

The BBC and climate change

The BBC Trust has set up a review 'to assess the accuracy and impartiality of the BBC's coverage of science'. Here, **Richard Black** and **James Delingpole** disagree about whether the BBC's coverage of climate change is biased.

Impartial and honest

Richard Black defends the BBC

The febrile blogosphere has not just created an urban myth regarding the BBC's coverage of climate change. It has created an entire urban mythology.

Some tenets of this belief system are that the BBC has an institutional bias against climate 'scepticism' following a diktat laid down by some authoritarian central scrutinizer. Also, that the BBC never publishes articles or allows onto its airwaves those of a 'sceptical' disposition, or reports scientific advances that challenge 'climate catastrophism'. Furthermore, that the BBC ignores stories troublesome to the 'establishment', such as the so-called 'Climategate' affair or alleged mistakes in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 2007 assessment report.

On the surface, it's a mystery why this mythology is perpetuated in certain corners of the UK media when the evidence that it's false is easily obtained by spending five minutes on the BBC News website. Didn't report 'Climategate'? We were the first mainstream news organisation in the world to do so. Didn't report IPCC mistakes? We had the erroneous Himalayan glacier melting date in the output on 5 December, again before other mainstream organisations. Don't give sceptical or non-catastrophic issues an outing? So you didn't hear Ian Plimer on *Today*, or read the article on 29 March on why the Gulf Stream isn't turning off?

I say it's a mystery 'on the surface' because when you consider the wider context, it's no mystery at all.

Political context

For the last 15 years, climate science has been a political football, reaching pitches of unprecedented nastiness during the last twelve months as the Copenhagen summit approached.

Some UK newspapers have launched blogs that ape some of the more vitriolic and highly partisan offerings on the web.

It is predominantly from these corners of the media that the cry of 'BBC bias' emanates.

Sceptics' organisations have successfully created the impression that there is a single debate within the scientific community, between 'warmists' and themselves. In doing so, they have cast mainstream climate scientists as their polar opposite, with some point of 'balance' being halfway in between.

'Balance' not bipolar

From *Seesaw to Wagon Wheel*, the BBC Trust's 2007 report into impartiality,¹ concluded that this simple, bipolar view is not an adequate picture of the real world. Balance does not lie halfway in between the 'warmists' and 'sceptics'; the weight of evidence favours a discernible impact of humanity's greenhouse gas emissions on the climate. This position is adopted either explicitly or implicitly by most mainstream UK newspapers whose environment correspondents cover climate change in roughly the same way that we do, and privately praise our coverage.

Now, sceptics' organisations are attempting to paint a similarly bipolar picture of how climate science is reported, with 'establishment' journalists cast as being in uncritical thrall to the warming deity, opposed to the independent, free-blogging spirits who are the only ones displaying any academic rigour. Yet it was bloggers rather than mainstream journalists who fell hook, line and sinker for the *Journal of Geoclimatic Studies* spoof back in 2007. If you've forgotten the details, Google it, and ask yourself how much rigour was displayed when something so ideologically appealing yet so scientifically bizarre came along.

Some readers might think I'm erecting a smug, self-satisfied screen to obscure an unwillingness to confront problems with BBC reporting. Absolutely, I am not.

We take the responsibility of covering climate change accurately very seriously. Our office regularly sees robust dissections of past coverage. We do not get everything right, but we do attempt to be impartial and honest. We accept honest criticism, on all subjects and at all times. Tendentious criticism is another thing – and we should not shy away from calling it what it is.

1. See www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/review_report_research/impartiality_21century/report.pdf



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The BBC is biased

It's official policy, says **James Delingpole**

BBC bias on 'climate change' is often more insidious than overt – and all the more dangerous for it because it conveys to its audience a spurious air of scrupulous neutrality.

I'll give you one tiny recent example. The other day I was invited onto BBC2's *The Daily Politics* to debate Anthropogenic Global Warming (AGW) with George Monbiot. All very balanced, you might think: ardent denier v passionate warmist. Except it wasn't.

Monbiot had been granted the luxury of preceding our discussion with a two and half minute filmed segment, in which he was shown looking earnest and caring amid the beautiful Welsh landscape, while making any number of emotive but unsubstantiated assertions about the grave threat of AGW. This hardly got things off to an even start; nor was I allowed nearly enough space to rebut George's tendentious claims.

Almost worse, it had been decided for some reason that Monbiot should be allowed to sit in the studio as an expert witness on a range of subjects for the entire half-hour length of the programme, while I was wheeled on at the end, almost as an afterthought.

Paranoia? Petulance? Sour grapes? Sure we media luvvies don't half love to get on our high horse about any number of perceived slights. But we also understand intimately how the media works. We know that it's not just about what you say, but about context. I know of several leading climate 'sceptics' who now

refuse outright to lend their expertise to BBC debates, knowing as they do from experience how the argument will always be skewed in one direction.

'Frankly shocking'

And indeed, on closer scrutiny, this bias turns out to be enshrined in official BBC policy. Here is what its June 2007 report, *From Seesaw to Wagonwheel: Safeguarding impartiality in the 21st century*¹ has to say:

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

And here is what one witness – a sceptic, not a denier – made of that seminar: 'I found the seminar frankly shocking. The BBC crew (senior executives from every branch of the corporation) were matched by an equal number of specialists, almost all (and maybe all) of whom could be said to have come from the "we must support Kyoto" school of climate change activists.'

I think there are strong financial motives, too, for the BBC's particular stance on AGW. It recently emerged that the BBC's £8 billion Pension Trust – currently struggling to reverse a whopping £2 billion deficit – is heavily exposed to the carbon trading market. This in turn is heavily dependent on government legislation which will only pass if voters are persuaded that AGW represents a genuine and grave danger. In other words, I think it's strongly in the BBC's interests not to give a voice to climate scepticism.

Feebler consensus

Yet in the wake of Climategate, more and more evidence has emerged to suggest that the so-called 'consensus' science on AGW is much feebler than was thought. The public mood is shifting. Has the BBC responded by reporting on this new level of doubt? By and large it has not, as at least one former insider – Peter Sissons – has noticed:

'The corporation's most famous interrogators invariably begin by accepting that "the science is settled" when there are countless reputable scientists and climatologists producing work that says it isn't. It is, in effect, BBC policy, enthusiastically carried out by the BBC's environment correspondents, that those views should not be heard.'

From what I know and understand of the BBC's socio-political make-up and instincts, this is unlikely to change any time soon.

1. www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/review_report_research/impartiality_21century/report.pdf



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