behalf of 'a few remaining greenhouse sceptics'. In this November 2000 issue, the page one story focused on environmentalist dissatisfaction with the Australian position at the Hague

climate change conference that month. The headline 'Greens flex their muscles at "last chance" climate summit', underscored the government versus the greens frame that the narrative had assumed.

Smith's piece was preceded on the same pages on 19 October by a piece called 'Hot news, the greenhouse effect is not so bad after all' by Larry Mounser, who was credited as 'a freelance writer, a physics teacher and runs a course'. Mounser also contributed again later in the year.

In the October piece he argued that, since the climate in recent geological time is a series of ice ages with brief interglacials: 'The onset of an ice age could take just 70 years. Being able to avert it by burning fossil fuels, purposely creating a "greenhouse effect", could be one of the luckiest flukes in human history. Yet, strangely, it's the warming of the planet that we fear'. He wrote that documented natural temperature variations with the Arctic losing ice have caused no ecosystem harm and furthermore 'there's also no hard proof that CO₂ is causing the warming anyway' (Mounser 2000: 12).

On 6 December, after Smith's IPCC piece, Mounser appeared again writing about 'Cracks in the greenhouse ...' claiming hundreds of studies don't support the IPCC, and offering some plausible (to the layperson) alternative perspectives. He used rhetoric like 'the high priests' and the 'white coated posse' when referring to mainstream climate scientists, and this name-calling would be a growing trend.

The *Herald* samples for the next year, 2001, presented fewer opinion pieces. Instead the paper ran a stream of political stories about why the United States, supported by Australia, did not want to ratify the Kyoto Protocol. There were also some informative stories linking weather outcomes to climate change. In January 2001 the IPCC assessment, now officially released, received page one treatment, with the risk message being emphasised in the headline: 'Six degrees hotter, global climate alarm bells ring louder'.

What was missing was the context that this alarm was raised more than a decade ago. The 'news' tag applied to successive IPCC reports implying that the risk to society and human agency had just been discovered or made more certain, was in fact historically inaccurate and served to dull urgency about a problem that had been known in detail for 20 years and longer.

Leading audiences to assume that things were only beginning to become scientifically clear also made it harder for them to 'connect the dots' with extreme events on the ground. Instead in 2001, the focus stayed on debate: international response negotiations were framed by both reviewed newspapers as a battle between environmentalists and the government backed by industry. A *Financial Review* article in November 2001, 'Conservationists fail to expel Australian team', for example, reported on non-government organisation complaints about

the Australian negotiating team and its role in Kyoto Protocol negotiations. In that article, the government's role is defended by the Australian Aluminium Council's representative and public relations specialist John Hannagan.

Taken together, the 2000 and 2001 articles suggest that the discussion might be dismissed by audiences as uncertain and debatable or opinion, or as a special interest issue of little concern to the mainstream.

Commercial pressures and ignoring the dots

Commercial considerations always help shape how news is presented and what the important stories are for the ever-more concentrated mass media owned by a few giant corporations (Bagdikian 2004). Commercial pressure regarding the climate change story is therefore nothing new: Gelbspan reported that more than a decade ago in October 1999, he had a conversation with a top editor of a major US TV network asking why the dots were not connected between increased coverage of weather disasters and climate change. The editor said on the one occasion where they tried it, a barrage of complaints was aimed at the top network executives from the industry-funded Global Climate Coalition.

The fossil fuel industry argument then, and now, amplified by sympathetic politicians, is that any one event cannot be linked to human-induced climate change; even mentioning that scientists linked a pattern of violent weather with climate change has been deemed offensive. The editor said the network was intimidated. 'The threat was implicit: if the network persisted, it ran the risk of losing a lot of lucrative oil and auto advertising dollars' (Gelbspan 2004: 80).

In Australia, ABC reporter Alan Tate said that his editors were also deluged with complaints from the resource extraction industry whenever he covered climate change during the 1990s. While not a commercial threat, it might be considered a political threat to the public broadcaster.

It is noteworthy that with recent extreme weather events in Australia, such as the cyclone that destroyed Innisfail in 2006, the 'Black Saturday' extreme bushfires in Victoria in 2009, and the extreme flooding and cyclones of 2011, fire devastation in Tasmania and New South Wales in 2012 and 2013, a similar lack of 'connecting the weather dots' remains evident from politicians and media.

Enormous spin campaign succeeds with reporters

Structurally, the way a newspaper or TV news service is organised is in 'rounds', and many science and society issues like water, wildlife management and climate change will be covered across different rounds—political and economic, as well as science and environment. This affects the quality of reporting: often resting on the judgement of non-science reporters and their willingness to accept opinions or propaganda as fact without a critical knowledge base.

Veteran American journalist Bill Moyers, now one of the corporate media's sternest critics, described the dominant political journalism culture in the United States—and it can as easily apply to Australia:

'Instead of acting as filters for readers and viewers, sifting the truth from the propaganda, reporters and anchors attentively transcribe both sides of the spin—invariably failing to provide context, background, or any sense of which claims hold up and which are misleading.' (quoted in Nichols & McChesney 2005: 25)

'Spin' was also the word used by Tate when he said high-energy users and production industries—aluminium, coal, electricity, and later fertiliser and cement—were actively setting the climate response agenda along with federal officials. Reporters heard and amplified a steady narrative of 'go slow' on climate action (also documented by Pearse 2005 and Hamilton 2001). In Tate's view, 'It was the biggest most powerful spin campaign in Australian media history'. He understood the strategy was to delay action on greenhouse gas emissions until 'coal was ready'—with geo-sequestration (burying carbon gases) and tax support. He told me that what he saw of the communication tactics was:

First sow seeds of doubt about the science — make it a nonsense. Say let's not be part of the Kyoto Protocol — it's too little anyway. Then say OK we've got a techno fix, geo-sequestration and nuclear. Ignore energy efficiency and renewables, why bother, those are green issues, it's all marginal. The Oz main game is coal and cheap energy.

The historical record of this period, found in published documents and books already mentioned, largely agrees with Tate's assessment. What was accomplished during the 1990s by corporate interests, politicians and media was the reframe of the story by denying, downplaying or confusing the risks of climate change and the cementing of a 'business as usual' narrative. The resource industry and lobby groups from aluminium to forestry played a strong role behind the scenes. Political and economic reporters ate it up. Former mass media journalist Wayne Sanderson wrote on the political website *Crikey* in 2006 about the federal press gallery during the Howard government from 1996 on:

In attempting to dictate the terms of the response to climate change, John Howard is the doctor who denied the disease, but now wants to prescribe the cure. And the press gallery shows every sign of letting him get away with it. In fairness, the gallery may be doing the best they can, given they are intellectually retarded on this subject, having shown little interest in it over the years. Search the archives, in vain, for a serious piece by a serious 'insider' on what has been a monumental failure of national public policy.

As a pack, the gallery has allowed the climate change debate to be framed by the government—first it wasn't happening; then it was happening, but there wasn't much Australia could do; now it is serious and nuclear energy will fix it. At each point, the stance has been either totally wrong, or at least questionable, but the fourth estate has been missing in action. (Sanderson 2006)

Where was the public broadcaster and the public interest?

With the parliamentary press gallery missing in action or at least missing the point, the next question might be to enquire more closely why Australia's iconic public broadcaster retreated from informing the public about climate change during the course of the 1990s. Veteran ABC reporter Allan Ashbolt gives one answer, contending that the ABC's main function is 'to legitimise and stabilise the culture and ideology of the present socio-economic system' (Ashbolt 1987: 14–15) and that the 'ABC passively accepts the ideological values passed on by outside institutions'.

In other words, even without the commercial imperative, did the public broadcaster just reflect prevailing government ideology and the narrative agenda set by politicians and the dominant parliamentary press gallery journalists in any given period? The evidence suggest that might be the case, and there was a noticeable switch in the climate change coverage by the end of the 1990s, after an earlier period in the news and science departments which had covered the risk and responsibility story fully.

Looking back, former ABC broadcast producer Richard Smith recalled that he and journalist Geoff Burchfield produced a half-hour thematic special on climate change for the science program *Quantum* in 1988 and that the special came about because the science reporters and producers decided to 'force the issue' and sold

the program to management. Asked what triggered their interest, he said the science of climate change was ‘common knowledge’ and emerging as ‘a serious scientific issue’ at the time.

Smith also noted that conflating the hole in the ozone layer and climate change science was a misperception at the time that the program tackled. A specific trigger for the *Quantum* special was the scientific work coming out of the CSIRO by Pearman and others around the time of the first ‘Greenhouse’ conference in 1987.

A four-season series followed with *A question of survival*. By the early 1990s, however, management sentiment had changed within the science unit. Smith was not sure where the pressure to drop the program came from but the production team was told the audience mood had shifted and people were not interested in an environmental science series anymore. At the same time interest in *Quantum* science coverage had not changed, he told me and, ‘it didn’t seem to me from my interpretation of the figures that there had been a serious erosion of audience interest in environmental science matters’. Management, however, became more interested in the growing information technology revolution.

Meanwhile, ABC news division continued to support Tate’s reporting well into the 1990s, he said. He left in 1998 when he felt that deep uncertainties about climate change had settled into the editorial policy. Other contemporary observers and insiders of the ABC testify that in the late 1990s and early 2000s, self-censorship and timidity marked the public broadcaster *vis a vis* federal government narratives on controversial issues (Manne 2005).

The fact that we still hope for more consistent and incisive journalistic standards from public media may thus appear optimistic, but sometimes that hope is still realised in the remnants of investigative journalism found in ABC *Four Corners*, *Media Watch* and some Radio National documentaries.

Culture wars, agenda-setting, and owning most of the media

‘Culture wars’ is a label for attempts to influence the dominant ideas and values driving a society. Media moguls can have that influence and Rupert Murdoch is one with a long reputation for culture warring and agenda-setting with a deregulation, free enterprise and ‘freedom’ mission. His News Limited (and News Corp internationally) has shown its ability to help make and break governments not only in the United Kingdom, but also in Australia, as has been examined in a shower of recent books and documentaries.

Parent company News Corp has an international reputation for inflammatory and opinionated publication with significant right-wing influence in the United States with the *Fox news* network. It also exerts ideological influence through the *New York Post* and *The Wall Street Journal*. In the United Kingdom, News Corp enjoyed unparalleled political influence until undone by the recent phone-hacking scandal enveloping its tabloid press, which also dampened monopoly plans for its satellite Sky TV network.

News Limited Australian mastheads include the national daily *The Australian*, as well as *The Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), *The Herald Sun* (Melbourne), *The Courier Mail* (Brisbane) and *The Advertiser* (Adelaide). Sky News is here as well and making inroads on the mobile communication front.

This dominant newspaper position in recent decades, in combination with political attacks on the ABC (and the broadcaster's timidity in response), plus an aggressive right-wing commentariat assembled on News Limited pages, has had profound impacts on Australian political culture. Not missing has been significant influence on public understanding and discussion of anthropogenic climate change (Manne 2005, 2011).

The Australian and the tabloids have maintained a consistent stance since at least the mid-1990s of uncertainty and doubt regarding climate change science and any attempts at regulated response that would affect commercial activity (Manne 2011). The world view coincides with the increasing hegemony of market fundamentalist thought in Western English-speaking democracies where News Corp operates.

A newspaper can exert influence and reflect its perspective in editorials, opinion pieces, headlines and story slant. In the case of *The Australian* and its 'culture war' on this topic and others, journalist and media researcher David McKnight writes that, editorially, News Limited exhibits a sympathetic value relationship with right wing think tanks and federal politicians from both major parties:

This orthodoxy is one which holds to certain doctrinaire ideals about economic management, national identity, foreign affairs, public schools, climate change and many other issues ...

It is an orthodoxy which is shared by a number of senior journalists at News Ltd and by many of their editorial writers, columnists and contributors. It is an intellectual universe in which a network of conservative think tanks, academics and writers of the right have a symbiotic relationship with the newspapers of News Ltd ... and most significantly the coalition government under John Howard. (McKnight 2005a: 54)

Based on sympathy of ideas, it is not surprising that Murdoch backed, with his newspapers, the Howard Coalition bid for government in 1995/1996, and Tony Abbott in 2013, while in 2007 Murdoch reportedly thought he would have major influence with Kevin Rudd and backed him at that time.

A near monopoly of news outlets in major metropolitan centres can quickly spread ideas it favours. An analysis of News Limited publications exposed their positive coverage of geologist Ian Plimer's 2009 contrarian book on climate science (McKewon 2009). The researcher thought this might have had a significant effect on the political discussion of an emission trading scheme at the time. She also documented a trend to release sceptical science books at key political time points.

This has been an ongoing tactic of free market think tanks that question climate change, particularly the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA) and the Lavoisier Group, with their thoughts amplified by sympathetic media outlets. Four such books were reportedly published in 2009, including Plimer's. (The public broadcaster, with its national coverage, also gave Plimer's book a sympathetic airing as a 'balancing' voice).

McKnight gives examples of the undisguised ideological bent of some News Limited editors and writers over the years (in a profession that cloaks itself in supposed neutrality and impartiality). He writes of editor Leslie Hollings who had open ties to the IPA in the 1980s: 'For a decade Hollings was a key figure in fashioning the ideological stance of *The Australian* and News Ltd' (McKnight 2005a: 61), including championing economic rationalist goals like deregulation.

In this way 'culture wars' of ideas are deployed on the value front, with editorial policy slanted for business and political objectives on an issue like climate change. Who first marks the agenda—whether media or policymakers—may be difficult to unravel: in the climate change case it may well have fallen into place through personalities and ideological agreement.

But in 2005 at least one veteran newsman and long-time ABC professional, Quentin Dempster, concluded that the lack of diversity and the concentration of media power in Australia was a sign of media corporations' power *over* the politicians, affording a handful of media owners strangleholds over the nation's sources of mainstream information. He wrote: '... we must remind ourselves that Murdoch (News Limited) and Kerry Packer (Consolidated Press and TV channels) are not called 'the gatekeepers' for nothing. They have had a testicular hold on our prime ministers from Fraser to Howard' (Dempster 2005: 113).

To put this in further context, influence lies not just with global media companies such as News Corp. Transnational corporations in general exert major influence in Australia and did on Australian climate policy during the 1990s—aluminium

smelting, coal, and metals corporations topping the list. These are backed by US-developed public relations techniques and the agenda-setting role of domestic and international free market think tanks since the 1970s.

Regarding other Australian print media, media critic Guy Rundle (Rundle 2005) painted a picture of journalistic 'decline' at the Fairfax corporation, which owns *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Australian Financial Review*. This began under the influence of a conservative board led by free market competition policy advocate Fred Hilmer and prominent conservative businessman (sports, mining, casinos) Ron Walker in the mid-1990s.

Rundle characterised the decline as a shift from being a publisher reflecting a pluralistic society to one more closely aligned with the economic rationalist world view that overtook Australian culture and society. That may help explain the change in treatment of climate change stories and the shift to uncertainty through opinion and 'balancing' of stories in the later 1990s in the *Herald*, and the shift to a partisan defence of resource industries' interests in the *Financial Review*.

Since then the Fairfax empire has suffered major economic woes and contraction, having fewer resources than News Limited to weather the worldwide decline of print media related to changes in advertising income. In its slimmed down state, however, Fairfax has in recent times produced significant climate change science and policy coverage that is more akin to the early days.

Language that supports culture wars

A similarity to classic propaganda techniques is evident with the 'us and them' framing that has taken place in the course of redefining the climate change story. Divisive language denigrating climate scientists and environmentalists has been part of the armoury of this culture war, while the general rightward shift has seen regulation of business for public health or environmental concerns painted as a drift to socialism and to the 'left' influenced by outsiders, without raising many eyebrows.

The divisive 'us and them' frame is regularly applied by columnists and particularly radio talk show hosts to decry climate change science and those who believe climate change is an urgent risk to society. Take for example a 2009 piece by columnist Christopher Pearson, a former speechwriter for Howard as prime minister.

In launching Plimer's book in *The Australian* under the headline 'Sceptic spells doom for alarmist religion', Pearson accuses climate scientists and

environmentalists of ‘religious’ fanaticism and calls the IPCC findings pseudoscience led by ‘eco-fundamentalists’ who hate the modern world and subscribe to ‘anti-human totalitarianism’ (Pearson 2009). ‘Us and them’ rhetoric is not confined to any one sector or ideological perspective in society but is relevant to this story because of its contributing role in re-establishing neo-conservative and traditional values from 1996 on.

Story metaphors of home, hearth and national interest

Getting the story wrong in the news media has been made easier by the journalistic convention of reporting issues as dramatic personal narratives, framing global issues such as anthropogenic climate change in metaphors of personal loss or gain and one-on-one contested argument. Thus the dominant narrative by federal politicians and the media in the late 1990s painted action on climate change not as risk management for the whole society, but as a threat to jobs and businesses, and an attack by ‘them’ (in Europe or the United Nations) on ‘our national interest’ (read family).

In this storyline, market capitalism is synonymous with political democracy and ‘freedom’, and there is a natural order in the type of economy Australia operates—i.e., the emphasis on export of natural resources. Freedom evokes a metaphorical pathway that signals choice and lack of regulation and ‘national interest’; that is every family’s interest, comes through wealth from mineral extraction—coal being most relevant here. These value metaphors gloss over the reality that co-driving Australia’s resource extraction policies are multinational corporations with their own interests, both on the ground and in the media.

How this coded value language is applied in the media/political culture wars is further illustrated in a 2003 book by David Flint, *The Twilight of the Elites*. Flint enjoyed a power position in regard to the Australian consumer and the Australian media as former chair of the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) and of the Australian Press Council during the 1990s. His book candidly sketches and approves of a campaign by the right against the left wing of Australian politics.

Australian sovereignty and prosperity are dominant themes in this world view, as is an attack on ‘Australia’s media and legal elites’ represented by those who disagree. Labelling opponents elites (as opposed to the rest of us) has been a common rhetorical tactic. He writes: ‘A significant feature of the elite agenda involves the surrender of part of our sovereignty to international organisations’ (Flint 2003: 154).

Anti-United Nations sentiment helps explain why the IPCC gains no respect from people holding this world view. With regard to the Kyoto Protocol, Flint writes 'The Kyoto Protocol is obviously another elite passion' (2003: 175) and proceeds to quote the Lavoisier Group, and prominent sceptics Fred Singer, Ian Castles and others on climate change—as well Brian Fisher of the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics (ABARE) at the time, whose economic modelling underpinned much of the argument about the potential severe damage to the Australian economy if Australia signed any significant Kyoto targets.

Propaganda techniques have been successfully adapted to much of what we understand today as public relations and marketing techniques. Common propaganda techniques that can be recognised in the metaphors and language applied to 'sceptical' climate change discussions include: the use of fear, name calling, glittering generalities, euphemisms (that appear as metaphorical language or misleading labels) and appeals to what the Americans call 'plain folks' and Australians would call 'the battlers' (Delwiche 1995). An extension of these techniques can be seen in the public relations advice on how to frame climate change science to stress uncertainty offered by Frank Luntz (2003). In this framing, specialist climate scientists can be regarded as just another 'academic elite', out to keep their jobs and their perks.

That public relations advice has had an increasingly strong hold on what passes as news can be shown from media research. Modern politicians and business leaders all have public relations advisers. By 2001 researchers were asking 'how it is that practitioners of public relations have managed to usurp authorship of the news?' (Ward 2001: 178).

Talkback rules

While public relations techniques help mould what audience perceive to be reality, in Australia considerable influence in the public war of ideas is waged by talkback radio. Radio professional John Faine argues that a major strategic advantage for the Howard federal Coalition view of the world from the mid-1990s was the understanding of the importance of talkback radio. 'Talk radio has overtaken all of the forms of media—electronic or print—as a political medium in Australia. It has become the daily agenda setter and the preferred organ for national and state leaders to sell policies and ideas' (Faine 2005: 167).

Consequently, the commercial radio talkback hosts, along with the politicians they interview, wield immense power on the daily issue agenda for public discussion. Action on climate change has not been a favoured item. The most popular talk show hosts in major Australian cities make their bread and butter by

taking extreme positions, saying outrageous and abusive things about politicians or climate scientists, among others, and diving right into the economy versus the environment divide of the culture wars.

One-time Labor political adviser and self-styled 'left' media commentator Dennis Glover, described the role of the media, whether radio, press or television, in 1990s agenda-setting:

(Prime Minister) John Howard had the powerful levers of government at his disposal to influence public opinion, but he had something more—a strong forward pack of media supporters willing to pick up a policy or a message, and smash through the opposing teams defences ... the screaming front page 'exclusives', rabid opinion columns, unbalanced editorials, soft radio interviews and opponents made timid by their own ethical codes, must be close to what the Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci had in mind when he coined the term 'hegemony'. (Glover 2005: 213)

Dominating the channels of information in the way I have discussed in this chapter helped install an ideological hegemony that obscured earlier knowledge of what James Baker, former head of the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), said of climate change science in 1997: 'There's no better scientific consensus on any other issue I know—except perhaps Newton's second law of dynamics' (Gelbspan 2005: 73).

A majority of media coverage during the second half of the 1990s and in subsequent years ignored both this message and acres of previous newsprint that took human agency as a given, to report instead that human involvement in climate change was contested and prompt action was not going to happen because it would cost the economy and cost every family.

The fascinating issue that arises is the nature of perceived 'reality' to which the public reacts on a daily basis. In this story it has changed from one decade to the next.

Academic research, particularly from science history, neuroscience and psychology shows, along with the documentary evidence trail, that what we know as reality can be, and is, manipulated by elite agenda setters within societies. The media and politicians, reflecting ideas, values and influential backers, set and reset the agenda. Their beliefs and policies dictate what the public hears, aided by the heavily researched tools of public relations, the basing of news on what politicians say, and media practices that favour drama and controversy.

7. Influences on a changed story and the new normal: media locks in the new narrative

But what about scientists themselves, what role did they play in the revised story of 'can't do' on climate change action that gripped Australia and other countries in the 1990s?

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