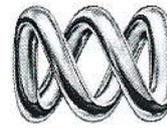


26 March 2013

Malcolm-Ieuan Roberts  
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**ABC**  
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Dear Mr Roberts

Thank you for your correspondence dated 15 February and 7 March, 2013, copies of which you have sent to the Chairman and the Managing Director, as well as various ABC program areas and staff. The Chairman and Managing Director have asked me to respond on their behalf.

If I understand correctly, you are requesting that the ABC Board commission an investigation into the ABC's coverage of climate change-related content, across all its programs and platforms. I can advise that the ABC has no plans to instigate a study of the sort you are proposing; however, the Corporation has a robust Board endorsed complaint handling process.

The ABC is committed to reviewing complaints that allege breaches of its editorial standards by specific programs or publications. Those complaints should be submitted within six weeks of broadcast or publication and are assessed by Audience and Consumer Affairs, which is separate and independent from ABC program making areas.

As you would appreciate, our resources are not infinite and investigations need to be proportionate to the nature of the complaint.

With the exception of *The Science Show* of 24 November 2012, all the specific examples of ABC content you cite are too old for Audience and Consumer Affairs to investigate. It is an unreasonable burden on program makers to have to respond in detail to complaints about work they may have done many months or years before. It is also the case that after such a long period of time, all relevant material to properly investigate a complaint may no longer be available, and the program makers themselves may have moved elsewhere.

However, we are able to respond to your complaint in relation to the *The Science Show* of 24 November 2012. Audience and Consumer Affairs are satisfied that when taken in context the introductory comments by presenter Robyn Williams did not equate climate change sceptics to paedophiles. This segment was framed in terms of the broad subject of distortions of science by using the example of the US election and politics more generally. The presenter quoted from a recent *New Scientist* magazine article on the US election and then stated:

*What if I told you that paedophilia is good for children, or that asbestos is an excellent inhalant for those with asthma? Or that smoking crack is a normal part and a healthy one of teenage life, to be encouraged? You'd rightly find it outrageous. But there have been similar statements coming out of inexpert mouths again and again in recent times, distorting the science. This is what The Economist magazine said last week about the election in America ...*

These rhetorical questions, as Robyn Williams said, were “outrageous” and used to grab the listeners' attention and highlight the broad point that absurd statements have been made in the face of scientific evidence. The examples were not intended to be taken literally and were not particularly in relation to climate scepticism. Rather, these obviously hyperbolic statements were used to illustrate the general point that the distortion of science in public debate can have dire consequences.

Your comments regarding Professor Stephan Lewandowsky are noted. Audience and Consumer Affairs are satisfied that Professor Lewandowsky's work on science scepticism was appropriate for and of relevance to *The Science Show* audience. We have concluded that the program was in keeping with ABC editorial standards.

In relation to your complaints about various other programs and ABC program-makers, I believe it is fair to say that they can largely be summed up by saying that you believe the ABC gives disproportionate credence to those climate scientists who believe that human activities are significantly contributing to global warming. While we are unable to investigate the specific examples you have provided, it may be helpful for us to explain the ABC's approach to climate change science.

The ABC is not itself a scientific organisation, rather it reports the scientific work of others. In doing so it must make judgements about the relative credibility of sources of information and weigh the publicly available evidence. Experienced science journalists like Robyn Williams and Dr Karl Kruszelnicki are well equipped to make these judgements.

While the ABC impartiality standard requires that “*no significant strand of thought or belief within the community [should be] knowingly excluded or disproportionately represented*” (section 4.2) it does not dictate that equal time should be given to all views on contentious issues. The Code makes it clear that judgements must be made and that “*balance... follows the weight of evidence*”.

The judgement of experienced ABC producers and reporters has been that the weight of evidence supports the basic proposition that greenhouse gases are contributing to global warming. To a large extent that conclusion is based on the fact that the majority of relevantly qualified scientists support that assessment and their conclusions are backed up by good quality peer-reviewed scientific research.

Consequently, the ABC does not believe it is necessary to debate this core proposition every time a story is produced that relates to some new aspect of climate science or climate policy.

Of course, there are dissenters and any fair examination of the evidence reveals that there is uncertainty about both the future course of global warming and the correct policy responses. As is evidenced from the stories you have referred to, differing views are presented in ABC programs from time to time. The ABC will continue to report developments on the science that progress understanding of the issues.

If in the future you believe a particular ABC program or publication is not accordance with ABC editorial standards, your complaint will be given careful consideration. Please ensure that the correspondence clearly identifies the content, what standard you believe has been breached and why you believe it is not in keeping the Code. Generally, complaints should be lodged within six weeks of broadcast or publication.

Thank you for taking the time to write to the ABC; your feedback is appreciated. For your reference, a copy of the ABC Code of Practice is enclosed.

Should you be dissatisfied with this response, you may be able to pursue your complaint with the Australian Communications and Media Authority, <http://www.acma.gov.au> .

Yours sincerely



Kirstin McLiesh  
Head, Audience & Consumer Affairs