

# LIES, DEBATES, AND SILENCES.

How News Corp produces  
climate scepticism in Australia

By Wendy Bacon & Arunn Jegan  
December 2020

An independent research report commissioned by GetUp



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The authors wish to acknowledge that this work was produced on the land of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation. Their land was never ceded.



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This independent research was commissioned by GetUp members as an update to the previous research by the authors in 2011 & 2013 on behalf of the Australian Centre For Independent Journalism at the University of Technology Sydney. The responsibility for the design and execution of the project remained solely with the authors. The authors would like to thank GetUp, especially Ed Miller, Anusha Muller and Alix Foster Vander Elst for their collaboration, support, and the development of the initial scope of the research.



# INTRODUCTION

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**This report presents the results of an investigation into how four publications, owned by Australia's most powerful media company, News Corp Australia, covered anthropogenic climate change and its impacts from April 2019 to March 2020. These publications are The Australian, Herald Sun, The Daily Telegraph and The Courier Mail.**

The issues that this report investigates go to the heart of Australia's politics and system of government. For years, the International Governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and other powerful scientific communities around the world have warned that if the world does not act urgently to reduce its dependence on fossil fuels, there will be massive impacts on all forms of life. Five years ago more than 200 nations agreed to measures to lessen greenhouse gas emissions at the behest of the United Nations (the Paris Agreement). The warnings from scientists have become ever more cogent and urgent. As a country dependent on fossil fuels, this poses a huge political challenge for Australia. As with all political challenges, the media is an active player in determining how we meet that challenge.

It happens that Australia also has one of the most concentrated media markets in the world. News Corp is a powerful global company. In Australia it is the dominant force controlling more than 50% of the national newspaper market and holding a near monopoly of print-based publications in some states. It also controls Sky News, which it cross-promotes across all its publications. For more than 30 years News Corp Australia's dominance of the media market has been seen by many commentators as a threat to our democracy. In 2012, barrister and retired judge Raymond Finkelstein conducted an independent inquiry into the media and found that the power that

News Corp exercises is potentially a threat to democracy. News Corp repudiated his findings, describing them as a threat to its 'free speech'.

This research builds on two other reports produced for the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism (ACIJ) at the University of Technology, Sydney (The ACIJ has since closed). Those reports found that News Corp had vigorously campaigned against ex-Prime Minister Julia Gillard's carbon price policy and had actively produced large amounts of content that undermined the work of the world's climate scientists. News Corp's campaigns were justified by appeals to its right to free speech and the importance of journalists sticking up for dissenters. ([Bacon, 2011](#) & [Bacon, 2013](#)).

When that report appeared, the then Director of the ACIJ, climate-change researcher and journalist Associate Professor Tom Morton was [quoted](#) in *The Conversation* as saying, 'If you believe that the main obligation of journalists is to the public right to know, the results of this study are truly alarming. Journalism is about reporting contemporary events as accurately as possible. There could be no better example of the importance of this than the reporting of climate science.'

Eight years later and with an even greater understanding of the urgency of the threat of climate change, the same authors welcomed the chance to produce this report, commissioned by GetUp.

A number of volunteers also contributed to the work of data coding for this report, and we thank them. They share our concern about how News Corp covers climate change. Our aim has been to produce the most accurate report possible, and responsibility for its content lies solely with the authors.

The research sample is very large, and as we report, the patterns that have emerged are clear. Despite News Corp's executive chairman Rupert Murdoch saying in two consecutive years (2019, 2020) that there are no 'climate denials' in his company, News Corp continues to pursue its practice, honed over many years, of producing large amounts of content that derides and undermines climate science, climate scientists and climate policy change advocates.

Like any other media organisation, News Corp Australia is not monolithic. Editorial strategies driven by commercial and political imperatives are geared towards building targeted audiences. Over the years, as documented in our previous reports, journalists have pushed back against News Corp's editorial agenda, some even

eventually leaving their jobs. Mostly, journalists accept the findings of climate science, although news reporting is still oriented to fit News Corp Australia's editorial agenda. This is why the role that opinion and commentary plays is so important.

Journalists not only produce visible content. They can also produce absences: silences and invisibilities. Our research reveals absences, including the exclusion of leading climate scientists and of First Nations sources, and the production of a myopic worldview, in which the plight of communities impacted by extreme weather linked to climate change in the Pacific, South Asia, South-East Asia, and elsewhere, is invisible.

Some may argue that News Corp Australia's repeated attacks on climate science don't matter. As recent polls show, most Australians understand that climate change is happening. News Corp's audience and revenue is declining. However, if particular audiences, even if not huge, are being told that their interests, values and way of life are threatened, it can only make the processes of change slower and more difficult.

**News Corp's coverage seems to be more about producing ignorance than informing people so they can participate in debates about solutions. If people are confused or ignorant about potential threats, they cannot be expected to support action to confront these**

Our research clearly demonstrates active opposition by News Corp Australia to the development and implementation of effective public policy to address the massive threats of anthropogenic climate change.

Half a million signatures on a 2020 petition to Parliament calling for a Royal Commission into News Corp Australia is an indication that there is a great deal of public concern about the role that News Corp plays in climate change and other political debates. We hope that this report will increase public and scholarly understanding about the complexity of media strategies to serve an editorially defined political agenda of thwarting popular knowledge about and effective policy responses to anthropogenic climate change.

— Wendy Bacon and Arunn Jegan  
December 2020

# KEY FINDINGS

We identified & analysed all news, features, opinion pieces, letters, and editorials that discussed climate change across four News Corp publications – The Daily Telegraph, Herald Sun, Courier Mail, and The Australian – between April 2019 and March 2020. Here is what we found:

## Quantity of climate change coverage

- The total of relevant items was 8,612. (Section 4.1).
- Nearly half of all items (44%) were in The Australian. (Section 4.1).
- Information-based reportage (news and features) was 38% (Section 4.2). Nearly two-thirds (62%) of the coverage was commentary (editorials, opinion, and letters). The strong influence of commentary on the overall message about climate change is evident, both in volume, and in seeding and shaping ideas and analysis.

## News Corp produces climate scepticism

- All of the four News Corp publications produce substantial amounts of material that is sceptical about the findings of climate science. Overall, 45% of all items either rejected or cast doubt upon consensus scientific findings. (Section 4.5).
- The Daily Telegraph is the most sceptical of the News Corp publications, with 58% of content discussing climate change being sceptical (Section 4.5).
- Most News Corp reporters do not actively promote sceptical views. Reportage (news and features) was less sceptical than commentary (editorials, opinions, and letters), with 89% of reportage accepting climate science findings. (Section 4.5).
- Commentary items (editorials, opinions, and letters) drove scepticism in all News Corp publications. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of opinion pieces were sceptical towards climate science (Section 4.5).
- Out of a total of 2,309 opinion articles, the top ten opinion writers accounted for 44% of content. All of these opinion writers are either climate change sceptics, promote scepticism in their articles, or are negative towards climate action/efforts. The top five were Andrew Bolt, Tim Blair, Peta Credlin, Peter Gleeson, and Chris Kenny, all of whom are occasional or regular Sky News presenters. (Section 5).

## News Corp produces climate scepticism (cont.)

- Andrew Bolt, a prominent sceptic, is the largest contributor to stories about climate change with 405 opinion articles, accounting for 12% of all articles (news, features, editorials, and opinion) in the Herald Sun, The Daily Telegraph, and Courier Mail combined. In the Herald Sun alone he had 32% of all articles. He is strongly promoted and prominently endorsed by News Corp. (Section 5).
- Of the 55% of stories that accepted climate science, there was negligible reporting of the findings of climate scientists or the impacts of climate change. Misunderstandings about climate science were almost always promoted rather than clarified or explained (see sections 4.4 and 6.2).

## Attitudes towards climate action/efforts

- Of 3,029 items where an attitude to policy was relevant, 57% were negative towards climate action, 16% were neutral, and only 27% were positive. Items were more than twice as likely to be negative than positive. News Corp is an active player on the side of political and economic interests resisting action on climate change. (Section 4.6).
- The most negative was the Daily Telegraph with only 22% of items communicating a positive attitude towards climate change efforts. (Section 4.6).
- News Corp opinion pieces were more than twice as likely to be negative towards climate change action than news stories, while news items were twice as likely to be positive than opinion pieces. (Section 4.6).
- There was a lack of diversity of sources and perspective in climate coverage. The Herald Sun provided the most one-dimensional coverage with 82% of opinion pieces being negative towards climate change action, and 62% of reportage (news and features) having one or two sources only. (Sections 4.4 and 4.6).
- Politics and policy themes dominate the coverage of climate change in the four News Corp publications and are strongly linked to climate scepticism. This reveals how strongly the negative interpretation of climate change science and action is linked to political conflict over energy policy. (Section 4.3).
- News Corp provides those readers with an interest in business with a more realistic perspective on climate change and climate science findings. Business-themed reportage (news and features) was more likely to be accepting of climate change science (95%) and was more balanced towards action on climate change. Just over half (55%) of business reportage was positive towards action/efforts. (Section 6.3).

## Who gets a voice?

- Half of all the news and features had no source or just one source, which demonstrates the superficial nature of much of the reportage. (Section 4.4).
- In one year, only 11 or 0.2% First Nations sources were identified in stories relating to climate change. Indigenous people were effectively silenced on matters relating to climate change. (Section 4.4).
- Men dominated the coverage of climate change. Where gender could be identified, men were quoted on 76% of occasions, women were quoted on 24% of occasions and <1% were non-binary. (Section 4.4).
- Readers of News Corp Australia are receiving almost no information about the impacts of climate change at either the global level or in the Indo-Pacific where Australia claims a regional leadership role. (Section 4.4).
- Political sources dominated, at 47% of all sources. This reflects the partisan politicisation and decades-long tussle over policy that dominates coverage of climate change in Australia. (Section 4.4).
- Although civil society (environmental groups, NGOs, think-tanks) are often engaged with climate change issues, they represented only 4% of sources. At the same time, civil society groups were often the objects of derision and abuse. They were only occasionally given a voice to respond or state their views. Effectively they were silenced. (Section 4.4).
- Financial, fossil fuel and other mining sources accounted for 56% of all business sources, while renewable energy business accounted for 5%. (Section 4.4).
- Ten percent of political sources were Australian independent or minor party politicians (other than the Greens). They included Independents at the national, state, and local level. Only 7% of the political sources were Greens at all levels of government, and nearly all articles quoting Greens were negative coverage. (Section 4.4).
- Scientists had very little visibility in News Corp's coverage of climate change. Only 6% of all sources across four News Corp publications were scientists of any kind. Some scientists were also negatively targeted by News Corp publications. (Sections 4.4 and 6.2).
- In a science and environment piece, News Corp is more than twice as likely to quote a politician than a scientist on climate change topics, which is a further indication of the deeply politicised approach to coverage of the science. (Section 4.4).



# METHODOLOGY

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This report investigates media coverage of climate change by four Australian outlets, owned by [News Corp Australia](#), over 12 months from 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020. The chosen outlets are the print and online editions of [The Australian](#), [The Daily Telegraph](#), the [Herald Sun](#), and the [Courier Mail](#). Mastheads that have a Sunday edition were merged with daily editions. For example, The Daily Telegraph includes The Sunday Telegraph.

The Australian is one of only two national newspapers in Australia. (The other is [The Australian Financial Review](#) which is owned by [Nine Entertainment Co](#)). The Daily Telegraph is published in Sydney and competes with [The Sydney Morning Herald](#) which is owned by Nine Entertainment Co. The Herald Sun is published in Melbourne and competes with [The Age](#) which is also owned by Nine Entertainment Co. The Courier Mail is the only metropolitan daily newspaper in Brisbane. (More details about each of these publications can be found in the relevant sections of this report).

There are a variety of different approaches that can be used to analyse media coverage. This study used an exhaustive sampling method and content analysis which involves coding different characteristics of the coverage. This provides a view of the 'shape' and patterns of the coverage (Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1991, p.50; Bacon & Nash, 2003). This is supplemented with case studies and examples to provide further depth of understanding of how journalistic and editing strategies are used to produce particular types of coverage (Bacon & Nash, 2012). Finally, journalistic research techniques are used to highlight gaps and silences in reporting.

## 3.1 CONTENT ANALYSIS

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[The Dow Jones Factiva](#) database (owned by News Corp) was used to retrieve all articles which mentioned and/or dealt with climate science, global warming, climate change, climate policy, carbon or greenhouse emissions or climate activism. All items were included which mentioned any of these search terms whether or not it was the main theme of the article or only a minor yet still relevant mention. Items were excluded where the mention was merely incidental. For example, an item in which there was a reference to a 'Minister for Climate Change' but no other relevant mention of climate change at all was excluded from the sample.

News Corp shares many articles among their publications. We counted each occurrence as a separate item. Many items also occurred in both print and online editions of the same publication. In these cases, items were only counted once.



## **Recruitment and training of researchers for coding of content**

Potential coders were recruited, briefed and then checked for research experience before taking a competency test. All candidates underwent various stages of training, including an induction to the underlying research concepts, a practical coding test, and, for those who were selected, on-the-spot training to ensure consistency and to limit variability where interpretation was involved in coding. Only those who had demonstrated a high level of accuracy were included in the final coding team. Ongoing feedback and training was provided throughout the project.

## **Quality control**

Comprehensive data validation mechanisms were in place and any systemic irregularities that were identified were addressed. All raw data was entered into spreadsheets and checks were conducted to ensure accuracy and consistency in coding; for example, selections of data were double-coded and systematic sampling was used to survey coding consistency. Researchers were also given the option for the research coordinator to check information that was difficult to code. The margin of error was further mitigated by using a large sample size, where emerging patterns are clear and more accurate.

## **General**

- Publication.
- Date.
- Headline or first words of letters.
- Author/Byline.
- Type of item: four types of journalism (news, features, editorials, opinion) and readers' letters.
- Word count (for selected sample only).

## **Theme analysis**

- Dominant theme.
- Second theme of item, where relevant.

## **Source analysis - sources quoted in articles.**

- Analysis of sources quoted for reportage which includes news and features. If present, names of first and second sources quoted were coded.
- Occupation, affiliation and identifiable gender of each source.

## Attitude or stance towards action to mitigate or adapt to climate change

- Stance of item towards action to address climate change (positive, negative, neutral, N/A).

## Attitude to key findings of climate science

- Attitude to findings of climate science including scientific consensus on anthropogenic climate change and other key climate science findings including on extreme weather and climate change. Researchers were asked to allocate each article into one of four categories - rejects, questions or raises doubt, accepts, or, unable to discern.
- These last two categories require interpretation. Researchers were provided with standardised principles sourced from publicly available information to encourage consistency. These issues are further discussed in the [sections 4.5 and 4.6](#).
- All numerical figures in this report have been rounded to whole numbers.

### 3.2 CASE STUDIES

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Case studies and examples are used to explore the data in more depth. These provide an understanding of how News Corp Australia uses journalistic strategies to produce particular types of coverage and meaning.

Gaps and silences are significant features of media coverage: we used journalistic research methods to reveal some of these.

### 3.3 LANGUAGE ANALYSIS

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Detailed discourse analysis was not within the scope of this research but coders identified a list of descriptors of organisations, activities and people that address climate change. These have been discussed in [Section 6.4](#).

# RESEARCH FINDINGS

## 4.1 QUANTITY OF COVERAGE

Of 8,612 items mentioning climate change, 44% or nearly half were in The Australian. The Daily Telegraph had half as many with 22% of all items. The Courier Mail had 17% and the Herald Sun 16%. The higher numbers in The Australian, which is the only broadsheet and national paper in our study, is consistent with two earlier studies ([Bacon, 2011](#); [Bacon, 2013](#)). Readers of the tabloid outlets receive less information of any quality about climate change.

TABLE 4.1.a

| Publication         | Total #      | % of Total  |
|---------------------|--------------|-------------|
| The Australian      | 3,824        | 44%         |
| Courier Mail        | 1,506        | 17%         |
| The Daily Telegraph | 1,920        | 22%         |
| Herald-Sun          | 1,362        | 16%         |
| <b>Grand Total</b>  | <b>8,612</b> | <b>100%</b> |

Figure 4.1.a: Table representing the total number and proportion of climate change items across four News Corp Publications from April 2019 to March 2020.



**Readers of the tabloid outlets receive less information of any quality about climate change.**

The April 2019 to March 2020 period included the Australian Federal election, protests by the global School Strike 4 Climate and Extinction Rebellion movements, plus the 2019-20 bushfire season. As the graph below shows, the coverage followed the flow and was concentrated around these events.

GRAPH 4.1.b

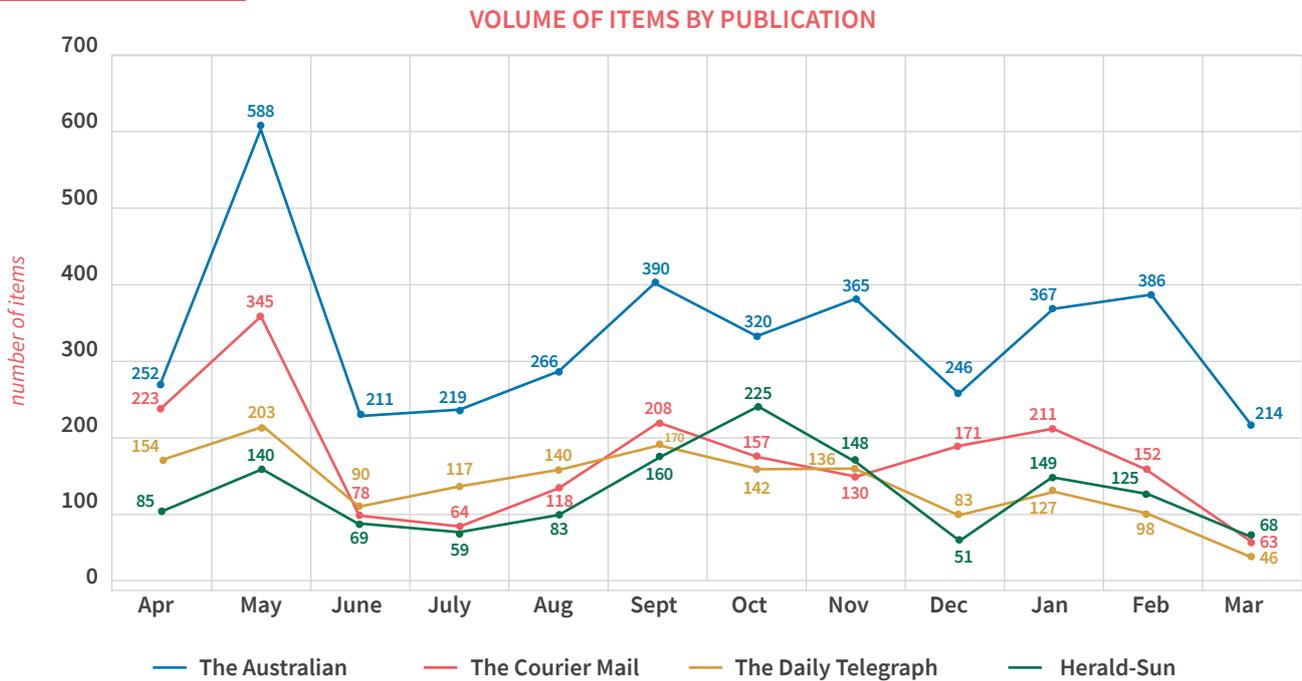


Figure 4.1b: Line graph representing the total volume of items per month of four News Corp publications from April 2019 to March 2020.

TABLE 4.1.c

|                    | The Australian | The Courier Mail | The Daily Telegraph | Herald-Sun   | Grand Total  |
|--------------------|----------------|------------------|---------------------|--------------|--------------|
| <b>April</b>       | 252            | 154              | 223                 | 85           | 714          |
| <b>May</b>         | 588            | 203              | 345                 | 140          | 1,276        |
| <b>June</b>        | 211            | 90               | 78                  | 69           | 448          |
| <b>July</b>        | 219            | 117              | 64                  | 59           | 459          |
| <b>August</b>      | 266            | 140              | 118                 | 83           | 607          |
| <b>September</b>   | 390            | 170              | 208                 | 160          | 928          |
| <b>October</b>     | 320            | 142              | 157                 | 225          | 844          |
| <b>November</b>    | 365            | 136              | 130                 | 148          | 779          |
| <b>December</b>    | 246            | 83               | 171                 | 51           | 551          |
| <b>January</b>     | 367            | 127              | 211                 | 149          | 854          |
| <b>February</b>    | 386            | 98               | 152                 | 125          | 761          |
| <b>March</b>       | 214            | 46               | 63                  | 68           | 391          |
| <b>Grand Total</b> | <b>3,824</b>   | <b>1,506</b>     | <b>1,920</b>        | <b>1,362</b> | <b>8,612</b> |

Figure 4.1c: Table representing the total volume of items per month of four News Corp publications from April 2019 to March 2020.



The concentration of the coverage around key events is not surprising as it has been observed by previous researchers (Jacobs, 1998; Nash & Bacon, 2003). However, it means that other significant information is not covered because journalism resources including staff time and space are not available. The relative visibility and invisibility of significant climate science and climate change issues will be analysed and discussed in climate science and environment - (Section 6.2)

### Quantity of coverage by word count

Another measure of quantity of coverage is the amount of space allocated to an issue. However, there is a difficulty in comparing space allocated to different types of coverage when online and print media are combined into an overall sample. In order to consider this issue, we chose a sample of all items in the month of September 2019 and compared the number of words relating to climate change in each publication allocated to each type of item. (For results see Table below).

TABLE 4.1.d Table representing a total word count and proportion of word count

|                            | Editorials    |           | Features      |            | Letters       |           | News           |            | Opinion        |            | Grand Total    |             |
|----------------------------|---------------|-----------|---------------|------------|---------------|-----------|----------------|------------|----------------|------------|----------------|-------------|
| <b>The Australian</b>      | 1,525         | 1%        | 24,643        | 13%        | 11,720        | 6%        | 72,671         | 37%        | 83,802         | 43%        | 194,361        | 100%        |
| <b>Courier Mail</b>        | 793           | 1%        | 20,076        | 35%        | 8,569         | 15%       | 13,276         | 23%        | 14,520         | 25%        | 57,234         | 100%        |
| <b>The Daily Telegraph</b> | 8,230         | 1%        | 13,670        | 18%        | 6,948         | 9%        | 18,355         | 24%        | 28,475         | 38%        | 75,678         | 100%        |
| <b>Herald-Sun</b>          | 192           | 0%        | 4,811         | 9%         | 2,510         | 5%        | 13,692         | 25%        | 32,829         | 61%        | 54,034         | 100%        |
| <b>Grand Total</b>         | <b>10,740</b> | <b>3%</b> | <b>63,200</b> | <b>17%</b> | <b>29,747</b> | <b>8%</b> | <b>117,994</b> | <b>31%</b> | <b>159,626</b> | <b>42%</b> | <b>381,307</b> | <b>100%</b> |

Figure 4.1.d: Table representing a total and proportion of word count by type of item of four News Corp publications in September 2019.

## 4.2 TYPES OF ITEM

We divided the items originated by the four mastheads into five types within an overall division into reportage and commentary: reportage – news, features, running news blogs; commentary – editorial, opinion. We also analysed letters, which although they are selected and organised for layout by staff are written by readers.

### Reportage

- **News**

News items report fresh and timely information. They usually provide the 'who', 'what', 'where', and 'when' of events. They often contain quotes from sources. Traditionally, news did not include overt editorial opinion, but this has changed recently. With the development of the internet, running news blogs have been developed and were included with news in this report.

- **Features**

Features have traditionally been the form of story that provides an opportunity to include a diversity of sources, description, research analysis, and storytelling techniques. However, rather than being more in-depth and longer than news, many features in this sample were very short features in lifestyle sections or small one-person profiles or interviews. We also included small reviews with features.

### Commentary

- **Opinion**

Opinion is also known as comment. According to Australian Press Council guidelines, opinion should be based on accurate facts. However, researchers noted the emotive and strident tone of many pieces. (Gurney, 2017). It can be provided by in-house journalists, regularly-commissioned columnists, or guest columnists.

- **Letters**

Letters are sent in by readers and curated by journalists under the supervision of senior editors. They can vary between letters of up to 200 words (occasionally longer) to short text or statements. Many are triggered by opinion pieces.

- **Editorials**

The views expressed by the editor of the publication. These usually have no nominated author.

TABLE 4.2.a

|                            | Editorials |           | Features   |           | Letters      |            | News         |            | Opinion      |            | Total        |             |
|----------------------------|------------|-----------|------------|-----------|--------------|------------|--------------|------------|--------------|------------|--------------|-------------|
|                            | #          | %         | #          | %         | #            | %          | #            | %          | #            | %          | #            | %           |
| <b>The Australian</b>      | 91         | 2%        | 379        | 10%       | 989          | 26%        | 1,509        | 39%        | 856          | 22%        | 3,824        | 100%        |
| <b>Courier Mail</b>        | 35         | 2%        | 116        | 8%        | 546          | 36%        | 461          | 31%        | 348          | 23%        | 1,506        | 100%        |
| <b>The Daily Telegraph</b> | 73         | 4%        | 209        | 11%       | 559          | 29%        | 509          | 27%        | 570          | 30%        | 1,920        | 100%        |
| <b>Herald-Sun</b>          | 33         | 2%        | 102        | 7%        | 425          | 31%        | 267          | 20%        | 535          | 39%        | 1,362        | 100%        |
| <b>Grand Total</b>         | <b>232</b> | <b>3%</b> | <b>806</b> | <b>9%</b> | <b>2,519</b> | <b>29%</b> | <b>2,746</b> | <b>32%</b> | <b>2,309</b> | <b>27%</b> | <b>8,612</b> | <b>100%</b> |

Figure 4.2a: Table showing the total volume and proportion of each item across four News Corp publications from April 2019 to March 2020.

### 4.2.1 High levels of opinion compared to low levels of features

It is worth noting that while news was the biggest category (32%), opinion pieces were closely followed totalling 27% of all items. This reflects the increasing amount of commentary and the reduction in the amount of news in media observed by other researchers (ACIJ & ABC, 2014). The influence of opinion pieces on the overall coverage becomes clearer when the publications are compared in this report.

Features, which provide more opportunities for depth in reportage and analysis, were only 9% of all items. This is far less than 'opinion', which also tends to be more prominently displayed, especially in tabloids. Overall, there were very few longer features (more than 800 words) that related to climate change in these four publications, and even fewer that focused on climate science and the impacts of climate change (See Section 6.2). We also found low levels of features in our earlier reports (Bacon, 2011; Bacon, 2013). This reflects resource constraints available for reportage, including a lack of reporters, and editorial policies favoring more subjective content.

### 4.2.2 Quantity of types of articles compared in publications

- The Australian had the highest proportion of news at 39% compared to opinion at 22%.
- The Daily Telegraph had more opinion (30%) than news (27%). Together, commentary - editorials, opinion and letters - were 62% compared to more information-based news and features at 38%.
- The Herald Sun had 39% of opinion which was nearly double the amount of news (20%). Together, the more opinion based types of articles - editorials, opinion and letters - were 73% compared to news and features which were 27%.
- The Courier Mail had more news (31%) than opinion (23%).
- In all publications, there were low levels of features - eight percent of items in Courier Mail, 7% in the Herald Sun, 10% in The Australian, and 11% in The Daily Telegraph.

### 4.2.3 High levels of commentary

Overall across the four mastheads, commentary (editorials, opinions and letters) was 59% of items compared to more information-based news and features which, when combined, were 41%.

The high proportion of commentary material highlights the influential role it plays in driving the overall coverage. The levels of scepticism and negative attitudes towards action to address climate change in opinion pieces is discussed in sections 4.5 and 4.6.

This smaller word-count study showed that the Herald Sun had a particularly high percentage of its words in opinion (61%) compared to the overall sample (42%). More than two-thirds of the Herald Sun word-count was opinion or letters, which are often written in response to opinion pieces. This may reflect the strong influence of the Herald Sun's most prolific opinion writer, Andrew Bolt. The lowest word count of commentary was in the Courier Mail with 41% (opinion 25%, letters 15%, and editorials 1%) which conversely had the highest proportion of word-count in news and features (58%).



- **Media Coverage**

Reportage or commentary directed towards other media outlets and their coverage of particular issues, e.g. the ABC's coverage of climate change or policy.

- **COVID-19**

Coverage about the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **Other**

All other themes such as travel, religion, academia or sport.



Photo credit: Bermix Studio

### 4.3.1 Which themes were strongest in the coverage?

TABLE 4.3.1.a - Theme 1

|  | The Australian |             | Courier Mail |             | The Daily Telegraph |             | Herald-Sun   |             | Total        |             |
|--|----------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|---------------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|
|  | #              | %           | #            | %           | #                   | %           | #            | %           | #            | %           |
| <b>Politics</b>                              | 882            | 23%         | 368          | 24%         | 583                 | 30%         | 321          | 24%         | 2,154        | 25%         |
| <b>Movement/Protest</b>                      | 305            | 8%          | 403          | 27%         | 296                 | 15%         | 289          | 21%         | 1,293        | 15%         |
| <b>Policy</b>                                | 835            | 22%         | 129          | 9%          | 401                 | 21%         | 136          | 10%         | 1,501        | 17%         |
| <b>Science/Environment</b>                   | 424            | 11%         | 180          | 12%         | 193                 | 10%         | 159          | 12%         | 956          | 11%         |
| <b>Natural Disaster/<br/>Extreme Weather</b> | 254            | 7%          | 165          | 11%         | 164                 | 9%          | 103          | 8%          | 686          | 8%          |
| <b>Business/Industry<br/>Agriculture</b>     | 702            | 18%         | 131          | 9%          | 98                  | 5%          | 105          | 8%          | 1,036        | 12%         |
| <b>Other</b>                                 | 176            | 5%          | 89           | 6%          | 123                 | 6%          | 118          | 9%          | 506          | 6%          |
| <b>Media/Coverage</b>                        | 198            | 5%          | 35           | 2%          | 56                  | 3%          | 121          | 9%          | 410          | 5%          |
| <b>COVID-19</b>                              | 48             | 1%          | 6            | 0%          | 6                   | 0%          | 10           | 1%          | 70           | 1%          |
| <b>Grand Total</b>                           | <b>3,824</b>   | <b>100%</b> | <b>1,506</b> | <b>100%</b> | <b>1,920</b>        | <b>100%</b> | <b>1,362</b> | <b>100%</b> | <b>8,612</b> | <b>100%</b> |

TABLE 4.3.1.b - Theme 2

|  | The Australian |             | Courier Mail |             | The Daily Telegraph |             | Herald-Sun |             | Total        |             |
|--|----------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|---------------------|-------------|------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|
|  | #              | %           | #            | %           | #                   | %           | #          | %           | #            | %           |
| <b>Policy</b>                                | 768            | 30%         | 332          | 30%         | 442                 | 34%         | 167        | 25%         | 1,709        | 30%         |
| <b>Science/Environment</b>                   | 467            | 18%         | 268          | 18%         | 296                 | 23%         | 226        | 34%         | 1,257        | 22%         |
| <b>Politics</b>                              | 488            | 19%         | 215          | 19%         | 224                 | 17%         | 70         | 10%         | 997          | 18%         |
| <b>Business/Industry<br/>Agriculture</b>     | 209            | 8%          | 60           | 8%          | 96                  | 7%          | 43         | 6%          | 408          | 7%          |
| <b>Natural Disaster/<br/>Extreme Weather</b> | 181            | 7%          | 73           | 7%          | 93                  | 7%          | 60         | 9%          | 407          | 7%          |
| <b>Movement/Protest</b>                      | 156            | 6%          | 128          | 6%          | 75                  | 6%          | 36         | 5%          | 395          | 7%          |
| <b>Media/Coverage</b>                        | 161            | 6%          | 22           | 6%          | 32                  | 2%          | 33         | 5%          | 248          | 4%          |
| <b>Other</b>                                 | 93             | 4%          | 28           | 4%          | 37                  | 3%          | 30         | 4%          | 188          | 3%          |
| <b>COVID-19</b>                              | 14             | 1%          | 3            | 1%          | 8                   | 1%          | 7          | 1%          | 32           | 1%          |
| <b>Grand Total</b>                           | <b>2,537</b>   | <b>100%</b> | <b>1,129</b> | <b>100%</b> | <b>1,303</b>        | <b>100%</b> | <b>672</b> | <b>100%</b> | <b>5,641</b> | <b>100%</b> |

Figures 4.3.1.a/b: Tables showing totals and proportions of Theme One and Two per News Corp publication from April 2019 to March 2020.

## Politics and Policy dominates

In every type of item (i.e. news, features, opinion, etc), the political theme was dominant. In 25% of items for Theme One and in 18% for Theme Two, the thematic frame for the reference to climate was politics, usually political conflict. In 18% of items, this was the only frame.

The second strongest theme was the broad category of policy (17% in Theme One and 30% in Theme Two). Policy pieces were large in volume, but they were often in the context of political conflict.

The top combination of politics and policy was evident across all four publications and extended beyond the coverage of the federal election. This is consistent with previous research on Australian coverage of climate change that revealed a heavy focus on the political conflict over how Australia should address the reduction of fossil fuel emissions.(Eide, 2010, Bacon,2011). The political conflict over energy policy tends to drive the interpretation of climate change and science in these four News Corp Australia publications (see sections 4.6 and 6.1).

## Science and Environment

Science and Environment was next highest with 11% of items in Theme One and 22% in Theme Two. These items are analysed further in Section 6.2. This category also included sceptical opinion, letters, and editorials that undermined or trivialised matters that have sound scientific basis. There were extremely low levels of articles about climate science as such. Rather than being reported or discussed as factual information about newsworthy developments, climate science was reduced to a matter of debate about ideological or political belief.

## Movement and Protest

Movement and Protest was 15% of Theme One and 7% of Theme Two. Fifty-percent (847) of items relating to movement and protests were clustered in three months between September and November 2019 when nation-wide and global climate change protests were occurring. Further analysis will show that 68% of these items were negative towards protests. See [Section 4.6](#).

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## Business / Industry / Agriculture

Business, industry, and agriculture were 12% in Theme One and only 7% in Theme Two. The Australian had a much stronger emphasis on business (18% in Theme 1) than the three tabloids (7%). This is further analysed in [Section 6.3](#).

## Extreme Weather and Natural Disaster

Seventy-three percent (795) of these items were published between November 2019 and February 2020. Much of this coverage occurred in the context of the fire season and was part of the debate about the link between climate change and bushfires. Other forms of extreme weather including drought, floods, hurricanes, and heatwaves received little attention. These issues will be further analysed in [Section 6.3](#).

## 4.4 WHO GETS A VOICE AND WHO IS SILENCED?

### 4.4.1 Sources

The selection of sources plays an important role in producing journalism. Who gets a voice and what they say has a strong influence on the narrative and message of the story. For this reason, an analysis of quoted sources in reportage - news and features - is another important way of evaluating the nature of News Corp coverage including its bias.

It is hard to influence public debate if you do not have a voice in the media (Thompson, 1995). The capacity of reporters and editors to include and exclude voices is one of the ways in which they exercise power. At the same time, sources use both overt and covert strategies to gain a presence in the media. Previous research revealed that more than 55% of all reportage in one week in ten Australian newspapers was largely based on public relations material, i.e. 'spin'. The study found that the levels of spin were higher in News Corp outlets and highest for The Daily Telegraph (ACIJ & Crikey, 2012).

If groups are systematically denied a voice, they are effectively silenced (Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1989; Cottle, 2003; Bacon & Nash, 2003). Our results suggest that this exclusion applies to News Corp's treatment of climate change scientists and advocates for action on climate change. As our results also demonstrate, groups and individuals can be denied their own voice as a source and at the same time become the object of derision from reporters, commentators or other sources (See section 6.2 & 6.4).

#### Low levels of sources

First sources are significant because they are likely to provide the primary definition of meaning conveyed to audiences. A second source or further sources may provide contrasting views or amplify the perspective of the first source. For this study, only the first two sources in news and features were coded. Only a small proportion of articles had more than two sources.

Of all news and features (3,552), 13% had no source. For the Herald Sun and Courier Mail this was even higher at 19% (71) and 24% (138) respectively. Of the news and features which had a source (3,089), 43% had only one source and 57% had two or more sources.

The proportion with only one source was highest in the Herald Sun with 53%, and the lowest in the Daily Telegraph with 37%.

**More than half of all the news and features had no source or just one source which demonstrates the superficial nature of the reportage across all four News Corp Publications. (1,796 out of 3,552).**

The one-dimensional nature of the coverage is not surprising and has been revealed in earlier research into news content on other subjects as well as climate change (ACIJ & Crikey, 2012; Bacon & Nash, 2003; Bacon, 2011). It is likely that the use of single source stories is increasing in light of shrinking editorial resources (ACIJ & ABC, 2014).

#### 4.4.2 Breakdown of sources in four News Corp publications

We sorted both the first and second sources into categories:

Table 4.4.2.a

|                           | The Australian |             | Courier Mail |             | The Daily Telegraph |             | Herald-Sun |             | Total        |             |
|---------------------------|----------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|---------------------|-------------|------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|
|                           | #              | %           | #            | %           | #                   | %           | #          | %           | #            | %           |
| <b>Politics</b>           | 1,305          | 49%         | 290          | 42%         | 532                 | 50%         | 148        | 34%         | 2,275        | 47%         |
| <b>Business</b>           | 624            | 23%         | 90           | 13%         | 82                  | 8%          | 78         | 18%         | 874          | 18%         |
| <b>Activist</b>           | 100            | 4%          | 90           | 13%         | 60                  | 6%          | 37         | 8%          | 287          | 6%          |
| <b>Professional</b>       | 100            | 4%          | 45           | 7%          | 59                  | 6%          | 27         | 6%          | 231          | 5%          |
| <b>Academia</b>           | 115            | 4%          | 43           | 6%          | 38                  | 4%          | 18         | 4%          | 214          | 4%          |
| <b>Civil Society</b>      | 106            | 4%          | 24           | 4%          | 39                  | 4%          | 17         | 4%          | 186          | 4%          |
| <b>Citizens</b>           | 46             | 2%          | 17           | 2%          | 99                  | 9%          | 23         | 5%          | 185          | 4%          |
| <b>Government</b>         | 59             | 2%          | 20           | 3%          | 27                  | 3%          | 23         | 5%          | 129          | 3%          |
| <b>Media Personnel</b>    | 78             | 3%          | 4            | 1%          | 33                  | 3%          | 13         | 3%          | 128          | 3%          |
| <b>Celebrity</b>          | 22             | 1%          | 18           | 3%          | 43                  | 4%          | 23         | 5%          | 106          | 2%          |
| <b>Emergency Services</b> | 28             | 1%          | 30           | 4%          | 22                  | 2%          | 20         | 5%          | 100          | 2%          |
| <b>International</b>      | 63             | 2%          | 7            | 1%          | 8                   | 1%          | 6          | 1%          | 84           | 2%          |
| <b>Other</b>              | 22             | 1%          | 5            | 1%          | 13                  | 1%          | 6          | 1%          | 46           | 1%          |
| <b>Grand Total</b>        | <b>2,668</b>   | <b>100%</b> | <b>683</b>   | <b>100%</b> | <b>1,055</b>        | <b>100%</b> | <b>439</b> | <b>100%</b> | <b>4,845</b> | <b>100%</b> |

Figure 4.4.2.a: Table showing the number and proportions of sources (both first and second sources) per category per four publications from April 2019 to March 2020.

**The one-dimensional nature of the coverage is not surprising and has been revealed in earlier research**

### 4.4.3 Sources Analysis

#### Political Sources Dominate

Political sources include all national, state, local and international politicians. Political sources dominated with 47% of all sources. While there was some variation between The Daily Telegraph having 51% and the Herald Sun having 34%, political sources had the highest representation in all publications. This flows from the strong influence of political frames revealed in the themes analysis and reflects the decades-long tussle over policy that dominates coverage of climate change in Australia (Wilkinson, 2020), and the partisan politicisation of coverage of climate change.

Graph 4.4.3.a

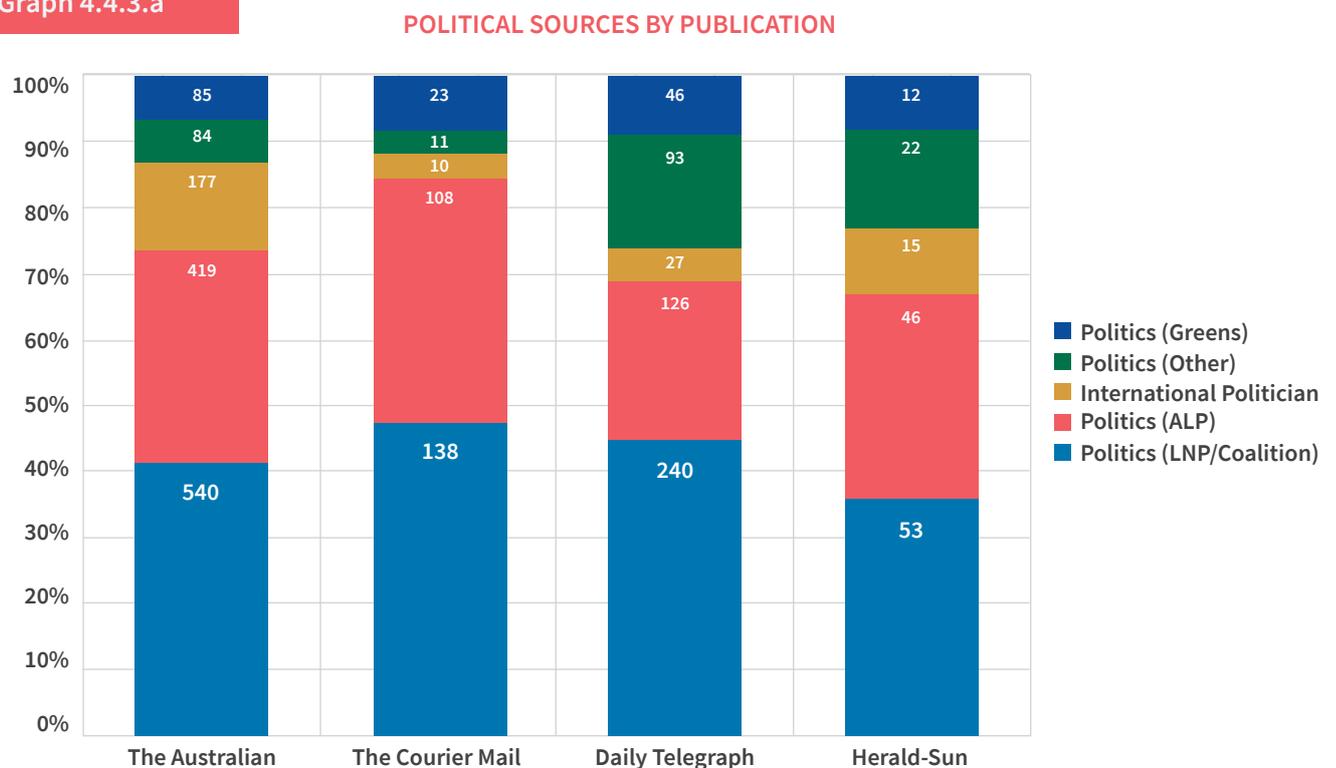


Figure 4.4.3.a: Bar graph showing the breakdown of political sources per News Corp publication from April 2019 to March 2020.

The dominance of political sources confirms earlier findings in our 2011 study of three months of coverage of the Gillard Labor government's carbon price policy, which became known as the 'carbon tax'. In that study, political sources were used more frequently than any other sources (54% of all sources), reflecting the intensity of the political debate about that policy (Bacon, 2011 p.42).

## Major Parties Dominate Coverage

The political coverage of climate change is largely framed through the contest between Australia's two major parties - the Liberal National Coalition (hereafter Coalition) that has been in government nationally since 2013 and the Australian Labor Party (ALP). Of the political sources (2,275), 43% were from the Coalition and 31% were ALP politicians.

The patterns of major party sources across the four publications is fairly similar except for The Daily Telegraph, which gave less space to ALP and more to independents. This can mostly be attributed to NSW coverage of Zali Steggall who defeated the ex-Prime Minister Tony Abbott in his federal seat of Warringah in the 2019 Federal election.

Nine percent of political sources were Australian independent or minor party politicians (other than the Greens). This included Independents at the national, state, and local level. Only seven percent of the political sources were Greens at all levels of government.

## Lack of depth and diversity in political reportage about climate change

Of those stories that had a source, the first sources were Coalition politicians in 19% or 591 of cases. Of these, 38% or 223 had no second source. These stories nearly always communicated Coalition-preferred political messages without further analysis. The first source was ALP in 14% or 443 stories. Of these 44% or 196 had no second source. Many of these latter stories were negative towards ALP's policies, highlighting the argument that a climate policy was not fully costed and therefore was not worth supporting.



Table 4.4.3.b Top ten domestic political sources

|   |            |            |
|---|------------|------------|
| Scott Morrison, Prime Minister, LNP                         | 258        | 13%        |
| Bill Shorten, former ALP Leader                             | 147        | 7%         |
| Anthony Albanese, ALP Opposition Leader                     | 109        | 5%         |
| Angus Taylor, Energy and Emissions Reductions Minister, LNP | 77         | 4%         |
| Zali Steggall, Independent Member for Warringah             | 61         | 3%         |
| Mark Butler, Climate Change and Energy spokesman, ALP       | 53         | 3%         |
| Matt Canavan, Resources Minister, LNP                       | 42         | 2%         |
| Tony Abbott, former Prime Minister LNP                      | 37         | 2%         |
| Adam Bandt, Greens Leader                                   | 35         | 2%         |
| Richard Di Natale, former Greens leader                     | 30         | 1%         |
| <b>Top 10 sources as % of all sources</b>                   | <b>849</b> | <b>42%</b> |

Figure 4.4.3.b: Table of the top ten political sources in volume and proportions of all sources across four News Corp publications.

**This shows how the media coverage of climate change is focused on a few spokespeople from major parties. Of the top ten quoted politicians, only one was a woman.**



## International politicians

Of the remaining political sources, 10% (229) were international politicians. New Zealand PM Jacinda Ardern, US President Donald Trump, and President of France Emmanuel Macron received the most mentions. The representation of politicians from non-western countries was negligible with 51 mentions in a year. The ex-President of Tuvalu, Enele Sopoaga, was quoted 9 times. This highlights the narrow western focus of both broader international reporting (Putnis et al, 2000, Bacon & Nash, 2003), and the orientation of coverage of climate change by Australian media. No politicians from the important regional countries [Vietnam](#), [Bangladesh](#) or the [Philippines](#) were quoted in the first or second sources. All of these countries are predicted to sustain damage and huge losses as a result of climate change.

Readers of News Corp Australia are receiving almost no information about the impacts of climate change at either the global level or in the Indo-Pacific where Australia claims a regional leadership role.

## Business sources

Business sources were the next biggest group of sources with 18% of the total. This was less than half the level of political sources. Of 874 business sources, The Australian published 619 or 71%. We broke the business sources down into categories.

Table 4.4.3.c Business Categories

|                                       | #          | %           |
|---------------------------------------|------------|-------------|
| <b>Business - Financial</b>           | 257        | 29%         |
| <b>Business - Other</b>               | 230        | 26%         |
| <b>Business - Coal/Gas/Oil</b>        | 171        | 20%         |
| <b>Business - Transport</b>           | 87         | 10%         |
| <b>Business - Other Mining</b>        | 63         | 7%          |
| <b>Business - Renewables</b>          | 41         | 5%          |
| <b>Business - Agriculture/Farming</b> | 25         | 3%          |
| <b>Grand Total</b>                    | <b>874</b> | <b>100%</b> |

Figure 4.4.3.c: Table showing the breakdown of all business sources in reportage items in four News Corp Publications from April 2019 to March 2020.

**Together, financial, fossil fuel, and other mining sources accounted for 56% of all business sources quoted.**



## Renewable business sources

Of the 874 business sources, only 41 represented businesses exclusively focused on renewable forms of energy. Of 41 renewable business sources, the vast majority (36) were in The Australian.

In an editorial of The Australian on 13 November 2019 called 'Lies, Illusions, extremists stalk the political fringes' the paper proudly claimed that:

**“The nation (Australia) is investing in wind and solar power three times faster per capita than Germany and four to five times faster than China, the EU, Japan and the US.”**

Given how well Australia is doing on renewables and the constant claim by News Corp that Australia is doing its part, you might expect more reporting on renewables, relative to fossil fuels and mining.

Moreover, of the 595 news and features where the first source was business, 57% had only one source, and the lack of contestation could be indicative of the promotional nature of the coverage. This is explored in detail in [Section 6.3](#).

## Government

There was a very low level of government sources/people working for the public service. This includes heads of government departments. Of all 4845 sources, only 125 or 3% of sources were government sources.

In earlier decades this might have been higher. The low levels reflect an increase in the controls of the communication between public servants and journalists and the increasing influence of 'political spin' managed by Ministerial advisors (Stockwell, 2007).

## Scientists and other academics

Out of 4,845 sources coded, 177 (4%) across the four publications were scientists (both academic and professional). All other academics were 124.

These figures were very low across all publications. In a full year of Herald Sun coverage scientists were quoted on the subject of climate change on only 14 occasions. Even allowing for a margin of error, these figures are very low.

There were 779 news and features stories that were coded as having a Science and Environment theme across the four News Corp Publications. These are the stories that related climate science or were about environmental impacts of climate change in some way. Of these stories, 667 had a source. Of these, 212 (32%) were political sources and 85 (13%) were scientists.

**This means that News Corp in a science and environment story is more than twice as likely to quote a politician than a scientist, which is a further indication of the deeply politicised approach to coverage of the science.**

(For further discussion, see [Section 6.1 & 6.2](#))

## Health is a significant issue in climate change

In August 2019, the Australian Medical Association joined other health organisations around the world in recognising climate change as a health emergency. More recently, in mid-November 2020, a coalition of 29 leading health groups wrote to the Australian Prime Minister asking him to apply "the same level of urgency in tackling climate change as you have to the COVID-19 pandemic". They warned that "climate change is accelerating, and if our current trajectory continues unchecked, we face existential threats to humanity." These levels of concern stand in sharp contrast to the negligible levels of health sources (only 18 occasions over the year) that were quoted as either a first or second source in stories mentioning climate change from April 2019 to the end of March 2020 in four News Corp publications.

## Civil society, citizens, and activists

Of 4,845 sources, 658 (14%) were either civil society, citizens, or activists. This total comprised:

- Civil society (Environmental and other non-government organisations, think tanks of all political persuasions, unions, peak organisations): 186 or 4% of sources.
- Citizens including residents, workers, and others: 185 or 4%.
- All activist organisations, movements or individual activists including protesters: 287 or 6%.

On only 20 (4%) occasions were civil society sources coded in stories with a climate science and environment theme. This is despite the very high engagement of those organisations with environmental issues. So although they were so often the object of derision and abuse, they were only occasionally given a voice to respond or state their views. (For more discussion, see sections 6.2 and 6.4).

These current findings confirm our earlier research findings about the low representation of civil society sources in Australian newspapers' coverage of the Gillard government's carbon policy. In that study, we found that although environmental NGOs played a prominent role in campaigning for climate change action, they were quoted as the first source on 1% of occasions and overall on only 2% of occasions. (Bacon, 2011:p45). In case readers of this study might be tempted to dismiss that as a reflection of universal news values, this low use of civil society sources was also a finding in a comparative study of the coverage of COP 15 United Nations Climate change conference in 19 countries. That study found that Australian newspapers (SMH and The Daily Telegraph) gave less coverage to civil society sources than newspapers in other countries including China, United States, Sweden, Brazil and Canada. The only countries that had a lower proportion of civil society sources were Pakistan and Israel. (Eide, Kunelius & Kumpu, 2010: p25).

## Men dominate climate change coverage in News Corp publication

Of the 4,175 identifiable sources, men dominated with 76%, while only 24% were female, and <1% (2) were non-binary. This division, while stark, was even stronger in the business-themed articles with approximately 85% of sources being male

## First Nations Sources

There were very few stories which a quoted source was identified as First Nations source in an article that mentioned climate change. We only identified 11 stories in which a source was identified as a First Nations person. Several of these were in relation to Aboriginal knowledge and experience of fire in a story that referred to climate change. There were also several mentions in small positive stories. For example, in an article promoting the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair. In this story, journalist Angela Saurine writes that with 'natural wonders unlike anywhere in the world, it is not surprising that issues of climate change will take centre stage at this year's event.' She quotes Artistic Director Janina Harding as saying, 'there are a multitude of changes to the environment that we have witnessed on our homelands in Queensland and the Torres Strait that we know are related to climate change.' ('Climate Change up in lights at arts fair', Courier Mail online, 13 Feb. 2020). Nowhere in our year's sample could we identify coverage of these issues. We also could not find any stories about concerns being expressed by the Central Land Council about impact of heat on communities in Alice Springs and remote communities. There was a story about the need to cull camels causing damage in drought-stricken Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands.

### 4.4.4 Conclusion

Overall, this analysis shows that News Corp's coverage of climate change was heavily influenced by male elite sources which include a large number of Federal politicians from the Coalition and ALP.

More financial and fossil fuel sources were quoted than those associated with renewable businesses. Much of the business coverage was in The Australian rather than the three tabloids and was often single-sourced, i.e. promotional.

Environmental, scientific, and health sources are marginalised although they actively engage in addressing climate change issues. Audiences received almost no information about the global or Asia-Pacific impacts of climate change. First Nations sources are rendered all but invisible in News Corp coverage of climate change.

**Overall, this analysis shows that News Corp's coverage of climate change was heavily influenced by male elite sources...**

# RESEARCH FINDINGS

## 4.5 HOW NEWS CORP PRODUCES CLIMATE SCEPTICISM

Some argue that the term climate denialism is more appropriate than the term climate scepticism. However, the term climate denialism also over-simplifies the issue and since the term scepticism is very widely used, we have adopted it in our report.

**A key finding of this report is that News Corp Australia continues to produce a substantial amount of content that rejects or undermines the findings of climate science. In this chapter, we lay-out the context and patterns in which that scepticism occurs.**

Climate science reporting includes describing, explaining, and investigating the findings of climate scientists and their predicted impacts. Our findings show that in the year under review News Corp Australia's publications did very little of that (see [Section 6.2](#)). Instead, editors continued to actively promote and publish scepticism. In doing so, they continued a News Corp practice that goes back more than 20 years ([Bacon, 2011](#); [Lewandowsky, 2011](#); [Bacon, 2013](#)).

News Corp Australia's responses to accusations that they promote climate scepticism range from repudiating the accusations to arguing that it sees its role as one of promoting fairness by presenting debate. Critics point out that climate science is an issue of fact, not opinion. Even if one was to entertain the 'debate' defence as valid, News Corp Australia in fact suppresses debate to the advantage of sceptics by not engaging with evidence of fact, as we show in [sections 5 and 6.2](#). It presents views and opinions but does not engage with evidence in a way that can clarify facts and develop analysis.

### 4.5.1 What is scepticism?



The consensus position on anthropogenic climate change has been well established for more than 15 years. As scientific investigations progress, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change findings and assessments of risk have strengthened (Hoegh-Guldberg et al., 2018). Despite this, the four publications covered in this study continue to publish sceptical opinion that does not engage with evidence but simply repudiates it. They are part of a broader movement of climate scepticism that has been an active force in the climate change debate for nearly 30 years. There is extensive research showing that the scepticism movement is strongly linked to fossil fuel interests and has been since its inception (Oreskes, 2004).

## Journalism ethics and climate scepticism

Initially, and despite the increasing consensus and strength of findings in many areas of climate science, the media tended to amplify sceptical views. (More discussion of this can be found [here](#)). However, with the increasing strength and urgency of climate science findings, the growth of public disquiet and journalists' ethical concerns about reporting information that does not align with evidence, most of the Australian media that is not owned by News Corp has stopped publishing scepticism. Some media organisations, including The Guardian and The Conversation, have developed explicit policies to not reproduce the views of sceptics.

**For example, last year The Conversation editors decided that it was 'journalistically irresponsible to present settled science alongside comments that undermine and distort it and mislead our readers.'** ([link](#))

In response to questions, editor Misha Ketchell replied: 'It's part of the role of a journalist to filter disinformation and curate a positive public discussion that is evidence-based and doesn't distort the range of views ...' The Australian accused The Conversation of stifling free speech ([Kenny, 2019](#)).

Scepticism covers a range of attitudes to climate change (Hobson & Niemeyer, 2012). It may be expressed in the allegation that climate science findings are a hoax or fundamentally flawed. It may be that a person writes that they accept that the climate is changing but challenges the role of humans in causing it. Or, it may be that climate change is happening but that it won't have the destructive impacts that have been established by climate scientists. It may mean asserting that, despite thousands of scientific reports demonstrating that there is a link between extreme weather and climate change, no such link exists. Scepticism can also be expressed by suggesting that ideology and not science lies behind the work of climate scientists. Climate scientists and advocates are labelled as 'warmists', 'zealots', or following a 'religion' (Rusi, et. al, 2015). This issue is further dealt with in [sections 5 and 6.4](#).

*image credit: Tim Mossholder*



## 4.5.2 Measuring scepticism

In our previous research, we found that a binary measure of 'accepts' and 'rejects' for attitudes to scepticism was too crude. A writer may say that they accept the science of climate change but then deliberately undermine it or delegitimize it by vilifying the scientists. Therefore we developed a measure of scepticism that includes 'rejects and questions/suggests doubt'. Articles coded 'questions' or 'rejects' can be grouped to indicate an overall measure of scepticism.

This study includes all articles that deal with climate change, if only in minor ways. For this reason, the issue of scepticism is not relevant in many articles. These articles were coded 'unable to discern'. This does not mean that their authors do not have an attitude to climate science but simply that it was not manifest.

As we have previously acknowledged in [Section 3](#), coding of this kind involves interpretation. We used a set of principles to encapsulate the findings of climate science, which included:

- Since 2013, more than 97% of climate scientists agree that climate change is occurring due to human activity, and primarily due to carbon emissions. In 2019, [a major report](#) found that the consensus had passed 99%.
- Extreme weather covers a range of phenomena. The pattern of these occurrences differs across the surface of the earth. It is more than a decade since the IPCC found that climate change would increase the intensity, likelihood, frequency, and severity of extreme weather events. For more discussion of this issue in Australia, see the Climate Council report [Weather gone wild](#) which was released in 2019. This presents scientific findings in an accessible way. (Note: IPCC reports are based on peer reviewed reports by thousands of scientists.)
- When discussing causation, it would not usually be possible to provide proof that a specific weather event is immediately and directly due to climate change. There is a logical issue of commensurability in directly linking overarching global factors with complex multifactorial events localised in time and space. The media's role is to explore and clarify these issues, not to confuse audiences by undermining the link that scientists have established between natural disasters (including bushfires) and extreme weather and climate change or the broader consensus around the role of anthropogenic climate change.
- Climate change has varying impacts depending on the geographical position, climatic conditions and physical characteristics of each region of the world. Comparisons between the different experiences of climate change between regions, or nonsensical extrapolations, can discredit the consensus position. For example, if there is a cold day or season, this does not discredit the scientific consensus that the planet is warming.



- Thousands of scientific reports have stressed the urgent need to tackle climate change. Over the years, the note of urgency has strengthened. For example, in September 2019, the US IPCC Special [Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate](#) found that the rate of ocean warming has doubled in the past three decades, with enormous implications for marine life, ecosystems, food, nutrition and economic well-being. It concluded: 'It's absolutely critical that nations come together now to create climate-smart fisheries for the future that take into account the many impacts that are likely to occur based on the IPCC report.'
- Also in September 2019, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres said '[the climate change emergency is a race we are losing, but it is a race we can win](#)'. The World Health Organisation considers climate change '[an urgent public health challenge that requires action now](#).' While it is tricky for journalists to express urgency without overstating the case, it is much worse for journalists to deliberately mock the IPCC's calls for urgent action without having evidence to support their claims.

Photo credit: Markus Spiske

## 4.5.3 Measuring scepticism

Across items in the sample, it was not possible to discern an attitude in 42% of cases. Many of these were focused on other topics or did not express a position either way. In the remaining 5,002 items, 55% of articles were coded as accepting, 20% were questioning and 25% were rejecting of climate science. Simply put: where a position could be discerned, 45% of items were sceptical of climate science.

As demonstrated in sections 4.3 and 4.4, extremely few of the 55% of stories that communicated acceptance of climate science findings were reports about climate science research, the impacts of climate change or focused on repudiating or clarifying misunderstandings produced by climate scepticism (sections 5 & 6.2). Many of these 'accepts' pieces were about consumer choices of products that could reduce emissions or minor mentions that communicated a passive acceptance, without engaging further with issues relevant to climate change (Section 6.3). On the other hand, the sceptical articles were often very assertive or aggressive.

### Climate scepticism in each publication (when 'unable to discern' is removed)

Table 4.5.3.a

|                            | Accepts      |            | Questions    |            | Rejects      |            | Total        |             |
|----------------------------|--------------|------------|--------------|------------|--------------|------------|--------------|-------------|
|                            | #            | %          | #            | %          | #            | %          | #            | %           |
| <b>The Australian</b>      | 1,357        | 62%        | 447          | 20%        | 389          | 18%        | 2,193        | 100%        |
| <b>Courier Mail</b>        | 538          | 55%        | 181          | 18%        | 262          | 27%        | 981          | 100%        |
| <b>The Daily Telegraph</b> | 453          | 42%        | 213          | 20%        | 413          | 38%        | 1,079        | 100%        |
| <b>Herald-Sun</b>          | 384          | 51%        | 168          | 22%        | 197          | 26%        | 749          | 100%        |
| <b>Grand Total</b>         | <b>2,732</b> | <b>55%</b> | <b>1,009</b> | <b>20%</b> | <b>1,261</b> | <b>25%</b> | <b>5,002</b> | <b>100%</b> |

Figure 4.5.3.a: Table showing number and proportions of items and their position on climate science in News Corp publications from April 2019 to March 2020.

#### The Australian -

62% accepted the findings of climate science and 38% did not.

#### The Daily Telegraph -

42% accepted the findings of climate science and 58% did not.

#### Courier Mail -

55% accepted the findings of climate science and 45% did not

#### Herald Sun -

51% accepted the findings of climate science and 49% did not.

**The Daily  
Telegraph  
is the most  
sceptical of  
all News Corp  
publications  
in the study.**

## Comparing scepticism across types of items

We have already discussed the strong influence of opinion on the overall coverage and the close links between comments and letters. Commentary is prominently displayed and letters are triggered by commentary. The Australian even has an Engagement Editor who produces a column by selecting letters for republication. This is designed to provide readers with a sense of 'belonging' and a sense that they matter to the publication.

Table 4.5.3.b

|                    | Accepts      |            | Questions    |            | Rejects      |            | Total        |             |
|--------------------|--------------|------------|--------------|------------|--------------|------------|--------------|-------------|
|                    | #            | %          | #            | %          | #            | %          | #            | %           |
| <b>Editorial</b>   | 28           | 39%        | 30           | 42%        | 14           | 19%        | 72           | 100%        |
| <b>Feature</b>     | 457          | 93%        | 29           | 6%         | 3,413        | 1%         | 489          | 100%        |
| <b>Letters</b>     | 574          | 34%        | 433          | 25%        | 692          | 41%        | 1,699        | 100%        |
| <b>News</b>        | 1,194        | 87%        | 130          | 9%         | 48           | 3%         | 1,372        | 100%        |
| <b>Opinion</b>     | 479          | 35%        | 387          | 28%        | 504          | 37%        | 1,370        | 100%        |
| <b>Grand Total</b> | <b>2,732</b> | <b>55%</b> | <b>1,009</b> | <b>20%</b> | <b>1,261</b> | <b>25%</b> | <b>5,002</b> | <b>100%</b> |

Figure 4.5.3.b: Table showing items and their position on climate science across four News Corp publications from April 2019 to March 2020.

## Comparing scepticism across types of items

We grouped commentary (editorials, opinion and letters) and reportage (news and features). Where an attitude to climate science was revealed:

- 90% of reportage in The Australian was coded as accepting the climate consensus position rather than expressing a sceptical position.
- 81% of reportage in the Courier Mail was coded as accepting the climate consensus position rather than expressing a sceptical position.
- 86% of reportage in The Daily Telegraph was coded as accepting the climate consensus position rather than expressing a sceptical position.
- 99% of reportage in the Herald Sun was coded as accepting the climate consensus position rather than expressing a sceptical position.

The highest level of scepticism in reportage was in Courier Mail with 19%. In other words, almost one in five of the news and feature articles in that publication did not accept key findings of climate science. On the other hand, this does show that reporters are mostly not producing scepticism.

Examples of sceptics and scepticism are offered in [Section 5](#).

## AAP and local news

From April 2019 to March 2020, a number of the 'accepts' articles in reportage came from the AAP newswire service (62 at least). AAP news is based on strong reporting principles and does not promote scepticism. During 2020, News Corp sold out of AAP and ceased its subscription to the news service. Without the AAP stories, the coverage in our study would have been even weaker. News Corp has set up its own internal wire service for court crime and politics for the moment.

We also observed that local suburban news outlets were more likely to publish soft promotional stories on climate change that were included in the sample because they were also published online by the Herald Sun, The Daily Telegraph or Courier Mail. During 2020, News Corp Australia has closed or reduced resources at many of its suburban outlets. The few stories that are still published now appear online behind a paywall.

These changes in the Australian media are likely to have had a negative impact on the quality and quantity of coverage of climate change in News Corp publications. This needs to be further researched across all fields of reporting.

## More discussion of commentary in four News Corp publications in 2019/20

Commentary includes opinion, editorials, and letters.

### Letters

Letters are strongly linked to comment pieces, either endorsing or disagreeing with them. These letters do not include the hundreds of comments posted online across News Corps publications.

Of the 1,699 letters in the sample that expressed an attitude to climate science, 66% were sceptical and 34% were accepting of climate science findings.

The highest proportions were evident in the Daily Telegraph – 80% were sceptical and 20% accepted climate science findings, and in The Australian – 74% were sceptical and 26% were accepting.

These extremely high proportions cannot be explained as merely a reflection of audience opinion because letters are selected to achieve editorial objectives and views about what will build audience engagement. They demonstrate an ideological drive to mobilise audiences to support certain policies, attitudes and values. This represents an editorial choice.

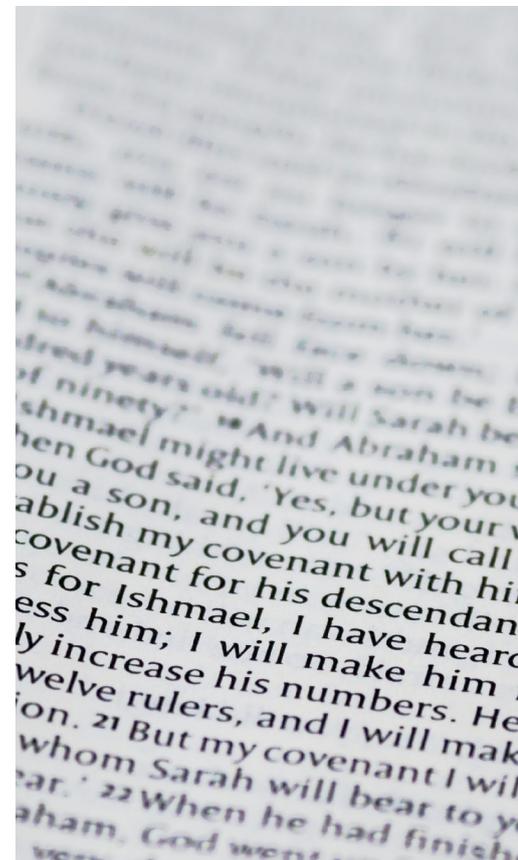


Photo credit: Brett Jordan

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## Editorials

Editorials are a statement of a media outlet's position on issues.

Overall, of 72 editorials that expressed a view towards climate science, 61% of these were coded as sceptical in relation to one or more of the principles explained above. Thirty-nine percent of the editorials expressed an acceptance of climate science findings reaffirming that News Corp's Australian publications have an editorial strategy that involves turning science into a debate and continue to vastly overrepresent sceptical views.

## Opinion

**Overall, 65% of opinion pieces (1,370) rejected or questioned the climate science findings and only 35% accepted them. In other words nearly two-thirds of comment pieces were sceptical.**

The highest proportion of scepticism was found in the Herald Sun and Daily Telegraph. In both, 77% of pieces, or more than three-quarters of opinion pieces, promoted sceptical views. The great majority of these were produced by in-house opinion writers whom News Corp refers to as journalists. This is followed by the Courier Mail with 59%, and The Australian with 50%.

Comment pieces are not only high in volume but also take up a lot of space. Sceptic columnists play a big role in mobilising readers around polarising narratives of climate action. The most prolific sceptic is Andrew Bolt.

[In Section 5](#), we discuss the top sceptics.

## 4.5.4 Discussion

The climate change scepticism displayed in News Corp publications comes as no surprise because it follows a pattern established over many years (McKnight, 2010; Manne, 2011). In 2013, the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism (ACIJ) investigated [Australian media coverage of climate change](#). This study found that 32%, or nearly one-third of 602 articles that referred to climate science either rejected or suggested doubt about the consensus position. The highest proportion of climate scepticism was found in The Daily Telegraph. This much larger, more recent study shows that News Corp continues to promote climate scepticism.

Oreskes and others have shown that the media tend to amplify uncertainty of science when economic and political interests are at stake (Oreskes, 2010). In an earlier study, the Reuters Institute found that there was more scepticism in the United Kingdom and the United States media than in Brazil, China, France and India and that it was more likely to be found in right-leaning than left-leaning media (Painter, 2011). This is also true in Australia. News Corp promotion of climate scepticism closely aligns with the political ideologies and positions it supports. The politicisation of climate change and ideological underpinnings of scepticism can also be shown through analysing the language that is used and the context for the scepticism. In [Section 6.4](#), we provide examples of how language is used to brand and stigmatise those who act to address climate change.

Recent surveys have shown that a majority of Australians accept the key consensus position on climate science (Australia Institute, 2020; IPSOS, 2020). However there is a solid minority that reject the findings of climate science. News Corp commentary deliberately targets these minority readers and seeks to reinforce their hostile views and sense of exclusion.

The promotion of scepticism occurs in a context in which conflict over climate policy continues to play a strong role in domestic politics and in which the Morrison government and sections of the Labor opposition (and state Labor governments) continue to oppose the phasing out of fossil fuels. As we have already shown, the news and features are strongly framed in the context of domestic politics. Attitudes to action to address climate change will be further explored in [Section 4.6](#).

## 4.6 ATTITUDE TOWARDS CLIMATE ACTION/EFFORTS

In this section we are reporting on how the four News Corp publications approached policy and action to address climate change. These findings need to be considered in light of the high level of scepticism about climate science presented in the previous section.

Articles were interpreted and coded as to whether they were positive, negative, neutral, or 'N/A' towards climate action/efforts. To establish this, the following identifiers were used to categorise policies and actions to address climate change.

- Policies and actions that aim to reduce carbon emissions by limiting fossil fuels and transitioning towards the use of renewable sources of energy including wind and solar.
- Activism, campaigns, and movements in support of action on climate change and reduction of carbon emissions.
- Climate change policies where the individual consumer is the priority and the global humanitarian imperative of emissions reductions are not ignored.
- Energy related policies which are a part of climate change policies to reduce emissions.

In our study, 13% of items about climate change did not relate to climate action of any kind, leaving 7,497 items, which are the focus of this section.

Table 4.6.1.a Findings

|                            | Positive     |            | Neutral      |            | Negative     |            | Total        |             |
|----------------------------|--------------|------------|--------------|------------|--------------|------------|--------------|-------------|
|                            | #            | %          | #            | %          | #            | %          | #            | %           |
| <b>The Australian</b>      | 922          | 27%        | 651          | 19%        | 1,804        | 53%        | 3,377        | 100%        |
| <b>Courier Mail</b>        | 431          | 32%        | 190          | 14%        | 737          | 54%        | 1,358        | 100%        |
| <b>The Daily Telegraph</b> | 391          | 22%        | 254          | 14%        | 1,117        | 63%        | 1,762        | 100%        |
| <b>Herald-Sun</b>          | 271          | 27%        | 145          | 15%        | 582          | 58%        | 1,000        | 100%        |
| <b>Grand Total</b>         | <b>2,017</b> | <b>27%</b> | <b>1,240</b> | <b>17%</b> | <b>4,240</b> | <b>57%</b> | <b>7,497</b> | <b>100%</b> |

Figure 4.6.1.a: Table showing number and proportion of items and their attitude towards climate action/efforts in four News Corp

Fifty-seven percent of items were negative towards climate action/efforts, with only 27% positive, and 17% were coded as neutral. The most negative was The Daily Telegraph with only 22% of items communicating a positive attitude towards climate change efforts.

When types of items are analysed, it is clear that reportage (news and features) is more likely to be more positive or neutral than commentary (opinion, editorials and letters).

**In fact, opinion pieces were more than twice as likely to be negative towards climate action than news stories, and news items were twice as likely to be positive than opinion pieces.**

**Table 4.6.1.b Findings**

|                  | Positive |     | Neutral |     | Negative |     | Total |      |
|------------------|----------|-----|---------|-----|----------|-----|-------|------|
|                  | #        | %   | #       | %   | #        | %   | #     | %    |
| <b>Editorial</b> | 6        | 3%  | 24      | 11% | 183      | 86% | 213   | 100% |
| <b>Feature</b>   | 362      | 54% | 170     | 26% | 133      | 20% | 665   | 100% |
| <b>Letters</b>   | 406      | 19% | 112     | 5%  | 1,666    | 76% | 2,184 | 100% |
| <b>News</b>      | 951      | 39% | 715     | 30% | 751      | 31% | 2,417 | 100% |
| <b>Opinion</b>   | 292      | 14% | 219     | 11% | 1,507    | 75% | 2,018 | 100% |

*Figure 4.6.1.b: Items and their attitude on climate science across four News Corp publications from April 2019 to March 2020.*

These findings suggest that News Corp's news reporters are more balanced in their approach to action to address climate change. For example, despite tirades by opinion writers against Extinction Rebellion protesters (Section 6.4), some junior reporters doing live reporting at protests included quotes from protesters about the reasons for their attendance.

The features were more positive (54%) with only 20% negative and 26% neutral. Many of these were smaller profiles in which interviewees expressed positive sentiments towards action on climate change. For example, in the Arts section of the Courier Mail, Indigenous actor Lisa Maza was asked, in an interview promoting the Brisbane Arts Festival, to name the most pressing issue facing the community. She replied, "Global warming and the destruction of our planet. The fact that so many of our leaders think money is more important than human beings is a problem." (Courier Mail, 'Centre Stage', 14 September 2019).

### **Negative commentary drives the coverage**

Scepticism and negative commentary about climate policy issues and action to address the problem overwhelms the more balanced reportage. Publication design and cross promotion between News Corp columnists and videos from Sky After Dark strengthen the cumulative impact on publications. There is a strong interaction between opinion and letters, creating an impression that readers are being mobilised to defend assaults on their ideas and values. Audience engagement is heightened by the use of emotive and abusive labels applied to the columnists' targets. (See Section 6.4).

**The patterns of negativity were broadly similar across the publications. However there were differences:**

- The Daily Telegraph (81%) and the Herald Sun (83%) were even more biased in their opinion pieces against action to address climate change than the other publications.
- The Daily Telegraph (86%) also had the highest proportion of negative letters. Only 9% were positive and 5% neutral.
- The Australian (83%) had a higher proportion of negative letters than the Courier Mail or the Herald Sun.
- The letters in the Herald Sun stood out as less biased than The Australian, The Daily Telegraph, and Courier Mail with 57% negative, 33% positive, and 10% neutral.

## 4.6.2 Is negative bias stronger in some themes than others?

Where relevant, we compared the attitude towards climate action varied across different reporting themes already discussed in [Section 4.3](#).

### Business

Of 1,308 items where an attitude to business was relevant, 43% were positive to action on climate, 37% were negative and 20% were neutral. This was the only topic group in which items were more likely to be positive than negative. The majority of these items were in The Australian, of which 45% were positive, 33% were negative, and 22% were neutral. (This finding will be further explored in [Section 6.3](#))

### Climate change protest and movements

Of 1,648 items where an attitude to protest and movements was relevant, 70% were negative, 13% were neutral, and 18% were positive. Items were four times more likely to be negative than positive.

Of 369 items in The Daily Telegraph, 77% were negative, compared to 14% positive, and 9% were neutral. The Daily Telegraph was the most biased against protest and movements to address climate change, and was over three times more likely to be negative than either neutral or positive. This was driven by opinion pieces, as news tended to be more balanced with 39% negative, 33% positive, and 27% neutral. (These findings will be further discussed in [Section 6.3](#)).

### Politics

Of 2,843 items with a political theme where an attitude was relevant, 59% were negative, 21% were positive, and 20% were neutral. The items were more likely to be negative than either positive or neutral combined. The Daily Telegraph and the Herald Sun were most negative (63% each) towards action to address climate change in their coverage of politics.

(These findings will be further discussed in [Section 6.4](#))

## Policy

Of 3,029 items with a policy theme where an attitude was relevant, 57% were negative, 16% were neutral, and 27% were positive. Once again The Daily Telegraph was the most negative publication on policy with 62% negative, 22% positive, and 16% neutral.

Coverage of policy issues was strongly connected to political coverage and had a focus on national domestic politics. Many of these articles were both sceptical on the science and negatively biased on policy issues.

## Conclusion

- Overall, the four publications were more likely to be negative towards action to address climate change than either neutral or positive.
- Reportage was more balanced than commentary.
- With its powerful, emotive tone, prominence and promotion, opinion tends to overwhelm the news.
- Features was the only category that was comprehensively more positive.
- As with scepticism, the negativity is driven by commentary in opinion pieces, editorials and letters.
- The Daily Telegraph is the publication that is most biased against action on climate.
- Business coverage (which mostly appears in The Australian) is more balanced than other coverage.
- Coverage of protest and movements calling for action on climate change.

# THE SCEPTICS

## 5.1 Columnists

A key finding of this research is that from April 2019 to March, 2020, News Corp Australia continued its long record of producing a large amount of content that undermines climate science. In this section, we identify the top News Corp opinion writers, and discuss editorials. Sceptical sources are included in Section 6.2.

| Table 5.1.a Columnists                  | # of items   | Share %    |
|---|--------------|------------|
| <b>Andrew Bolt</b>                      | 403          | 17%        |
| <b>Tim Blair</b>                        | 167          | 7%         |
| <b>Peta Credlin</b>                     | 81           | 4%         |
| <b>Peter Gleeson</b>                    | 73           | 3%         |
| <b>Chris Kenny</b>                      | 69           | 3%         |
| <b>Terry McCrann</b>                    | 57           | 2%         |
| <b>Renee Viellaris</b>                  | 45           | 2%         |
| <b>Gerard Henderson</b>                 | 44           | 2%         |
| <b>Judith Sloan</b>                     | 34           | 1%         |
| <b>Miranda Devine</b>                   | 33           | 1%         |
| <b>Total % of top 10 of all opinion</b> | <b>1,006</b> | <b>42%</b> |

Figure 5.1.a: Table showing the top ten opinion writers by volume and proportion of articles discussing climate change across four News Corp publications from April 2019 to March 2020.

These top ten opinion writers accounted for 42% of 2,309 opinion articles. Eight of these top ten writers work or previously worked for News Corp. Gerard Henderson runs the conservative think tank The Sydney Institute and Judith Sloan was previously a contributing Economics Editor at The Australian who has been a regular writer for many years.

All these writers produced opinion articles that conveyed scepticism towards climate science, or were extremely negative towards climate change action and movements. They have a range of styles and attitudes, some being more sceptical about climate science than others. Some pieces focused on climate change, while others referred to it in the context of other topics such as the ABC, progressive movements and refugees. We observed a lack of consistency in approach to scepticism even by a single writer. This is consistent with a recent study which found that the increasing consensus around both the causes and consequences of climate change does not necessarily mean that scepticism has disappeared, but may change the way it is represented, especially in UK centre-right publications (Ruiu, 2020).

The strength of the contribution from the opinion writers demonstrates that while News Corp continues to promote the views of external sceptics, it also produces a large amount of sceptical content in-house.

Andrew Bolt dominates the field accounting for 17% of all opinion pieces in the study. Tim Blair, who regularly appears in *The Daily Telegraph*, had the next most opinion pieces with 7%. These two men produced nearly one-quarter of all opinion pieces mentioning climate change in four News Corp publications from April 2019 to March 2020. Across the *Herald Sun*, *The Daily Telegraph*, and the *Courier Mail*, Bolt and Blair accounted for 39% (570) of all opinion pieces that referred to climate change.

Other News Corp columnists who expressed scepticism about climate change but who were not among the top ten opinion writers include Alan Jones, Piers Akerman and Jennifer Oriel.

Columnists who accept the findings of climate science include Peter van Onselen, Paul Kelly, Niki Savva, John Durie, Susie O'Brien, Phillip Adams, and until December 2020, Alan Kohler.

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## Here is an introduction to the top five opinion writers:

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### Andrew Bolt

Andrew Bolt has worked for News Corp Australia since the 1990s. In 2014, the current editor of The Age Gay Alcorn described him as '[the most ubiquitous and influential conservative commentator in the country...](#) [who] writes highly readable, sometimes funny, always provocative columns in The Herald Sun'. One of his 'obsessions' is 'challenging the orthodoxy of climate change', along with campaigning against ABC left-wing bias and the people he calls 'leftists'. News Corp embraces Bolt and promotes what it calls 'his enormous influence'. '[With a proven track record of driving the news cycle, Andrew Bolt steers discussion...](#)' (Herald Sun, 2020). His employer may be overstating his influence but there is no doubt that Bolt successfully generates loyal support from his strong follower basis.

Our research identified 403 stories by Bolt over the year mentioning climate change. This was more than double that of the next most prolific writer on the topic, Tim Blair (see below).

Andrew Bolt's contributions represented 12% of all articles (opinion, news, features, and editorials) discussing climate change across The Daily Telegraph, the Herald Sun and the Courier Mail. In the Herald Sun alone, he had 32% (302) or nearly a third of all articles mentioning climate change.

Bolt's crusade against climate science goes back more than 20 years. In the years since 1997, he has published thousands of articles and posts about climate change in the Herald Sun, The Daily Telegraph, The Advertiser (Adelaide), the Courier Mail (Brisbane), The Northern Territory News, The Townsville Bulletin, The Cairns Post, and The Gold Coast Bulletin. He also broadcasts a week-nightly TV show on Sky News' Sky after Dark which he cross-promotes with his online postings. He attracts many letters and thousands of comments (The latter are not included in this sample).

One of his earliest pieces was about the 'greenhouse scare bull' in 1999, which was an attack on Peter Garrett, then president of the Australian Conservation Foundation. Garrett predicted 'longer-lasting droughts' and 'more flooding' could occur as a result of global warming. Bolt accused him of getting 'gullible people to support green causes by scaring them silly'. In fact, Garrett was right, as is shown by subsequent events and by climate science which has strengthened over the years.

In 2002, Bolt deployed climate scepticism in favour of logging old-growth forests. He wrote, 'And with so many forests now shut away to age and rot, we'll have twice as much old-growth forest in Victoria by 2100 than we do today. And guess what gas dying trees give off as they decay? Yes, carbon dioxide -- that naughty poison that greenies blame for causing greenhouse warming. So do go down to the woods today and take a deep breath. What would you rather smell — the life-affirming whiff of fresh-sawn timber, or the dank and lifeless waft of rotting wood?' Notably, the politics of logging was integrated into his climate-sceptical views.

Over two decades, climate scepticism has evolved. Bolt has moved away from straight-out rejection of climate science into a range of shifting positions. Bolt has recently claimed to have 'never denied a single one of the changes in climate.' (['How civility and truth are becoming scarce', 18 December, Herald Sun](#)). He chooses not to remember that he rubbished Garrett and many others for linking extreme weather with climate change. While insisting he accepts that the climate is changing, he attacks mainstream climate-change thinking as 'a warming religion' that does not 'like facts'.

Bolt's style of argument is to focus on very specific details from which he draws overly generalised conclusions, often sharing the work of others in the international sceptic network. For a long time, he contested the facts on global warming. In 2008, he published five graphs from which he argued in a piece 'Column - Seven Graphs to end the Warming hype' that the earth was cooling, not warming. Michael James, a director of the Genome Variation Laboratory at the Queensland Institute of Medical Research analysed the graphs in a Crikey piece, ['Andrew Bolt: Master of Climate Representation' \(2008\)](#). He demonstrated how Bolt's highlighting of very short term 'blips' in data obscured trends over time.

Bolt constantly complains that he is a victim of abuse or that he or other sceptics are being censored. While attacking well-established scientific findings, he asserts his right to exercise free speech or state alternative 'facts'. He seizes on isolated statements to produce a series of 'gotcha' moments, and adopts an authoritative and apparently reasonable tone making his conclusions seem like the only ones possible.

While accusing others of not being interested in facts, he rarely approaches climate scientists asking them to put his 'facts' in context or respond to his criticism. Instead, he insults them by suggesting that they have closed minds. Although News Corp promotes him as being a journalist, these are all unacceptable journalism practices.

## Discrediting Pacific Islanders

Bolt assumes the mantle of a person of reason by cherry-picking scientific findings and using them to discredit other scientific research, and to attack other journalists and those advocating action on climate change. Among his familiar targets are the Pacific Islands' national leaders who for many years have been urging the global community to save their islands from the devastating impact of climate change.

For example, on May 8 2019 in '[Fran Kelly pushes fake news on drowning Kiribati](#)' and on 26 August 2019 in a piece called '[What's the ABC's excuse for still pushing this drowning-islands falsehood?](#)' ([Herald Sun](#)), Bolt attacked the ABC, Guardian Australia, and the Nine newspapers for getting the science about the Pacific Islands wrong. He referenced a study that found some atolls in the Pacific are growing in size and not shrinking.

This line of attack goes back ten years when academics Arther Webb and Paul Kench published a study showing that rather than being threatened by sea level rise, some Pacific atolls were growing in size (Webb & Kench, 2010). At the time, other leading scientists put this work in context by pointing out that the Kench study was not relevant to the main concerns of climate scientists that include damage caused by extreme weather that results in inundation during high tides and loss of arable land (Bacon & Nash, 2013, Nash, 2015).

More recently, Profesor Virginia Duvat published the results of [another study \(Duvat, 2019\)](#) that investigated the relationship between sea-level rise and atoll size and found that in most cases, sea-level rise was not causing atoll land mass to shrink. The study explicitly accepted that climate change is a driver of environmental change in the Pacific and considered how it might interact with land reclamation and other factors. But Bolt seized on this 2019 study and reduced the issue of climate change impacts to island size, without bothering to talk to scientists who could explain that his reductionism was misrepresenting the findings and analysis in the article. Across the Pacific horticultural and habitable land continues to shrink or be damaged as a result of inundation and salinisation.

Sea-level rise is a complex area of science, and research has shown it is greater in some parts of the Pacific, including in the Solomon Islands. These issues have been accessibly explained by five scientists and other academics in a piece for [The Conversation in 2016](#) (Albert et. al., 2016). Kench himself also published an article this year about sea level rise in the Indian Ocean (Kench et al, 2020). But instead of trying to clarify the issues, Bolt and other sceptics seized on one partial finding in the Duvat study to mock Pacific Islands leaders who communicated the existential threat experienced by their communities at the time of the 2019 South Pacific forum.

In a single column, Bolt spread confusion about the nature of actual threats to Pacific Island nations, continued his long-standing campaign against the ABC and positioning himself as a defender of Australia's borders. He stigmatised Pacific Islanders as spreaders of falsehoods who are attempting to commit fraud on the Australian government aid budget. Disregarding the warnings of Pacific leaders, activists and scientists, Bolt's aims to convince readers that they should disregard the concerns of their neighbours in the Pacific. ('What's the ABC's excuse for still publishing this drowning nonsense' Herald Sun.)

This misinformation is published in a context where readers of News Corp tabloid publications are provided with almost no actual news about developments in the Pacific and South East Asian regions. Although agencies and communities in these regions are actively dealing with threats, Bolt and others reduce them to a mere meme in the domestic politics of Australia's climate change battles.

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## Amplifying scepticism on Sky after Dark

Bolt extends his attacks onto Sky After Dark which often consist of interviews with other News Corp sceptics.

On 19 September 2019, Bolt invited Nick Cater, the director of the conservative think tank the Menzies Research Centre and columnist for The Australian, and Rita Pahani, Herald Sun columnist onto his show to discuss [Greta Thunberg and her appearance before US Congress](#). These two commentators also appeared prominently in our study, publishing 14 and 17 pieces respectively.

Bolt introduced his segment with a clip of a US Congresswoman asking Thunberg to give some examples of impacts of climate change. She told the Congress committee that she had spoken to communities whose food and water supplies had been impacted by 'climate catastrophes'. Thunberg's statement was consistent with [reports](#) that climate change is impacting food supplies in various regions of the world. Pahani, who also has her own Sky After Dark show, responded 'give us some facts, you know, not just, tell us some instances where people have in fact faced catastrophe, had their water and food supply threatened by climate change. We're not going to take, "I know lots of people, it's devastating". We're going to want examples.'

Cater referred to Thunberg '... I think she is talking nonsense...and is a nice looking girl and all that...she is probably crying to her mother, and those things... but she doesn't know what she is talking about'. He also said, 'who have you seen that has actually lost their water because of climate change? No, it's always I've spoken to somebody who is threatened by it.' None of these commentators were interested in whether what Thunberg said was likely to be true or the implications if it was. The intent of the piece was to attack her.

Such videos are recycled by News Corp into other news stories and remain on Facebook. Although the audience may not be huge, these marketing strategies add to the cumulative impact of Bolt's work on targeted audiences.

The Australian Press Council found that one of Bolt's attacks on Greta Thunberg [breached](#) its guidelines.

## Tim Blair

With 167 articles, Tim Blair comes in with the second-highest amount of News Corp produced articles across four publications between April 2019 to March 2020. His writing contributed to 12% of articles (news, features, opinions, & editorials) in The Daily Telegraph, and 29% in its opinion articles alone. The findings of this report conclude that The Daily Telegraph is the most sceptical publication of News Corp amongst the four in this study. Tim Blair is unapologetic and a major contributor to this scepticism.

His style is different from Bolt's. His approach is more emotional, compared to Bolt's tendency to focus on pieces of so-called 'evidence' to prove his case. His tone is personal, dismissive and sarcastic.

On 16 October 2019 after the Federal election, Blair refers to Labor wanting to give 'the old climate gambit' one more shot (['Definition of Insanity', The Daily Telegraph, 16 October 2019](#)). He writes, 'Recognition of a bogus climate emergency is, of course, the central demand of those Extinction Rebellion windings.' This is typical of Blair's approach: he makes passing reference to themes such as 'the bogus climate emergency' without providing any more evidence about what he means. The rest of the column is a sarcastic description of Extinction Rebellion protests in Perth.

In another column on 10 January 2020, Blair wrote about accountant Emily Townsend in '[The Left's Latest Hero](#)'. She had just [resigned from News Corp](#), accusing the company of spreading 'misinformation' and diverting attention from climate change during the bushfire crisis. In an email to News Corp management, she said The Daily Telegraph and the Herald Sun were misrepresenting facts by focusing on arson as

a cause of the bushfires rather than climate change. The email was leaked and the story widely covered in the rest of the media, including quotes from News Corp executive chairman Michael Miller who stood by the professionalism of News Corp's coverage.

In the public discussion that followed the email revelation, some people mistakenly identified Townsend as a journalist. This is the focus of Blair's column. 'Unlike us primitive deniers, climate activists carefully examine all available evidence before reaching intelligent and informed conclusions. Except they don't. Just look at this bunch of leftist climate change cranks applauding the fearlessness of Emily Townsend, who they imagine to be News Corporation's solitary brave and truth-telling journalist.'

To point out the careless confusion about Townsend's professional role at News Corp was legitimate: she was an accountant, not a journalist. But by making this the focus, Blair diverts from Townsend's reasons for resignation, and uses the error to hint that those who are interested in climate are careless with facts. He uses the fact that she had once worked in the coal industry to further discredit Townsend, although why this is relevant he doesn't explain. The column is all about building negative attitudes towards campaigners, scientists and journalists who address climate change to avoid attention on the concerns raised by Townsend.

Five days later, Rupert Murdoch's son James and his partner Kathryn were [reported as being upset about the climate scepticism being spread by News Corp](#), particularly in the context of the bushfires. Five months later James Murdoch resigned from the company.

## Peta Credlin

Credlin was a Liberal staffer and Chief of Staff to Prime Minister Tony Abbott. After Abbott was deposed as Prime Minister by Malcolm Turnbull, she moved to Sky News where she has her own weeknightly show. She is a rising star in the world of right-wing political commentary. Her opinion pieces are syndicated across News Corp Australia's publications. In our study, she had 81 articles, representing 4% of all opinion pieces, and was published in all four publications. Her style is less superficial than Bolt or Blair although many of the same themes occur.

Credlin's columns are less emotional than Blair's and less rhetorical than Bolt's. She is quite explicit in her support for the fossil fuel industry and continued reliance on coal-fired power stations.

In 'Burning not climate driven' (15 December 2019, Herald Sun) she draws together a number of familiar sceptic themes. She begins: 'All the so-called leaders and self-appointed climate guardians blaming the current bushfires on climate change know little of our history – and even less about how indigenous [sic] people managed land for tens of thousands of years.' This statement is made without any evidence that those who advocate for climate change action do not know about Indigenous fire practices, which she then briefly describes.

Credlin then outlines the losses in previous major bushfire events including the 1851 Black

Thursday bushfires in Victoria. On the basis of this she launches an attack: 'So massive bushfires are nothing new in this land of "droughts and flooding rain". What is relatively new, of course, is climate cult hysteria and the readiness of grant-hungry researchers, headline-hunting MPs and virtue-signalling business people to attribute every extreme weather event to carbon dioxide emissions.'

She does not engage with the huge amount of science that from 1988 onwards has been warning that bushfires will become more intense and frequent with climate change or deal with statements by climate scientists who have used the term '[unprecedented](#)' to describe the nature and scale of contemporary fires (Steffan et al, 2020). She uses historical information to distract rather than engage with statements by scientists and others that the scale and frequency of massive fires are correlated with climate change. Before dismissing that body of science a journalist would be expected to ask how historical facts should be considered in the light of recent evidence.

Credlin ends on another familiar version of anti-climate change action arguments. 'Two things are clear though: first, as the source of scarcely 1 percent of the world's emissions, nothing we do can make the slightest difference to any CO<sub>2</sub>-caused climate change; and second, it doesn't matter how much we do, it will never be enough for the climate change true believers.'

The claim that there is nothing that Australia can do to make any difference to climate change is a well-worn theme. It had been used by Bolt in a column in 1 December 2018, 'Less marching, more learning', which included a reference to the then Chief Scientist 'admitting' that we 'could stop all Australia's emissions – junk every car, shut every power station, put a cork in every cow – and the effect on the climate would still be "virtually nothing"'. [In a statement on 18 December, 2018](#), Finkel accused Bolt of completely misrepresenting him (Chief Scientist, 2018). There have been many other responses to this argument, some of which are spelled out in [this column](#) by Associate Professor Matt McDonald at the University of Queensland.

In a column, 'Coal is still the only answer to reliability' in The Daily Telegraph, Credlin gives a 'thumbs up' to Coalition MP Matt Canvan's campaign for more investment in coal-fired power stations. 'The only way to get more reliability is to stop building more generation that's dependent on the wind blowing or the sun shining, and start replacing the ageing fleet of 24/7 coal-fired baseload power.' She criticises the political risk that 'has spooked the private sector' and the 'climate cult [that] has captured the Labor Party'. She urges her readers to 'forget "climate emergency" claptrap...'

Credlin raises broader ideological themes in her columns and links them with the issue of climate change. For example, on 26 January, she wrote a celebration of Australia Day: 'Be thankful for what we have and don't cry over mistakes.' In passing, she commented that 'usual suspects on the Left have been too busy arguing that climate change has caused the bushfire disaster.' This underscored her attitude that climate action is about politics not science.

## Peter Gleeson

Peter Gleeson published 73 opinion pieces, which makes him the fourth-most prolific of sceptic columnists. He is a Sky News host, and is published in all four News Corp Publications, but most prominently in the Courier Mail where he accounts for 11% (38) of opinion pieces.

## Chris Kenny

Chris Kenny is an Associate Editor at The Australian who hosts his own TV show on Sky News. Kenny is the most published opinion writer for The Australian on the topic of climate change, accounting for 8% (69) of items. Kenny often links climate change with criticism of the ABC and other media outlets. Kenny's position appears to shift. On 31 August in 'Vision' on the road ahead, Morrison in driver's seat' in The Australian, Kenny references Morrison as suggesting 'that China, as the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases, no longer deserves a free ride in global climate efforts ... and that means that the arrangements that we have in trade or whether it's emissions reduction or the global responsibility and the relationships people have, this all changes too' (Morrison). Kenny then validates this by saying 'Morrison deserves credit for a careful reassertion of Australia's values and interests.' A reader would likely interpret this to mean Kenny does accept the need to drive down carbon emissions.

On the other hand, on 16 November 2019 in 'Climate crusaders exploit fires to push their alarmist view' in The Australian, Kenny writes:

Like a struck match in the bush, global warming is the spark that triggers a destructive firestorm in public debate. Heated on emotion, fanned by sensationalist media and fuelled by ideology, it burns through common sense, reason and decency, showing no respect for facts or rational thought. Climate alarmists are using tragic deaths and community pain to push a political barrow. Aided by journalists and others who should know better, they are trying to turn a threat endured on this continent for millennia into a manifestation of their contemporary crusade. It is opportunistic, transparent, grisly and plain dumb. Contributions this past week take lunacy to new levels in an ominous sign for public discourse. In this land of droughts and flooding rains — Dorothea Mackellar's "flood, fire and famine" — we now confront an extra injury every time the weather tests us: silly and reckless posturing from climate alarmists trying to prove their point. History doesn't matter to them, nor the facts. Rather than consider reality, they proffer an almost hallucinogenic alternative, pretending their political gestures will deliver cooler, damper summers unsinged (sic) by bushfires.'

Kenny does not accept the climate science findings that the huge bushfires of the 2019 spring and summer seasons were linked to climate change. This fact has been confirmed by many scientists and the Royal Commission into Bushfires. It is clearly explained in [Climate Council briefings](#) that are based on scientific findings. Kenny's attitude seems to shift in accordance with his political focus and the object of his attack.

## 5.2 Editors

At the 2020 News Corp annual general meeting, Rupert Murdoch asserted that “there are no sceptics” at News Corp. This is not true. Editors are selected by senior management. Their ongoing employment is presumably a reflection of their alignment with the editorial culture of the company.

Of 72 editorials over the period of study that expressed a view towards climate science, 61% rejected or raised doubt about climate science findings. 39% of the editorials expressed an acceptance of climate science findings. This is a position, and part of a strategy.

In a column [‘ABC ideological blinkers cost broadcaster its credibility and viewership’](#) in The Australian on 4 August 2019, Chris Mitchell (ex-editor) explained that in 2002 he decided to ‘report the IPCC and the work of scientists in the field that would also open its pages to dissenters, both on the science and on the economics’. The editorial policy that he established became entrenched and flourishes today. Mitchell does not explain how he resolved the tension between the journalistic requirement that opinion be based on facts with his decision to publish sceptics.

It is one thing to argue that columnists provide a diversity of viewpoints, but editorials are a different matter because they represent the views of the publication. Editors often do not personally write the editorials but they do approve them. This is why Mitchell and others are much more sensitive about findings that their editorials are sceptical.

In fact, News Corp Australia has been publishing sceptical editorials since 1997. In 2010, David McKnight found that ‘newspapers and television stations owned by News Corporation, based on their editorials, columnists and commentators, largely denied the science of climate change’, and that its corporate view framed the issue as one of political correctness rather than science. He concluded: ‘Scientific knowledge was portrayed as an orthodoxy and its own stance, and that of “climate sceptics” as one of courageous dissent.’ McKnight was unable to identify ‘a substantial body of articles establishing the science and challenging the climate dissidents’ claims.’ (McKnight, 2010, p.700).

The Australian’s Environment Editor Graham Lloyd published a rebuttal called [‘Sceptical writers skipped inconvenient truths’](#) on 10 December 2010. McKnight pointed to an editorial on January 14, 2006 that argued that the environment movement was about ‘more theology than meteorology’ and ‘[S]upport for Kyoto cloaks the green movement’s real desire: to see capitalism stop succeeding.’ McKnight quoted another editorial that accused ‘deep green Luddites’ of believing that ‘the only way to avert the coming apocalypse is to close down all the power plants, take all cars off the road and return to a pre-industrial Arcadia.’

In 2011, Robert Manne's Quarterly Essay entitled 'Bad News' included a content analysis of all articles about climate change published by The Australian between January 2004 and April 2011 (Manne, 2011, pp.37–54). In response, Environmental Editor Graham Lloyd argued that the editorial stance of The Australian was one of clear acceptance of anthropogenic climate change and quoted from an editorial published at the time of the 2007 [IPCC report](#) which stated that 'global warming is unequivocally happening, and ... humans are, in the panel's view, highly likely to be causing most of it.'

He accused Manne of ignoring material published in The Australian which supported the climate science consensus and of unfairly quoting a 2006 editorial. He wrote, 'Manne quotes half a kicker headline from an editorial of January 12, 2006, which said "climate change may be a mirage". The second half of the headline, which Manne neglected to report, was "global poverty is not".' It is difficult to imagine how the words, 'climate change may be a mirage', in whatever context they were written, could be read as consistent with the scientific consensus position on anthropogenic climate change.

The Daily Telegraph's editorial on 14 May 2019 'The Telegraph says: [Coded message is Shorten slur](#)' criticises Greenpeace protests and then sarcastically discredits and trivialises the idea of a climate emergency almost in passing. 'Greenpeace claimed their protest was a demand to PM Scott Morrison that he declare a "climate emergency", which would have seemed odd during a beautiful Sydney autumn day.' This statement is deliberately designed to raise doubt in readers about the need for urgent action on climate change as found by thousands of scientists who contributed to the [IPCC report](#). This is further explained in [Section 4.6](#) and further discussed in [Section 6.1](#).

In the same vein, The Australian editorial on 12 December 2019 titled '[Climate Change Grandstanding](#)' hits back at the NSW Minister for the Environment and others who have linked catastrophic bushfires with climate change, which, again, is a link confirmed by climate scientists.

The editorial quotes Coalition MP Matt Canavan as referring to the 'bogeyman of climate change' suggesting that it is mythical rather than real. NSW Water Minister Melinda Pavey's view that there have been 'extreme weather events in Australia for centuries' is endorsed. "'Everyone on the ground knows that this is simply caused by a lack of rain," she told Sky News on Wednesday. Severe drought has been the primary driver of this season's fires.' The intended message that increased risk of drought is not linked to climate change is another example of sidestepping the scientific issue and consensus that extreme weather is linked to climate change.

Similarly to the Peta Credlin column discussed above, the editorial recounted historical facts to demonstrate that 'Bushfires are endemic to our land' (No one has actually disputed this; the issue is scale and frequency). The Australian writes, 'What is different now is that climate change is being blamed, even by people who should know better'.

This presents the issue as if someone has simply decided to 'blame' climate change instead of recognising that those statements reflect the findings of scientists. Minister Kean is accused of 'playing political parlour games' and 'taking the focus away from victims and people risking their lives to fight bushfires. Whatever the case with the science, we need to take practical steps to reduce the risk of bushfires.' This not only suggests that the science is an open question but also presents the argument as an either/or situation, which Kean has not done. The use of 'grandstanding' and 'standard ploy' suggests that science is being used as a political tool.

In another editorial on 19 December, '[Media Panic on climate, bushfires and a vacation](#)', The Australian attacks others for being in 'a post-fact age, high on emotion, fear and blame. Remember when journalism was about facts?'

This editorial refers to 'loony claims' that 'Australia is burning, climate change is causing it and we can fix it by slashing our emissions now. Our public debate is dominated by emotionalism while reporters chase non-stories sparked into the world by memes and tweets.' While it may be true that some commenters on Twitter and elsewhere imply that if emissions were instantly slashed, the climate change problem would disappear, this is not what journalists were reporting.

The Guardian's Deputy Editor Katharine Murphy is attacked for suggesting that 'We have a government, led by (Morrison), which is, in many different ways, failing to rise to the challenges of our time. They. Are. Failing. I get very impatient about that. I get very worried about that.' Although this view is widely shared by scientists and others, The Guardian is accused of a 'ceaseless hunt for clicks, with a begging bowl out for donations, climate alarmism is a brand optimiser. That's fine up to a point. But a reader wandering into The Guardian's pious yarn garden may think its journalists are reporting news. They. Are. Not.' As The Australian understands well, The Guardian publishes news and opinion, just like News Corp. To suggest that worrying about climate change is a form of 'climate alarmism' may not be an explicit rejection of climate change science but it deliberately undermines it.



The editorial goes on to endorse a statement by columnist Chris Kenny that 'Grown adults blame governments for weather', suggesting it adopts his trivialisation of 'climate' as just 'weather'. It undermines the credibility of former NSW Fire and Rescue Commissioner Greg Mullins (who warned about the consequences of ignoring climate change) by reminding readers that he is funded by Tim Flannery's Climate Council (Tim Flannery is another common target of News Corp). The editorial attacks NSW Environment Minister Matt Kean who it says 'has directly blamed the fires on climate change.' In using the word 'directly', it suggests that Kean has stated that climate change has literally lit particular fires, which he has not. Rather than clarifying direct and indirect causation issues, The Australian deliberately confuses them. Again, The Australian suggests that Kean is playing a political 'game'. He is accused of misleading the public as it diverts attention from what he should be doing to limit bushfires. The suggestion is that action to reduce bushfires and action to reduce emissions is a binary, mutually exclusive choice.

The editorial includes a quote from Kenny: 'rational arguments, hard facts and intelligent debate have been cast aside in favour of woke whingeing.' It ends with 'It's not even Christmas but in a post-fact age, amid End Times gloom and attention-clamour disorder, our faux climate emergency is just beginning.'

**Ironically, The Australian accusation of 'post-fact' is one that much more accurately describes News Corp's own employees Andrew Bolt and Tim Blair.**

### 5.3 Sceptic Sources

Journalists have an ethical obligation not to publish information that they believe could be false. There is no excuse for journalists not probing arguments and backgrounds of sceptics. Other journalists have worked for years to provide accurate and easily accessible relevant information via websites such as [Desmogblog](#). (For more on the [issue of ethical obligation of reporters](#) and climate sceptics, see Bacon, 2013.)

Until about 2012, the ABC and Fairfax (now Nine) published some climate sceptics on the basis that they represented one strand of the debate about climate science (Nash & Chubb, 2013). But as sceptics' links with the fossil fuel industry were exposed and ethical issues about publishing false information were debated, mainstream media gradually stopped promoting the views of sceptics.

We observed that since 2012, News Corp publications seem to be publishing fewer external sceptics. This may be because most News Corp staff agree with other organisations despite a policy that favours publication of scepticism at more senior levels of the company. It is possible that if in-house or regular opinion writers who can produce sceptical copy are readily available, why source and pay external writers?

More research is needed into the role of the external sceptics and their relationship with in-house sceptics. However, we can report that these people continued to have a presence in News Corp Australia publications, either as opinion writers or sources.

## Ian Plimer

Geologist Professor Ian Plimer has a long association with both News Corp and the Institute of Public Affairs (Wilkinson, 2020, p.163,199).

In 2009, Elaine McKewon researched the coverage of the launch of *Heaven and Earth: Global Warming: The Missing Science*, a book by climate sceptic, University of Adelaide Professor of Mining Geology Ian Plimer and the controversy that accompanied it. In his book, Plimer argues that there is no connection between human activity and climate change (McKewon, 2009).

McKewon's analysis showed that *Heaven and Earth* received sustained coverage when it was released. Of 219 separate print and online articles, more than half (56%) were favorable to Plimer, which is far more than would be expected given his attack on the consensus position. More than half of all coverage was in News Corp, two-thirds of which (64%) was favorable to Plimer. McKewon was critical of News Corp Australia for not disclosing Plimer's connections to the mining industry in its articles.

Plimer continues to challenge the very basis of climate change science. Although attention on Plimer has waned, he is still promoted by News Corp Australia. For example, on 29 January 2020, Bolt promoted that night's *The Bolt Report* on Sky TV with the words, 'I'll have a whisky with my mate Ian Plimer'.

On 17 November 2019, in the context of coverage of massive bushfires, *The Daily Telegraph* reporter Perry Duffin quoted Professor Plimer as saying that it was a 'fraud' to claim that we are 'living in times of an "unprecedented" climate emergency' ('Town of Bobin in ruins after blaze claims 18 lives' *The Daily Telegraph*, 17 November, 2019). Having quoted one sceptic in the news piece, Duffin added another sceptic source, retired meteorologist William Kininmonth, who was quoted as saying, 'that bushfires were part of the Australian landscape and drought episodes were part of the natural variability of our environment'. No sources were quoted in response to these sceptics in this news article. Both statements by Plimer and Kininmonth were used again in a news article by Clarissa Bye in *The Daily Telegraph* the next day ('Climate not the burning issue here', *The Daily Telegraph*, November 18, 2019).

On November 21, *The Australian* published a piece by Plimer in which he described all climate models as having failed, and that carbon emissions are not a matter for concern ('Let's not pollute minds with carbon fears', *The Australian*, November 21, 2019). When ABC Media Watch's Paul Barry strongly criticised the piece, Bolt attacked him and accused him of 'disgraceful' tricks.

Chris Kenny promoted a new book by Plimer called *Green Murder*. In the book, Plimer argues that environmental movements are similar to fundamental religions in their 'reliance on authority' and 'suppression of alternative ideas' (Anti-Murdoch hysteria baseless bizarre, *The Australian*, February 2, 2020).

On July 2020, the Australian Press Council found that Plimer had not substantiated some statements in an opinion piece and that it would be preferable if he did acknowledge his mining interests. However, it found that because these interests were so well known, the interests did not have to be revealed. The full adjudication can be found [here](#).

## Bjorn Lomborg

Danish political scientist Bjorn Lomborg's [perspective on climate change](#) is very different from Plimer's. He accepts that climate change is happening but downplays the risks and argues against various policies that are recommended as ways to address it. In the survey period Lomborg was published five times, in The Australian, Herald Sun and Daily Telegraph. This is far more than leading Australian climate scientists. He consistently deflects from policies that address climate change and has argued that a small not large reduction in emissions is all that is needed. A detailed account of his views and publications can be found [here](#).

## Dr Peter Ridd

Dr Peter Ridd is closely associated with the Institute for Public Affairs. The Australian's Graham Lloyd has given a lot of coverage to his views on the Great Barrier Reef and his disagreements with other senior and highly respected scientists. DesMos journalists have provided extensive background on Ridd (For more on Ridd See [Section 6.2](#)).

Other sceptic identities or scientists on the fringe of climate science who were given favourable exposure during the period of the study include: [Jennifer Marohasy](#) (previously with the Institute of Public Affairs), [Prof Valentina Zharkova](#), [Henrik Svensmark](#) and others associated with the [Institute of Public Affairs](#). In her recent book *The Carbon Club*, Marian Wilkinson has documented links between the IPA and fossil fuel interests (Wilkinson, 2020).

In providing these names, we do not intend to suggest that journalists should not investigate dissidents in science but that they should adequately research their background and consider their views in a wider research context before promoting their views uncritically. The access and visibility granted to contrarians needs to be considered in the light of the low visibility given to Australian climate scientists ([See section 6.2](#)).



# REPORTING CLIMATE CHANGE



## 6.1 Politics and case study: Climate emergency and local councils

As we have reported in [Section 4.3](#), politics and policy themes dominate the coverage of climate change in Australia. This finding is not surprising. It is consistent with other research that found a heavier focus on domestic political conflict in Australian coverage than in that of other countries (Eide et al, 2010). The political battles over Australia's climate policy have always been strongly linked to the ways climate science is represented. This continued during the year of this study.

Marian Wilkinson has recently spelled out in her book *The Carbon Club* how a network of climate sceptics, politicians and business leaders have fought to control Australia's energy policy for more than two decades (Wilkinson, 2020). News Corp continues to be a major protagonist in this battle to enforce Australia's dependence on fossil fuels, or at least to slow the decline in their use.

James Painter, who studied how scepticism was covered in six countries (not Australia), found a strong correspondence between the political perspective of each newspaper and the prevalence of sceptical voices within it, particularly on the opinion pages. 'By most measures (but not all), the more right leaning tend to have more such voices, the left leaning less.' (Painter, 2012). In comparing UK newspapers, Maria Ruiu also found that more right-leaning newspapers tended to contain more scepticism than centre-left ones, even as the consensus position around key findings of climate science strengthened (Ruiu, 2020). She suggests, however, that the scepticism may change from denying that humans cause climate change to focusing more on its consequences; for example, that climate change is happening but it is making things better. (Bolt has used this argument recently.)

## 6.1.1 Negative bias against action to address climate change

**This study has revealed that News Corp Australia is biased against action on climate change. Of those items in which attitude to climate action was relevant, 59% were negative, 21% were positive, and 20% were neutral. The Daily Telegraph and the Herald Sun were the most negative.**

An earlier, more narrowly focused study on how the Australian media covered the Gillard government's carbon price policy in 2010, showed how The Daily Telegraph and Herald Sun were extremely biased against this policy. Across all News Corp publications negative coverage (82%) outweighed positive (18%) articles. The study report commented: 'This indicates a very strong stance against the carbon policy adopted by the company that controls most Australian metropolitan newspapers, and the only general national daily.' (Bacon, 2011; Section 2.1).

Lower figures in the current research might suggest News Corp coverage has become less negative since then, but this is due to the larger scope of this study that includes all mentions of climate change, not just those related to policy.

In 2010, the attack on Gillard's carbon policy was mostly framed by economic concerns about the loss of investment, jobs and prices. These same themes continue today. Much of the coverage in 2019-20 in News Corp publications was based on a binary equation that the preservation of jobs and a viable economy is negated by any action to reduce carbon emissions.

Although there is ample evidence that climate change policy advocates have a wide range of proposals for workers to transition to new jobs rather than become unemployed, entrenched 'binary equation' frameworks prevail in News Corp publications.

For example, in a post-election 2019 column in the Courier Mail, Peter Gleeson re-stated the binary mutual exclusion between jobs and opposition to expanding coal mining in Queensland:

'The cold, hard reality is that Labor misread the mood of the public, who have opted for jobs over a global warming scare campaign. The Queensland Labor Government has been the leader of the anti-Adani cheer squad, prepared to invent legislative obstacles to appease their socialist mates. May 18 changed everything. To suggest otherwise is fanciful, and frankly, an insult to our intelligence.' ('Queen Jackie versus Snow White Palaszczuk', 11 June 2019).

While most of News Corps' political coverage is focused on the two major parties, its political reporters are constantly nudging Labor towards the right and chiding it for not protecting fossil fuel interests. For example, after the 2019 Federal election The Australian reported that Labor leader Shorten 'conceded' that he was unsuccessful in projecting a message that there would be jobs in renewable and other new industries. ('We got it wrong on climate change: Shorten', The Australian, 18 December, 2019.) News Corp, especially in Queensland where it controls all major newsprint outlets, had made that task very difficult.

Here are some typical, albeit somewhat contradictory, headlines from 2019:

**'Labor to turn screws on major polluters'**

- The Australian, 1 April 2019.

**'Labor candidates come out in favour of coal mines'**

- Courier Mail, 11 April 2019.

**'Labor plan falls into category of fairytale'**

- Courier Mail, 21 April 2019.

**'Labor fights for coal'**

- The Australian, 15 May 2019.

Wilkinson notes that Australian PM Morrison has strongly adopted the 'focus on jobs' theme as a way of not debating potential climate action strategies but instead as a means of turning away from discussion about climate (Wilkinson, 2020 p. 337).

If we lift our gaze from the parochial stage of domestic Australian politics, we may notice that the rest of the world is watching. In December 2019, The Climate Action Network's 2020 Climate Change Performance Index ranked Australia the worst in the world on climate change policy, out of 57 countries. Journalists, and the public, might think this lowest ranking would be newsworthy in Australia. The Guardian and Nine decided that it was news, but the four News Corp publications did not. The only reference that we could find on the Factiva database was in an opinion piece by Peta Credlin, which was syndicated across the three NewsCorp tabloids we studied. Credlin, one of News Corp's top sceptic opinion writers, mentioned it in the context of trying to justify the adequacy of current policies, including by repeating the refrain that 'nothing we do can make the slightest difference'. ('Burning not climate driven', 15 December 2019, Courier Mail). This article is discussed in Section 5.1.

As well as being framed by a choice between 'jobs' versus 'action to reduce emissions', the political coverage of climate change in 2019-20 was also driven by broader political and ideological battles on News Corp Australia's agenda – opposition to the ABC, a professed desire to destroy the Greens, a dislike of progressive voters, opposition to all forms of left-wing politics, suspicion of local councillors who see a role for local government beyond 'roads', and distaste for the regulation of media, land clearing and most forms of business.

The following case study of local government coverage demonstrates how these intertwined themes emerge through language and selection of sources.

### 6.1.2 Case study : Local politics, climate emergency declarations and News Corp media politics

Climate emergency declarations are one of many activist strategies to address climate change. They are designed to highlight the urgency expressed by the IPCC. Climate emergency declarations are made at international, national, state, and local levels. For instance, the World Health Organization has declared a climate emergency.

While declarations can be largely symbolic, they can also empower communities in different cities and regions to take action even when national governments are more resistant. In Australia, local governments have been out in front of the political process in declaring emergencies.

The first Council to declare an emergency in Australia was Darebin Council in suburban north Melbourne in 2016. Since then, 90 municipalities across Australia have joined 1400 local governments across the world in making climate emergency declarations.

Sceptics portray such declarations as a form of hysteria. For example, in a column 'Can we afford Labor's climate folly?' published in the Herald Sun on 3 April 2019, Andrew Bolt referred to Labor environmental spokesperson Mark Butler as 'hallucinating when he claims we face a 'climate emergency''.

#### Herald Sun – local government campaign

In July 2019, Herald Sun reporters John Masanauskas and Ian Royal published 'Council accused of climate hypocrisy'. Cathy Okie, a Greens Councillor on Melbourne City Council, had moved a motion supported by other councillors to declare a 'Climate Emergency'. The council declaration said climate change and mass species extinction posed serious risks to the people of Melbourne and Australia. The story then honed in on the fact that Okie had taken airline trips: a council-paid trip to Bonn for a forum on 'resilient cities' and another paid-for trip to Canada.

They wrote, 'City of Melbourne councillors and staff are under fire for taking at least 30 high carbon jet flights overseas in a year before the council declared a "climate emergency"'. The cost of the trips was \$100,000.

Of all the possible sources who might have provided a comment, the reporters chose Evan Mulholland, the communications director of right-wing think tank the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA). The IPA is an important part of the climate sceptical network in Australia (Wilkinson, 2020). Mulholland was quoted as saying, 'An emergency is a fire or a flood... This so-called emergency is an unnecessary distraction from the council's core business. Get back to roads, rubbish and keeping rates low.'

'An emergency is a fire or a flood ... This so-called emergency is an unnecessary distraction from the council's core business. Get back to roads, rubbish and keeping rates low'.

— Mulholland

Okie was quoted in response,

'With any work-related travel, we ensure that the agenda and activities justify the cost. In my role as vice-president of the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives, it's important that I attend the annual board and committee meetings in Germany.'

Herald Sun considered the story important enough to warrant an editorial on 22 July 2019:

**'Greens councillor Cathy Okie last week emotionally declared the City of Melbourne was in a "climate emergency". Despite Australia contributing only 1.3 per cent to global emissions, Cr Okie declared the city was in "dire circumstances"...There are more than enough pressing concerns for the council to focus on at home: economic growth for city businesses, managing traffic disruption amid major works, balancing the needs of motorists and cyclists and improve parking. And yet Melbourne is not alone: 27 other Australian councils have moved similar motions including the City of Sydney and Noosa ... Residents would prefer councillors focused on local issues rather than spend time and money campaigning on an international level.'**

The reference to 1.3% emissions is a familiar idea used to convince the public that there is no need for Australia to treat action on climate change as an urgent matter (we discuss it further in Section 5.) The hypocrisy of climate action advocates taking jet trips is raised again. The Editorial then indicated that the Herald Sun has more general concerns. The editorial voice claims to speak for 'residents' but does not explain on what basis it knows their position (Herald Sun editorial, 22 September, 2019).

Two weeks later, prominent News Corp Australia opinion writer Peter Gleeson contributed to the discussion in 'Councils must deliver basics, not save the world' (Herald Sun, 4 August 2019). News Corp Australia concerns extend to Queensland:

**"Noosa Council recently passed a motion that Australia was in a "climate emergency", whatever that means. Brisbane City Council rejected that this week but Sydney City Council and a dozen or so other local authorities have also declared a "climate emergency", despite Australia being on track to meet its Paris Agreement target five years earlier than planned."**

Gleeson ends with 'the best councillors are those who listen to their people and deliver what they need. Right now, "quiet" Australians want their councillors to be honest and transparent and stay away from Left-wing ideological ratbaggery'.

Rather than research easily available information about what a 'climate emergency' might mean, Gleeson leaves it as an unknown. He tells readers that Australia is on track to meet its Paris Agreement commitments although that is a matter of debate. Finally, he links councillors proposing climate emergency motions with 'left-wing ratbaggery' and claims to know what 'quiet Australians' want them to do instead.

However, not all News Corp Australia reporters are so dismissive of support for climate emergency motions. On 23 August 2019, the local News Corp outlet in Melbourne, *The Leader*, ran a small story about a petition calling on Monash Council to declare an emergency. This story did not align with the Herald Sun's campaign against such activity by councils, and was added to the Herald Sun online news. This reinforces our earlier point in [Section 4.6](#) that local stories are often more positive, perhaps because younger reporters look for news opportunities beyond the constraints of the main editorial agenda. With the closure of multiple local outlets in 2020, such opportunities for positive views have likely already diminished.

There were related stories in the Herald Sun over following weeks, including one about Yarra City Council hosting climate activists for 'training'.

On 17 September 2019 John Masanauskas had another local government climate story, about a plan by the City of Phillip. The story was headlined 'Council to declare "climate emergency" in Bangladesh', and continued, "Another Victorian council is set to declare a 'climate emergency', with a Greens councillor claiming countries like Bangladesh, Vietnam and Egypt face permanent flooding unless action is taken".

Again Masanauskas turned to the IPA for comment, this time from its policy director, Gideon Rozner. Rozner said that:

**"so-called climate emergencies were a meaningless political fad. "Does the City of Port Phillip intend to give itself "climate emergency powers"? Will ratepayers be living under "climate martial law"?" he said. 'Australia accounts for only 1.3 per cent of the world's emissions. Victoria only accounts for part of that and Port Phillip a tinier fraction still. Ratepayers should rightly be wondering how this pointless gesture will affect the earth's climate.'"**

Rozner, who actively campaigns in favour of climate scepticism, reduces climate action to a 'fad' and mocks the concept of climate emergency as 'climate martial law'. The article also dismisses the global dimension of the extreme weather occurring in Bangladesh and Philippines linked to climate change, encouraging readers to dismiss it as irrelevant to Australia. As [The New York Times reported in July this year](#), devastating climate impacts have already been experienced in Bangladesh and elsewhere. The Times article highlights how climate change will have very severe impacts on many poor communities in countries with less resources to adapt than rich countries like Australia. This is presumably what the City of Phillip councillors want to highlight by mentioning Bangladesh in their 'climate emergency' motion.

As well as quoting the Institute for Public Affairs, the Herald Sun went further, and promoted an IPA project as well. The Institute was raising funds to produce a fourth edition of its book *Climate Change: The Facts*, a collection of articles by climate sceptics. The Herald Sun continued to push back on climate action by Victorian councils during November.



## An attack on Sydney Lord Mayor Clover Moore that backfired

Meanwhile on 21 June 2019, the Sydney Morning Herald reported that Lord Mayor of Sydney Clover Moore expected the City of Sydney to pass a climate emergency motion because climate change posed a 'serious risk' to residents. After the motion was passed, Moore wrote a letter to PM Morrison urging the national government to treat climate change as a 'national emergency' and lead the transition to renewables and a low-carbon economy. Morrison passed the matter to the Minister for Energy Angus Taylor.

On 29 September 2019, Anna Caldwell at The Daily Telegraph was provided with an 'exclusive' by the Federal Minister for Energy Angus Taylor. She received a copy of his response to Moore shortly after he had sent it. The first paragraph of her article read: 'Lord Mayor Clover Moore has been told by the federal government to rein in the hundreds of thousands of dollars her council is spending on international and domestic travel if she is serious about lecturing Australia on climate change'. Once again, travel hypocrisy was the line of attack.

The Daily Telegraph reported, based on figures from Taylor, that Sydney Council's \$300,000 a year outlay on air travel 'outstrips that of Australia's foreign ministers'. Taylor alleged that Sydney City Council had spent over \$15 million on air travel, and was quoted as lecturing Moore that "One such example (of climate action) is to limit unnecessary air travel. Given your most recent annual report shows your council spent \$1.7 million on international travel and \$14.2 million on domestic travel, there is a real opportunity for your council to make a meaningful contribution to reducing Australia's emissions.'

Only in the last paragraph did Caldwell report that Moore did not accept that these figures were correct. 'He [Taylor] should focus on reducing emissions and providing reliable energy, not making up figures about travel by local government officials,' Moore was quoted as saying."

This story is consistent with the News Corp campaign against councils declaring climate emergencies and their alleged hypocrisy. There is also a long history of The Daily Telegraph attacking Clover Moore, who was resoundingly re-elected in 2016 despite the paper's strong campaign to toss her out. So from several points of view, the story fitted into News Corp's agenda. It's not clear why Caldwell was not cautious enough to hold the story when Moore's office alleged the figures were wrong. But instead the 'scoop' turned into a political scandal. As The Guardian has since reported, by the time of publication Taylor's staff had realised the mistake and informed him that the figures were wrong. It was not until the end of November that Taylor sent a letter to Moore unreservedly apologising. Although Taylor escaped any serious consequences, the issue has continued to plague him in parliament and the media.

These examples illustrate how a targeted editorial campaign against councils' declaring climate emergency drew on a broader right-wing political opposition to progressive councils. While exposures of unaccountable or wasteful government spending at any level would widely be regarded by journalists as a legitimate story, these stories are driven by a political agenda rather than a strong evidentiary basis.

The selection of the IPA as the key source to provide commentary plus the promotion of its book shows how the News Corp and its conservative political allies work together. Although in this case the attack on Clover Moore backfired, it also highlights the hidden strategies that powerful sources such as the Minister for Energy Angus Taylor can use to gain access to the media via selected journalists.

In the further example below of one day's coverage in *The Daily Telegraph* during the 2019/2020 bush fires, we can observe how several themes are drawn together for cumulative effect: News Corp's hostility to climate emergency declarations, the Greens, and the line that arsonists are deliberately lighting the fires.

### 6.1.3 One day in the life of *The Daily Telegraph*: Local politics and bushfires



In mid-November 2019, many NSW coastal regions were burning. Along with the fires, fear and concern for those affected swept through the community. But on 14 November, readers of *The Daily Telegraph* were greeted with headlines ( 'Mine Madness', 'Greens Adani motion is absurd') on the front page. These were a teaser to a story inside the paper. The rest of the page was occupied by a large Harvey Norman advertisement.

Inside, there was a double-page spread of bushfire coverage with the headlines: 'Fire coast aftermath', 'Risking it all to save a mate', 'Tears for a razed slice of heaven' and 'Close call for crew of RFS legends'. Page 9 included an exclusive report by John Rolfe: 'Council out of its mine - Mayor says move to boycott Adani contractors will cost millions'. The Inner West Council's Mayor Darcy Byrne told Rolfe that a 'climate emergency' motion relevant to council contracts had been proposed by Greens councillors and passed by Council. This ban on companies associated with Adani could potentially impact some Council contracts. Cr Byrne was quoted as saying that policy was 'juvenile and ridiculous and will bring council into disrepute'.

For comment Rolfe went not to the councillors who had passed the motion but the well-known sceptic and supporter of the Adani coal mine, the then Federal Resources Minister Matt Canavan. His predictable answer was, 'Sounds to me like the council just wants to signpost its self-believed virtue, not actually do anything practical for the environment'.

This was supported by an editorial headed, 'Greens faith is beyond logic'. It begins by reporting that a "nine-year-old boy in Cowra was caught lighting a fire with a blowtorch". The fire was put out quickly but police are "investigating many other Tuesday fires which they believe were deliberately lit". Further on, the Editor writes, "Meanwhile, despite press allegations of so many deliberately lit fires, we have Senior Greens blaming Prime Minister Scott Morrison and coal mining". The editorial sympathises with Byrne having to work with Greens: "It is the standard price paid for any association with the anti-progress Greens".

Opposite the editorial, there is a half-page cartoon 'Coal Faces' with a man in a turban and a flowing 'Adani' cloak serving spoonfuls of coal to hysterical Greens councillors in an inner west Sydney cafe. (This stereotypical representation ignores the fact that Gautam Adani, chairman and founder of the Adani Group, does not wear a turban).

Underneath the cartoon, a column by Andrew Bolt, 'Facts don't add up', includes a promotional link to his Sky News Bolt Report. Most of the piece focuses on a defence of Cardinal George Pell but a side column is headed 'Enough catastrophe mongering over fires'.

It reads:



Bolt is asserting that people are being manipulated. He uses historical bushfire statistics to dismiss an entire body of findings by scientists and fire experts. Instead of exploring the basis for use of the word 'unprecedented', he suggests that it has no basis and is just another form of political opportunism by journalists, fire chiefs, and climate action advocates who are making money (or encouraging precautionary behaviour) by spreading fear and alarm.

The rest of the double page is occupied by letters, most of which dismiss the connection between fires and climate change. The two quoted below are among hundreds of similar letters that News Corp Australia selected for publication during the fire season.

One reads: 'Let landowners protect properties properly. Hopefully the lesson has been learnt by these tragic bushfire events and landowners will be able to go about protecting their properties as only the landowners know how without the interference of green council bureaucrats dictating how the bush is managed from the safety of the office chairs. And please, I don't want to hear another politician using these fires as a soapbox for climate change. Fires are started either accidentally or by people doing the wrong thing.'

Another reads: "Assistance is always there. A few things about Australia that will always happen:

- 1. There will always be natural disasters such as droughts, floods, cyclones and fires.**
- 2. There will always be politicians using natural disasters to improve their profiles.**
- 3. There will always be some TV coverage overstating the severity to enhance ratings.**
- 4. There will always be greens and others from the left blaming all disasters on climate change.**
- 5. Lastly, there will always be services and volunteers to assist and clean up after every natural disaster.'**

These letters selected by The Daily Telegraph for publication reflected tropes that occurred frequently in other letters during discussion of fires. These include: landowners should be allowed to do their 'own thing' without interference from 'green council bureaucrats'; rejection of the scientifically established link between bushfires and extreme weather; media are exaggerating the severity of fires for commercial purposes; natural disasters are just a normal part of life and Australians are best to rely on volunteers.

In October this year, the Bushfires Royal Commission acknowledged the repeated expert evidence that climate change is, and will continue, to increase the frequency and intensity of natural disasters. It also dismissed arson as a factor. As the ABC's Media Watch put it, 'this dispelled a 'popular media narrative during the fires'.

## 6.1.4 Conclusion

Through this case study, we begin to understand the cumulative impact of multidimensional editorial strategies through which different types of coverage combine across a range of fronts. The editorial purpose is to mobilise audiences in support of policies and values of News Corp Australia and its political and commercial allies.

## 6.2 Representing scientists and climate change advocates

One of the key findings of this report is that there were very few voices of scientists in News Corp's coverage of climate change. Only 6% of all sources across four News Corp publications were scientists of any kind. Some scientists were also negatively targeted by News Corp publications. (Sections 4.4 and 6.4).

Many items that mentioned climate change in the context of science and environment reduced the validity of the science using critical political sources. (Some of these are dealt with in Section 4.4.) In a news story that relates to climate science, News Corp is twice as likely to quote a politician as a scientist. For example, in a story about the Great Barrier Reef ('Vibrant Reef teaming with life', The Australian, 13 August 2019), Graham Lloyd began:

'The Great Barrier Reef is not dead, is not dying and is not even on life support, federal Environment Minister Sussan Ley has declared after her first official visit to the World Heritage-listed site. Returning from a snorkelling trip ... Ms Ley was happy yesterday to broadcast the message that tourism operators desperately want heard around the world. "Today we saw coral that was struggling but we also saw coral that was coming back, that was growing, that was vibrant," Ms Ley said.'

None of the leading climate scientists who are extremely concerned about global warming impacts on the reef are quoted in this article, although Ley refers to the Australian Institute of Marine Science. Another Coalition MP Warren Entsch is quoted in relation to bleaching and climate change. 'He [Entsch] said it was not a new phenomenon: "It has been happening for millennia."' (This is similar to the frequently used sceptical argument: 'I believe in climate change because the climate is always changing.'). Lloyd does make a passing reference to 'marine scientist Peter Ridd who is about to begin a speaking tour'. Peter Ridd is a well-known sceptic who has repeatedly attacked other leading marine scientists. (See Section 5 & Wilkinson, 2020 p.196.).

The low levels of scientific 'voices' reflects very low levels of climate science reporting. In this section, we will look more closely at News Corp's reporting of climate science, including how scientists are represented.

First, some background issues relevant to climate science reporting.

### 6.2.1 Low levels of climate science reporting

Some may suggest that the low levels of science reporting can be explained by the complex nature of science or by saying that audiences are simply not interested. However, a lot of science reporting consists of publishing media releases with little or no extra follow-up. (ACIJ/Crikey, 2013.) 'Breakthrough' reports in scientific research have long been part of the staple diet of news organisations.



Photo credit: Marcus Spiske

For more substantial reports, there will always be complexities and uncertainties to explore. The job of journalists is to investigate these with an open mind. In exploring conflicting perspectives, science and general reporters make judgements about who and what are reliable sources. Good journalistic practice involves critical and dissident opinions being tested with the same rigour as scientists whose work has been subjected to review. (There is more discussion of these issues in Bacon, 2013, in [Section 3](#)).

The Australian Science Media Centre was established to enhance science reporting and has many useful resources. Think tanks and environmental organisations also have professional communications staff and publish resources that are especially designed for journalists, including those who are short of time.

Low levels of climate science reporting may reflect broader declines in specialist rounds. Our earlier report showed very low levels of reports about peer-reviewed climate science research across ten Australian publications and a decline in climate science reporting from 2011 to 2012. (Bacon, 2013, [Section 4.5](#)). Over six months, there were no reports in the Herald Sun that relied on peer-reviewed research and one in The Daily Telegraph. It is not within the scope of this study to investigate how coverage of climate science reporting compares with other fields of science. However, we can note that the massive focus on Covid-19 in 2020 shows how much reporting is possible when an issue is high on the national (and international) agenda, as climate change should be, given its risks. Nor is this study aimed at comparing News Corp Australia's reporting with that of other organisations, although our observation is that there is more climate science reporting in The Guardian, the ABC and Nine publications.

## 6.2.2 How are scientists represented in News Corp's climate science reporting?

Climate science stories usually include an authoritative individual or organisational scientific source that provides key information. In order to identify climate science stories, we selected news and features with a science and environment dominant theme that also had a scientist or academic individual or organisation as the first source.

Through this process, we identified 57 stories coded as having a dominant theme of 'science and environment' that quoted a scientist or academic as a first source. Even allowing for a margin of error (for example, source descriptions may be confusing), this is an extremely low number in a sample of 3,552 news and features. These four News Corp Australia publications pay very little attention to climate scientists or other academics researching climate change.

Nearly half of these stories were in *The Australian*. *The Australian's* environment editor Graham Lloyd, one of whose stories is mentioned above, had more climate science articles published than anyone else. *The Australian* promotes Lloyd as a 'fearless reporter of all sides of the environment debate'. (See below for more on Lloyd.)

On closer inspection of the few 'scientists' who were quoted, we recognised the names of several well-known sceptics or individuals on the fringes of climate science. While some of these individuals do accept the anthropogenic climate change consensus, they reject other consensus findings such as those linking climate change with extreme weather or argue that climate change improves the world. (See Section 6.3).

### How are civil society voices represented?

Australian civil society also struggles to get a voice in Australia's biggest media organisation when it comes to climate change. Organisations and movements advocating and acting to address climate change are much more likely to be collectively derided in News Corporation publications than they are to be quoted. (For examples of phrases and words used to describe those who advocate for urgent action to address climate change, see Section 6.4).

Environmental and other organisations regard visibility in the media as important and expend resources to achieve it. There is no shortage of easily accessed information packaged in media-friendly ways. This did result in organisations including the Australian Conservation Foundation, the Australasian Centre for Corporate Responsibility, Environment Victoria, and others getting quoted occasionally. Their communication strategies appear to be more successful in relation to other organisations, including the ABC, Nine Entertainment Co, *The Guardian*, other commercial media and independent media.



Photo credit: Simon Peel

### The Climate Council

The Climate Council, which was established privately in 2013 after the Abbott Coalition government abolished the Climate Change Commission, aims to provide 'authoritative, expert advice to the Australian public on climate change', funded entirely by the community. The Council and its staff include leading scientists, researchers and other subject matter and policy experts.

The Climate Council's representatives were quoted in climate science-related stories as a first or second source on approximately 12 occasions in all news and feature stories coded. (Note: We only coded first and second sources because stories with three or more sources were very rare, so it is technically possible the Climate Council was quoted on a few more occasions.) 'Qld a hotspot for extreme weather' (6 August, 2019) was based on a Climate Council report about extreme weather and renewable energy in Queensland. This is an example of a short local story about climate change that was also published on the Courier Mail online. It is based on a Climate Council report focused on Queensland, and quotes Climate Council CEO Amanda McKenzie. It begins, 'Queenslanders are on the frontline of climate change and extreme weather impacts, according to a Climate Council report released today'. It portrays a very encouraging view of renewable energy developments in Queensland.

This story, relying on the Climate Council as the sole source, was typical of a Courier Mail story that was positive to action on climate change. Our data analysis showed that the Courier Mail had almost an equal number of news and features that were positive as negative towards action on climate. (See Section 4.6)

In a column on June 21, 2019, Bolt promoted an issue of magazine *The Spectator* that included an attack on the Climate Council for allegedly taking journalists to report on 'artfully-selected patches of the Barrier Reef to see the bleaching first hand'. It criticised the Climate Council's CEO Amanda McKenzie for linking climate change with extreme weather and suggesting that Greta Thunberg, 'the mercilessly-exploited unwell Swedish 16-year old, to Skype her apocalyptic ravings to gullibles here: 'She's an amazing communicator and absolutely fantastic...'

### **Tim Flannery – object of hostility rather than a source**

Tim Flannery is the Chief Councillor of the Climate Council and is a leading scientist. He is a mammalogist who has played a leading role in climate advocacy in Australia. He served as the Chief Commissioner of the Climate Commission, a Federal Government body until it was abolished by the Abbott Government, and as the Chief Councillor of the Climate Council.

Tim Flannery was referred to in a negative way in more than 40 opinion pieces by News Corp columnists during the period of the study. We could find no occasion on which Flannery was given the opportunity to explain his views. We found one occasion on which he declined to comment. In other words, he was constantly subject to attack but effectively denied a voice. Those who attacked him included Chris Mitchell, Chris Kenny and Andrew Bolt who published more than 30 attacks on Flannery in seven different News Corp publications around Australia.

Comments about Flannery often mention his earlier descriptions of climate change threats including grave risks of water shortages in Perth, Western Australia. Wilkinson reports that Flannery later 'qualified the statement and said that it was contingent with governments not taking action.' A desalination plant was built. (Wilkinson, 2020, p.197). In its series *Holy Wars*, *Crikey* (2017) gave Flannery an opportunity to explain some points that News Corp sceptics have used against him for years, including some of his predictions. He argued that his remarks had been taken out of context.

None of this makes any difference. Flannery's earlier statements are repeatedly used by opinion writers against him. While Flannery, like any other public figure, should be open to critique by the media, he never appears to be asked by News Corp writers to clarify his earlier statements or put his comments in context.

During the 2019 Federal election period, Flannery was targeted in a prominent news article that reported that he had moved to a multi-million-dollar mansion in Manly. He was accused of waging a 'vendetta' campaign against Tony Abbott, the man who 'canned his old department in 2013', and that he had secured a 'raft of climate-related' positions at universities'. ('Climate chief's sea change aids abbot foe', The Daily Telegraph, 9 May 2019). The tone and content of these news stories is calculated to undermine the credibility of Flannery as a source on scientific matters. Flannery was given an opportunity to comment but declined.

The personalised campaign extended to other sources connected to the Climate Council. Reports were written about the ex-Commissioner of Fire and Rescue, Greg Mullins, being funded by the Climate Council. Mullins had set up a fire chiefs' climate group, which was referred to as Flannery's 'pet project', seemingly an attempt to delegitimise by association. Scrutinising the conduct of individuals and funding for projects is valid journalism so long as it is disinterested and offers the right of reply. However In the context of years of hostile commentary, a story like this seems more like part of a campaign to discredit Flannery and Mullins.

### **How scientist Professor Andy Pitman became fodder for sceptics**

Professor Andy Pitman directs a team of researchers at the ARC Centre of Excellence for Climate Science at UNSW, studying how extreme weather events such as heatwaves, bushfires and drought affect the environment. He has made many public statements about the links between extreme weather and climate change, and has signed letters urging governments to take urgent action. During 2019, he made a statement that 'as far as the climate scientists know there is no link between climate change and drought'. Instead of contacting him for clarification, News Corp used this remark for months as evidence that there were no established links between climate change and extreme weather, including fires. Bolt alone mentioned in more than 20 columns published by the three News Corp tabloids. Pitman issued a clarification stating that he had meant 'direct' link, but that was ignored.

ABC's Media Watch analysed the affair and noted that 'Bolt, Kenny and Jones have blocked their ears, because they're still treating Pitman's original quote as gospel'. Media Watch was also critical of scientists for not correcting the record quickly and clearly.

Ex-Prime Minister Tony Abbott also used the Pitman statement in an opinion piece rejecting the link between bushfires and climate change. ('Forget climate politics, this brutal bushfire season showed our fighting spirit', The Australian, 23 January 2017). Pitman's response was reported by Crikey. He told Crikey, 'Science is about accuracy and appropriate conclusions being reached from the data, and not about cherry picking parts of science to suit your argument'.

The treatment of Flannery and Pitman reveals two different editorial strategies in the representation of scientists. In Flannery's case, he has been targeted with hostile reports for years and denied an adequate voice to respond. In Pitman's case, a single statement was adopted by sceptics to strengthen their position. In neither case was News Corp Australia interested in exploring or giving voice to the scientists' actual views.

## Examples of climate science and environment stories

As we have reported in [Section 4.6](#), news reportage is less negative than the opinion pieces. Here are three examples of reports that were positive towards action to address climate change. The first was sabotaged, which led to a lot of negative commentary.

### Example 1: 11,000 scientists call 'climate emergency'

In early November 2019, 11,000 scientists from 153 countries endorsed an article titled 'World Scientists' Warning of a Climate Emergency' in the journal *BioScience*. This warning was widely covered around the world including in *The Australian*. According to our Factiva search it was not covered by the other three outlets.

The *Australian* reported that the statement claimed there was a 'climate emergency' that called for major transformations in the way global society functions and interacts with natural ecosystems. It quoted the group as stating that 'policymakers and the public urgently needed access to a set of indicators that convey the effects of human activities on (greenhouse gas) emissions and the consequent impacts on climate, our environment, and society'.

This was an example of a basic straight news story. It was one of the few examples in our sample that mentioned global inequalities related to predicted climate change impacts.

It is also an example of how the linkage of stories online can be used to undermine sources' authority. Readers who read the story online of the 11,000 scientists' warning are pointed via a link to a piece by Chris Kenny berating the ABC for 'ignoring the facts on climate change'. In this column Kenny attacked Media Watch and Paul Barry for 'climate groupthink' and the ABC for 'wilful deceit on global warming [that] is so entrenched that its self-censorship was as difficult to predict as sunrise'.

Another link embedded in the '11,000 scientists warning' news story took the reader straight to a different news story by Graham Lloyd ('US formally announces withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement', 5 November 2019) that was largely made up of statements from US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on the United States' record on climate action.

The original '11,000 scientists' story backfired when it was discovered that somebody had placed bogus signatories on the petition. Graham Lloyd reported this the next day in 'Mickey Mouse' on climate petition' (The Australian, 7 November, 2019).

He wrote, 'Dozens of signatories including Mickey Mouse and Harry Potter headmaster Albus Dumbledore from Hogwarts have been removed from an Alliance of World Scientists declaration of a "climate emergency"'.

Lloyd again included some of the findings of the Bioscience article but finished with a 'balancing' source. He chose consulting geologist Marc Hendrickx, who highlighted the errant signatures, and said 'legitimate researchers passionate about the scientific method do not do science by social media'. Marc Hendrickx has a long history of climate scepticism and has used the term 'climate dementors' to describe those who accept mainstream climate science.

Lloyd's report set off a barrage of sceptic letters in the 'debate' that followed. The letters were headed 'Scene set for new climate debate' (The Australian, 6 November 2019). One letter read: 'The role of carbon dioxide in global warming is not universally accepted, but sprawling cities are measurably hotter than their surroundings. By concentrating research and activism on greenhouse gases, often to the detriment of developing economies, we run the risk of turning our backs on the one ray of hope for humanity — the creation of high wealth and low population growth economies.'

One of the letters was from Marc Hendrickx himself. 'Looking over the 11,000 signatories from scientists declaring a climate emergency, I found a certain Professor Mickey Mouse, Institute for Blind, Namibia. It seems as much quality control has gone into this survey as climate science. I think I'll switch off the alarm bells.'

Another read: 'Earth is 4.5 billion years old yet 11,000 scientists have seen fit to declare a "climate emergency" on the basis of their examination of statistics on the past 40 years. That's hardly scientific rigour.'

The BioScience '11,000 scientists' story received massive coverage around the world. But other than in Australia, the Mickey Mouse angle received little publicity. None of the tabloids provided their readers with a serious report of the study. However, the 'Mickey Mouse' revelation was rich fodder for Andrew Bolt. He told his followers that the rest of the 'The media fell for the "study" that claimed "11,000 scientists" had declared' (Herald Sun, 5 November, 2019). He mocked other media outlets, accusing them of repeating 'any nonsense', and wrote, 'Global warming hysteria is now so manic that I don't trust a thing journalists say until I've checked for myself' (Herald Sun, 10 November 2019).

However, at least one columnist at News Corp Australia had a different view. Susie O'Brien wrote a strong column 'Bushfire crisis must be a climate wake-up call for Australia's leaders', in which she declared that while federal politicians did not want to talk about climate change during the bushfires, 'this is the ideal time to talk about global warming'. She added, 'The 11,000 signatories of the BioScience petition warning of a climate emergency agree. Disparaging a handful of the signatories because they're still students doesn't weaken its impact or importance'. (Susie O'Brien was mentioned in [Section 5](#) as one of the News Corp columnists who accepts the key findings of climate science). O'Brien's column was one of the few signs of real debate about the link between climate change and the bushfires in News Corp's coverage.

### Example 2: Greg Bearup: 'The Battle For The Barrier Reef' (13 December 2019)

Bearup is a very senior reporter who wrote a feature about the Great Barrier Reef. He explains that 'at the invitation of Tourism Queensland and the conservation group Citizens of the Great Barrier Reef, a number of journalists were flown to Cairns to observe the annual mass coral spawning and to look at a number of coral restoration projects in which tourism operators have partnered with scientists'. The story expresses more optimism than can be found in the views held by some leading scientists, but it does describe the 'devastation caused by the twin bleachings – it's like a poisoned forest. It wiped out 95 percent of the coral cover but you can see the baby corals regenerating among the carnage'. It does acknowledge that 'The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority found that the long-term outlook for the reef's ecosystem has deteriorated from poor to very poor... Concerted global action to limit global warming is needed to turn around the deteriorating outlook for the Great Barrier Reef – and all other coral reefs.'

As Bearup frankly acknowledged at the outset, this well-written feature was produced as a result of a Queensland tourism campaign. It celebrated attempts to fix the reef while acknowledging that the reef is threatened by global warming. Leading coral reef scientists such as Professor Terry Hughes have expressed concern about how positive narratives about attempts to 'fix' the reef may be used to deflect from urgent action to reduce the impact of fossil fuels. More reportage will be needed to investigate the viability of technologies that are proposed to save/restore the reef. However, Bearup's story does stand in stark contrast to much of News Corp Australia's coverage of coral reefs that has amplified the voices of those who promote the view that the Great Barrier Reef is not seriously threatened by global warming.

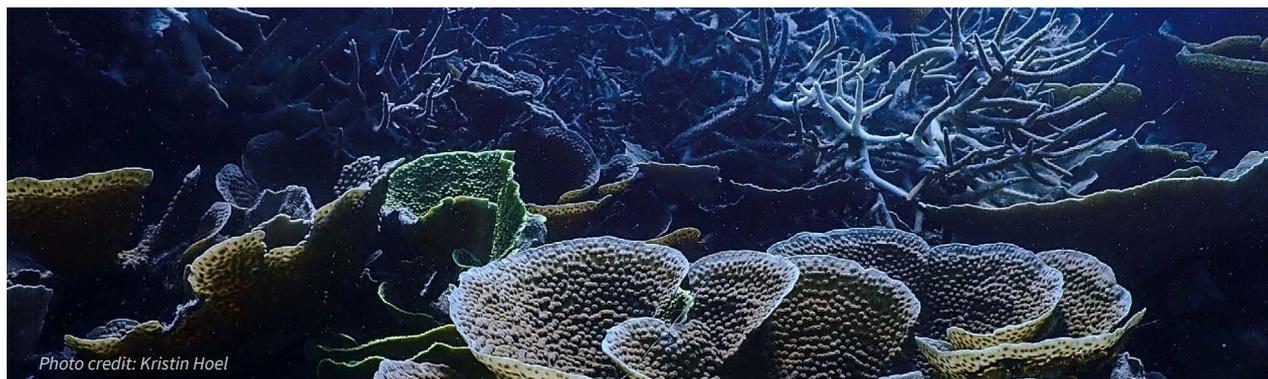


Photo credit: Kristin Hoel

**Example 3: 'Monash Uni's Julie Arblaster says the science shows that reducing carbon emissions is urgent' (also titled: 'Ringing the warning bell', 11 October 2019).**

This is a profile of a top scientist by Sian Powell in *The Weekend Australian*. Powell combines an opportunity to cover a woman who has reached the top of her field and also to focus on her belief climate change research is crucial, using ample quotes from Arblaster. 'Understanding the extremes of climate change is crucial ... because the resulting flash floods and crippling heat waves affect people's health and wellbeing. "A one degree rise in average temperatures doesn't sound like a lot, but it can have a really big impact on the extremes, like the heatwaves and the extreme rainfall events, that lead to the flooding we saw in Queensland a few years ago," she (Arblaster) says'. There were many similar examples of both long and very short features in our study where journalists found opportunities to highlight the issue of climate change. Unfortunately, opportunities lessen as resources shrink.

### **The media politics of the Great Barrier Reef**

There were several other stories, apart from the two already quoted in this section, that were about the fate of the Great Barrier Reef. This is a bigger evolving issue that goes beyond the scope of this report. Eight years ago, in our second *Sceptical Climate* report, the authors of this report analysed two 'good news stories' about the health of the reef. We concluded then: 'This example of news reporting of coral research shows how *The Australian* selects and structures its science news to fit within its overall political agenda on climate change. Unless readers receive information from other sources as well as *The Australian*, they could be left with the impression that climate change is not a major threat to Australian reefs.'

Amongst the small number of climate science in our sample, there were several by Graham Lloyd that quoted Dr Peter Ridd as a source on the health of the Great Barrier Reef.

Ridd was sacked by James Cook University for publicly attacking the credibility of the university's marine science research on Sky News and elsewhere. *The Australian* supports Ridd's belief that his sacking was an assault on free speech. Ridd won his case against James Cook University in 2019 but that judgement was overturned in July this year. Ridd has said that he is appealing to the High Court of Australia and is supported by the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA).



Although Ridd claims to accept that human-induced climate change is happening, he has long publicly rejected the credibility of some of Australia's top coral reef scientists. His claims that the reef is not seriously threatened fly in the face of thousands of national and international reports. He regards these as unreliable and 'doom science about the GBR'. He wrote a chapter in a new edition of the IPA book, *Climate Change: The Facts*. (This book was promoted by the Herald Sun. For more on Ridd and other sceptic sources see [Section 6.4](#)). He is supporting political campaigns against more regulation of farming run-off in Northern Queensland.

Of all the journalists employed by the four publications in our study, Lloyd is the only one to be given the time to seriously research scientific issues. He reads scientific papers and has at times identified statements by climate change advocates that he claims overstate the connection between specific extreme weather events and climate change. However, he also uncritically promotes sources that suit The Australian's editorial line, which is that those who reject well established findings of climate science have a right to be published whether or not their claims are justified. While other mainstream publishers have decided that it is unethical to publish statements without evidence to support them, The Australian positions 'dissidents' as free speech champions who deserve exposure.

In a news story celebrating Ridd's initial court win, Lloyd revealed his own position. He wrote, 'Peter Ridd has struck a powerful blow against the notion that climate can be conducted by consensus. .... Ridd has shown that 'plain speaking and an open mind can still trump bureaucratic intrusion and the dead hand of conformity.' Lloyd refers to an 'age of climate change dogma'. By conveying the impression that consensus in science is about dogma and conformity, Lloyd sidesteps the principles that underpin a 'consensus' in science which is only achieved through a long process of independent peer review. Lloyd has never explained how the coral reef research that Ridd has repeatedly rubbished as 'unreliable' and 'not objective' has passed through hundreds of evaluation processes. Other researchers have criticised Lloyd's journalism. In their "Wind turbine syndrome: a communicated disease on the controversy around wind farms", Professor Simon Chapman and Fiona Crichton provide an extended critique of the reporting strategies Lloyd used in a series of articles supporting the case of the anti-wind farm lobby (Chapman and Crichton, 2017).

Photo credit: Kristin Hoel

### 6.2.3 Conclusion

While News Corp Australia wages war against climate science and climate action advocates, these four outlets displayed little interest in reporting stories about climate science research in a fair way. However the stories analysed in this Section reinforce our overall finding that reportage is fairer than commentary. The last two (by Bearup and Powell) illustrate how senior journalists may have latitude to do stories that do not reflect the more sceptical overall editorial line. However, reportage can also be used to delegitimise climate action advocates, including scientists. Isolated instances such as a few false signatures (which may themselves have been a result of the actions of sceptics) on a 11,000 strong petition of support can become the trigger for a major attack from climate sceptics opinion writers and their followers.

## 6.3 The bottom line and climate change - Reporting business

These findings apply to the business coverage for the full year from April 2019 to March 2020, and need to be considered in the light of the dynamic and shifting nature of 2020 events in relation to energy, COVID-19, and international relations.

In our coding, we had a category for items concerning business, industry, and large-scale agriculture (not small-scale farming). In the rest of this section, we have referred to this category as 'business'. Overall, we found the proportions of coverage were low, with 1,444 items. This was less than half that of all political-themed coverage, which had 3,151.

Most (63%) of the business coverage was in The Australian which has a separate lift-out section for business and sport. Twenty-three percent of items in The Australian were coded with a dominant theme of business, compared to only 11% across the tabloids. This reflected the different target audiences of the publications. Audiences interested in business have a wide range of international and local sources of information beyond the mainstream media and would be unlikely to seek information about business or finance in a News Corp tabloid. The Australian competes with Nine Entertainment Co outlets including Australian Financial Review and the business sections of The Age and the Sydney Morning Herald, for the available mainstream business audience. Sources of advertising to sustain business news reporting have shrunk.

### Who gets a voice in business news?

Much of the business news in our sample was of a promotional nature, reflecting the perspective of a single company, executive or peak business group. This has been observed in other studies of business news (ACIJ/ Crikey, 2010; Nash, 2011).

13% (129) of business reportage (news and features) acknowledged no source at all. Of the 595 news and features where the first source was business, 58% of stories had only one source. This lack of contestation is further evidence of the promotional nature of the coverage.

However there were stories that included the perspectives of different business sources and a few longer features.

### 6.3.1 Promotional nature of business news

Of 724 business sources in business themed news, The Australian published 549 items or 76% of the total. The other 24% were spread fairly evenly across the tabloids. This was less than half the level of political sources. As explained in Section 4.4, we broke the sources down into types of business sources which represented 18% of the total. Together, financial, fossil fuel, and other mining sources accounted for 56% of all business sources. See Figure 4.4.2.c for this breakdown.

Of the 724 business sources in business themed articles, only 34 (less than 5%) represented the renewables industry including those focused on developing renewable forms of energy. Of the 34 renewable energy business sources, the vast majority (30) were in The Australian.

This shows continued strong representation of the mining/fossil fuel industries in climate change business reporting, which overwhelmed the number of renewable sources by a ratio of over 11:1 in 2019/2020.

In an editorial of The Australian of 13 November 2019 called '[Lies, Illusions, extremists stalk the political fringes](#)', the paper proudly claimed that:

**"The nation (Australia) is investing in wind and solar power three times faster per capita than Germany and four to five times faster than China, the EU, Japan and the US."**

Given how avowedly well Australia is doing on renewables and the constant claim by News Corp that Australia is doing its part, one might have expected more reporting on renewables relative to fossil fuels and mining. One explanation of the huge discrepancy in coverage is that News Corp is seeking to bolster declining support for fossil fuel and mining interests in the face of the strengthening position of renewables. It also publishes [Special Coal Reports](#) which contain promotional features and are funded by the coal industry.

### 6.3.2 How do News Corp business reporters approach action on climate change?

As we reported in Section 4.6, 43% of business items (News, features, opinion, letters, & editorials) were positive to action on climate, 37% were negative, and 20% were neutral. This finding stands out as business was the only theme in which items were more likely to be positive than negative. The majority of these items were in *The Australian*, of which 45% were positive, 33% were negative, and 32% were neutral.

Not only were articles more likely to be more positive towards action/efforts to tackle climate change if the article is about business but very few about business were coded as rejecting or questioning the findings of climate science.

Reiterating this, of the 864 News Corp reportage items (news and features) that were business themed and where an attitude to climate change action can be discerned, 53% of these were positive, with only 22% negative, and 25% being neutral towards action on climate change. In fact, of these business themed reportage items, 626 articles expressed a position on climate science, of which 95% accepted the consensus position.

Indeed, business readers are given a more realistic, more positive approach to climate action than the rest of News Corp's target audiences. How can this be explained? Here are some suggestions.

### 6.3.3 Risk analysis and reporting

For any serious business to operate in the market where the object is to make money, a risk analysis is necessary to create strategies to accept, protect, or deter risk. Risk analysis requires a realistic approach to available evidence to enable decisions to be made with confidence.

As is now widely acknowledged in the corporate and legal fields, climate change threatens social, economic, political, and security assumptions and models. So while News Corp has no hesitation in continuing to sell heavy doses of climate scepticism to its tabloid readers, its business readers are not expected to accept opinions that repudiate concerns based on scientific evidence. A more accurate reflection of climate change is required when there is a financial imperative.

### 6.3.4 Shareholder activism

The activities of shareholder groups agitating for companies to withdraw from fossil fuels has increased in the last three years. Part of the core business of reporting on markets is to report on annual general meetings. Groups such as the [Australasian Centre for Corporate Responsibility](#) and [Market Forces](#) have intervened in the field and demand at least minimal coverage.

## Business is moving on

As the pace of fossil fuel disruption accelerates, renewable energy and other businesses adapting to climate change are a source of news and advertising. Like all businesses, they invest resources into seeking promotional coverage in mainstream media.

In December each year, The Australian business section interviews CEOs. This provides them with an opportunity to say what they consider to be their priorities. The section editor John Durie acknowledged in 2019 that more executives raised climate change as a key concern than ever before. In '[Climate a hot issue for leaders](#)', he quoted legal services firm MinterEllison's chief Annette Kimmitt: "We're seeing a tipping point in corporate Australia's approach to climate risks", and the survey of more than 70 business leaders underlined the point. Some leaders made it clear that they were not satisfied with the Morrison government's climate policy. The Union Bank of Switzerland Australia boss Anthony Sweetman spoke for many: "Over the past decade, Australia's energy policy has lacked clarity and consistency. Businesses are not surprisingly reluctant to make significant long-term investment decisions in this environment and ultimately it is the community that will incur the cost either in the form of lost opportunities and or higher prices than would be necessary." Readers were left with no doubt that business was pressing for more action on climate change.

### 6.3.5 Examples

The following are some additional examples/ case studies illustrating the above analysis of News Corp's business-related climate change coverage in The Australian.

#### Example 1

'[BHP holds out against activist push](#)', 17 October 2019, by Nick Evans,  
The Australian

This article is about shareholder pressure on BHP to stop being a member of a major fossil fuel lobby, the Mineral Council of Australia, and other mining industry associations. This article is based on statements made by BHP's CEO Andrew Mackenzie at the company's AGM in London. It extensively quotes CEO Andrew Mackenzie on reasons for opposing the "action on climate change". The push attracted the support of one of BHP's biggest shareholders, Aberdeen Standard Investments, which had taken the step of "calling on BHP to withdraw from groups that lobby for policies inconsistent with global climate change limitation goals". The article provides Mackenzie with ample room to defend BHP's position but it also clear that he is on the defensive, stating that BHP will review "its membership of industry associations, and that its membership of Coal 21 — a group originally set up to back research into carbon capture technology but which bankrolled pro-coal advertising campaigns — would end if the body does not focus on its original remit."

Other investment background is provided including that production figures from BHP's Pilbara iron ore operations fell 3% in the previous quarter, and that some of BHP's coal mines had fallen "dramatically". Despite this, BHP's long-term view remained optimistic.

This article indicates that a business activist group campaigning on climate change is able to impact what would usually be a very straightforward report of an AGM. The report still provides ample room for the CEO's perspective and does not seek comment from Australasian Centre for Corporate Responsibility (ACCR). It nevertheless informs readers that fossil fuel investments are risky and that fossil fuel lobbies are under pressure from climate change campaigners.

## Example 2

'[Virgin turns new page on cutting fuel costs](#)', 6 August 2019, by Robyn Ironside, The Australian

This is an example of a promotional piece about airline Virgin's climate action. The company has cut its magazine to lower weight and fuel costs. Other measures adopted to save weight include "lighter business-class pyjamas", replacing the steel brakes on 737s with a lighter carbon variety and moving to featherweight mattress toppers. Some context is provided through a second source but no critical alternative perspective is provided. This is a positive promotional story about corporate action to reduce emissions.

## Example 3

'[Blue sky mining](#)', 28 April 2019, by News Ltd Reporters and BHP, The Australian

This article is entirely promotional. The Australian acknowledges that it is produced in partnership with BHP. It provides the optimistic perspective of a fossil fuel company and its 'revolutionary' technology plans without any scrutiny of its claims. It begins: "The mining industry is on the brink of a technological step-change, and Australia is in the box seat to lead it. According to Franz Wentzel, global mining consulting lead at PWC, "the sector is on the cusp of a massive breakthrough in applying technology to all aspects of the industry, from extraction right through to the customer".

It then quotes Rag Udd, BHP's global head of technology transformation, who "believes the introduction of autonomous vehicles, drills and ports is just the beginning of a revolution that will transform the industry".



Photo credit: Artyom Korshunov

"If I can get instantaneous information as I'm drilling the ground to understand what to put into our mine plans and into how we work with our trucks, diggers and logistics plans, that is the real unlock for us as a business,' he said." Further down the article, PWC's Wentzel explains that BHP's technological success will have significant flow-on effects.

"The halo effect is really important for the broader economy in Australia, where you can create an environment for technology organisations or innovative companies to use the mining industry as a 'sandbox'...If the mining industry wants to accelerate or revolutionise the use of analytics and innovation, it needs to learn from small and nimble organisations about how to quickly adapt."

Wentzel then links technology transformation with conversation with consumers and suggests "technology is expected to be transformative for miners, and not just in terms of the extraction and refining process. It could eventually create new opportunities to strengthen their brands, perhaps even allowing them to charge a premium for their products."

Wentzel continues: "This is going to happen, and whether it happens in Australia or the US or China or Korea, the reality is that these advanced technologies are more than just safety and productivity. It is going to be addressing very real concerns that people have around global warming, dealing with real issues around carbon capture and other areas. So we see technology really being a bigger unlock to actually help address some of those other problems out there."

#### Example 4

['Anything but COAL'](#), 20 March 2019, by Sascha O'Sullivan, The Australian

This is one of a very low number of longer features in the sample that provided space for more perspectives. The story is very favourable to renewable energy but also explores whether small nuclear energy is an option in the UK. The heading 'Anything but Coal' conveys a strong anti-fossil fuel perspective.

Sascha O'Sullivan reports that "Renewables are big business in Britain, and the big companies want their bottom line to be part of it. Indeed, Britain is light years ahead of Australia: last year more of the country's power came from renewables than traditional forms of energy. Less than 1 per cent of its energy came from coal, according to analysis from energy experts [Carbon Brief](#)."

The article explains that "wind, solar and nuclear are the big beasts of British renewables, and energy companies are rushing to get a slice of the future. On one hand, luxury car brand Rolls-Royce is edging its way into the market with plans to build mini nuclear reactors; on the other, energy supplier Bulb, one of the smaller renewables-focused companies, is giving consumers the option of a clean energy tariff."

Bulb Founders Amit Gudka, 35, and Hayden Wood, 36, quit their previous jobs to set up Bulb in 2014. Gudka says that six years ago, renewable tariffs were an option only for the wealthy but now the cost of renewables has plummeted and renewable tariffs offered by Bulb are on a par with traditional prices at the so-called Big Six energy suppliers in Britain.

It's a good news story. Gudka believes storage costs will fall, just as the cost of renewables has during the past few years. "The key problem is storage, and once that becomes cost effective then you really have the case to keep investing with wind and solar," he is quoted as saying.

A pro nuclear industry source is interviewed. He acknowledges the huge cost of large-scale nuclear power. Small nuclear plants are an option but even they cost \$1 to \$2 billion. The story ends with a quote from Amit Gudka: "There are more efficient nuclear technologies such as small-scale nuclear, but if you look at the rate the cost of wind and solar (has) continued to fall, then you can expect them to keep dropping and the economic case to keep investing in that makes sense."

This story can be contrasted with a number of Australian stories that appeared in our sample that promoted the interests of those wanting to develop a nuclear industry in Australia without considering how that idea stands up against the possibilities for renewable energy. For example, former Victorian Energy Minister and now Herald Sun columnist Theo Theophanous strongly pushed nuclear power as the solution to climate change in an opinion piece '[Why Australia must consider nuclear power](#)' in August 2019. The author argued the advantages of nuclear power in terms of cost, efficiency, and zero carbon emission, and compared it positively against renewable sources. He made claims that nuclear energy is safe and more sustainable and resource friendly than renewables. The perspective of the renewables industry was not provided.

### 6.3.6 Conclusion

Business reporting is closely aligned with the interests of its readers and advertisers. It provides a more realistic approach to the reporting of climate within a pro-business frame. Overall, News Corp treats its business sources with respect, even those who promote action on climate change, more so than it does scientists, NGOs or protesters. While it does provide coverage of renewable energy companies and other businesses marketing sustainable solutions, it still favours fossil fuel interests. This support for fossil fuels is supplemented by a smaller proportion of more balanced features.

## 6.4 Protest, movements, and the language of denial

Language is an important part of politics, including the politics of climate change.

Much of News Corp's rejection of climate change science takes place through the language deployed by opinion writers and letter writers to diminish and delegitimise climate change advocates. This language builds an attitude of negativity in the audience.

Overall, the study shows that the coverage of climate change protests and movements was particularly negative. This is not surprising as News Corp generally pursues a 'law and order' agenda and would be unlikely to support a civil disobedience campaign or school strikes.

Of 369 such items in The Daily Telegraph, 77% were negative, compared to 14% positive, and 9% were neutral. The Daily Telegraph was the most biased against protest and movements to address climate change, and was over three times more likely to be negative than either neutral or positive. This bias was shown most clearly by opinion pieces. New items tended to be more balanced, with 39% coded as negative, 33% positive, and 27% neutral.

Coders observed that the vehemence of the opinion pieces appeared to increase during the time of the Extinction Rebellion protests, and was particularly directed at Swedish campaigner Greta Thunberg.

This brief and indicative analysis accords with the findings of Dr Myra Gurney of Western Sydney University who undertook a linguistic analysis of a corpus of Andrew Bolt columns (Gurney, 2017). Her conclusions could be applied to sceptics more generally. Gurney argues that Bolt constructs himself as an 'Australian who respects reason and evidence'. She identified two contradictory discourses. One prefers democratic rights to freedom of speech versus the authority of expert scientists and the impunity of scientific method and rules of evidence. The other, through labelling climate science as a religious 'faith', diminishes its authority.

What follows is not a fully-fledged linguistic analysis because that was beyond the parameters of this project. However, because the choice of language is an important element, alongside selection of sources and framing of issues, we asked coders to record notable terms that were used in opinion pieces and letters, without undertaking a systematic linguistic analysis. The results are collated in the table below.

## Describing climate science and climate change movements:



- According to the Greens, we - normal people are heathens marching like lemmings to extinction, fuelled by our climate change ignorance
- Anti-industrial, anti-capitalist crusade
- Anxiety-inducing moral panic
- Catastrophe mongering
- Claptrap served up by 'experts'
- Climate catastrophism
- Climate change activists are at their core anarchists
- Climate change bandwagon
- Climate change fraternity
- Climate change mantra
- Climate change nonsense
- Climate cult hysteria
- Climate dogma
- Climate eco-cult
- Climate science is a religion
- Contrived hysteria
- Crazy beliefs
- Ginned-up statistics
- Global destruction movement
- Global fascist climate crisis horror show
- Global warming activists trotting out science fiction to benefit their greenie ideology
- Global warming vultures
- Hysteria, panic and vested interests emanate from this 'climate emergency' that allows no counter argument to be mounted
- International conspiracy
- IPCC is the United Nations global warming front for a new world order
- It is an unspoken conspiracy of misinformation, perpetrated by large sections of the media
- It is disrespectful to preach to people
- Manic global warming religion
- Our children are being brainwashed into believing that Australia is an inherently illegitimate, profoundly unfair country that's ruining the planet by mining coal, driving cars and eating meat

**Global  
fascist  
climate  
crisis  
horror  
show**

## Describing climate science and climate change movements:

- Ragtag bunch of students, dole-bludgers, greenies and activists
- Scaremongering disgrace
- Schoolchildren who have been infected with the triffid-like global warming virus
- So-called climate change
- Preaching climate hysteria
- The extent of the daily deception in the global warming debate is extraordinary
- The hoax of climate science
- They wish to overthrow our democratic way of life by using the climate change nonsense to attract 'useful idiots' to their cause
- Virtue signalling on climate change
- Warmist mob
- Whacky policies of the Greens
- Wide-eyed people bizarrely convinced that global warming will kill us

## Describing people:

- Bolshewives
- Chicken littles
- Climate alarmists
- Climate catastrophists' catechism
- Climate change acolytes
- Climate change apologists
- Climate change doomsday wafflers
- Climate change evangelists
- Climate change obsessives
- Climate change zealots
- Climate changers
- Climate extremists
- Climate gumbies
- Cultists of the ecopalypse
- Disciples of global warming
- Extinction Rebellion chuckleheads
- Freelance climate screamers
- Global grandstanders
- Global warming extremists
- Global warming vultures
- Gluebacks
- Left-wing ideological ratbags
- Marxist agitators

**Folk so fried by psychedelic drugs  
they're convinced flower power  
reigns and we're all going to die if  
carbon emissions aren't net zero by  
2025**



- Pacific Island climate cash extortionists
- Professional eco alarmists
- Proven frauds
- Self-induced, selfish, irresponsible, climate change obsessives
- Sydney's complainy community
- [Teachers are] leftie climate warriors
- [Teachers are] tax-funded climate cultists
- The deluded and mentally squishy
- Wealthy weather-worrying white women
- Weeping, screaming, brawling and spitting hysterics
- Well-heeled climate change preachers
- Wild-eyed people
- Woke city greenies
- (in) Woke World one must be an absolute believer ... suspend one's rationality and keep repeating the Climate Catastrophists' Catechism (CCC)



## Targeting well-known campaigners for climate change action:

### Greta Thunberg:

- Global warming saint
- Swedish international incineration infant
- Greta Thunberg, only 16 and with a range of mental conditions, yet is the world's greatest authority on global warming
- Saint of the warming religion
- Deeply disturbed messiah of the global warming movement
- Disciples of global warming
- Extinction Rebellion chuckleheads

### Scientist Tim Flannery,

#### Chief Councillor of the Climate Council

- Professional eco alarmist Tim Flannery
- The Gillard-appointed predict-o-matic
- A climate alarmist who misrepresents experts, misstates science, makes wild predictions that don't come true

### Malcolm Turnbull:

- Malcolm Turnbull's wild global warming falsehoods

## Institutions:

### The ABC:

- The ABC is running a protection racket for global warmists
- ABC warmist cathedral

News Corp Australia's cover-all justification for using such belittling and sarcastic language in its publications is based on a 'right to free speech', a right which their opinion writers assert is threatened.

Within the scope of this study, it has not been possible to analyse this language comprehensively. However, certain themes emerge clearly. These general themes include:

- Climate science and climate change advocacy are a religion rather than practices based on facts or evidence.
- Climate science is a systematic fraud or deception. Sometimes this theme is linked to the idea that there is an international conspiracy to promulgate climate science.
- Certain media organisations and journalists (and teachers) have joined the 'movement' and are not behaving in a professional or ethical way.
- Free speech is being denied, and climate change advocates want to shut down debate.
- Campaigners are not rational and are spreading hysteria and deliberately scaremongering.
- Climate change advocates are authoritarian. They want to impose their values on others and destroy others' way of life.

**These themes reflect the broader ideological and political affiliations of climate change scepticism as a right-wing political movement. The use of heightened language – slurs, insults and exaggerations – is designed to evoke an emotional response in readers rather than shape their opinions with facts and rational argument.**

# CONCLUSION

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Key findings of this research are that News Corp Australia produces a large amount of sceptical content about the ideas of anthropogenic climate change and efforts to counter it, but omits coverage of the actual impacts of climate change. It publishes relatively equal amounts of reportage and commentary on these issues, but it is the commentary that overwhelmingly drives the sceptical agenda. News Corp expends considerable resources on well-paid opinion writers who publish large amounts of content that rejects facts established by the world's climate science community. At the same time, our research shows that News Corp campaigns actively to frustrate the development of government and business investment policies that will encourage the necessary and urgent shift away from fossil fuels towards renewable energy sources.

The strategies used to achieve these goals are complex, dynamic and differ across publications and types of journalism, but all four mastheads that we examined (The Australian, The Daily Telegraph, Herald Sun and Courier Mail) produce a substantial amount of sceptical content. From April 2019 to March 2020, overall, 45% of all items relating to climate change either rejected or cast doubt upon consensus scientific findings.

The Daily Telegraph is the most sceptical of the News Corp publications with 58% of its content discussing climate change being sceptical, while The Australian is the least sceptical with 38% of items not accepting the findings of climate science. The Daily Telegraph was also the most negative towards action to address climate change. The Courier Mail is the least sceptical of the three tabloids we examined with 45% of items not accepting climate change, perhaps because as the sole Queensland masthead it needs to capture a broader spread of reader and advertiser interests. We found some positive reports about climate change action in stories sourced from AAP (to which News Corps no longer subscribes) and local News Corp mastheads, some of which now no longer exist in print and have almost no remaining staff following redundancies.

News Corp provides its business readers with a more realistic perspective on climate change and climate science findings. Business-themed reportage (news and features) was more likely to be accepting of climate change science (95%) and was more balanced towards action on climate change. Just over half (55%) of business reportage was positive towards action/efforts. Financial, fossil fuel and other mining sources accounted for 56% of all business sources, while renewable energy business accounted for 5%. Just as we were preparing this report for publication, The Australian published a special report on the coal industry, with associated advertising.

These figures need to be considered in light of the fact that there is a 99% consensus of climate scientists about the actuality and dangers of anthropogenic climate change. Further, News Corp's major competitors in the news media have decided not to promote climate scepticism, on the ethical grounds that it is false and misleading to do so. That leaves News Corp more or less alone to occupy the climate sceptic space among readers, corporate and political interests. This space in the media market is likely to be increasingly constricted, due to advertising revenue declines, investors seeking to reposition themselves to take advantage of energy and other industrial changes and increasing awareness in the broader Australian community about climate change and its environmental impacts. Despite these factors, Newcorp Australia appears to have become ever more strident in its attempts to mobilise readers attracted to its sceptic and other ideological stances.

Commentary (editorials, opinion, letters) plays a powerful role in contemporary climate journalism: fully 62% of items in this study were commentary. This compared to more information-based reportage (news and features) which, when combined, made up 38%. It is the commentary, especially the opinion pieces, that drives the scepticism.

All the top opinion writers at News Corp produce material that is sceptical or extremely negative to actions addressing climate change. Andrew Bolt, whose crusade against climate change goes back 20 years, is by far the strongest contributor on climate change coverage. He is personally responsible for 17% of opinion pieces relevant to climate change in our study. Andrew Bolt's contributions represented 12% of all articles discussing climate change across The Daily Telegraph, the Herald Sun and the Courier Mail.

In the Herald Sun alone, he had 32% of all articles mentioning climate change. He was also the biggest contributor in our 2011 and 2012 studies. News Corp heavily promotes Bolt and his opinions across its media outlets. News Corp represents itself as a passive facilitator of debate between different opinions in the community. This is inaccurate: News Corp is a very active participant in the politics of climate change in Australia. There is a strong relationship between opinion pieces and letters in its coverage. The Australian employs an 'Engagement Editor' (currently Jason Gagliardi) who aggregates and recycles reader's comments, however outrageously sceptic, into a column. The editor is constructing a sceptic community around the publication, promoting a sense of solidarity and connectedness in the audience, under the slogan 'this is the column where you provide the content'.

As other studies have shown, a distinctive feature of Australia's media coverage of climate change is that it is heavily politicised and framed by domestic partisan politics to the exclusion of other issues. Politics and policy are by far the strongest news themes associated with climate change. The scepticism aligns with coverage that is very negative towards action to address climate change, and aligned with more right-wing attitudes generally. While polls show that most Australians understand that anthropogenic climate change is happening and is dangerous, strategic minorities of climate sceptics can be mobilised in a political strategy to thwart effective action that will threaten identifiable political and commercial interests.

We have observed, as have other commentators, that as scientific research expands and deepens our knowledge of climate change, scepticism also shifts its ground. While there are still those that argue that human-induced climate change is not occurring, increasingly the argument is being promoted that we should act on other fronts before climate change, or that climate change is good for the planet. Scepticism morphs because rather than being about evidence, its purposes are ideological and political.

The content of coverage is one thing, but omissions in coverage are just as important. By contrast with the overwhelming levels of scepticism, News Corp Australia provides its readers with very low levels of coverage of climate science information, or actual or predicted impacts of climate change that might clarify misunderstandings promoted by sceptics. We did find a few individual in-depth stories from senior journalists – but then silence ensues, rather than the follow-up you would expect for a major issue. Silence produces ignorance.

News Corp regularly complains about others allegedly trying to stifle its voice or freedom of speech. However, one of the very clear characteristics of its own coverage is that it silences certain categories of sources, including leading scientists, and provides very little space for the voices of civil society. Leading scientists like Tim Flannery have been subjected to frequent abuse, but given little or no opportunity to actually articulate their arguments. It is effectively a policy of 'shoot the messenger'. The language used to describe climate change advocates and scientists is frequently abusive. Women's voices are not equally represented in coverage of climate change, especially given their strong contribution to environmental movements. First Nations' voices on the impacts of climate change were all but absent. In News Corp coverage the rest of the world barely exists, including low income and low-lying countries in our region that will be among the most severely impacted by climate change.

Meanwhile, the climate crisis accelerates. As we conclude this report, Fraser Island (K'gari), a World Heritage site off Queensland's coast, has been burning out of control for days. This time a year ago, a mega-fire unprecedented in scale was burning just outside Sydney. The 2019-2020 summer fires in southeastern Australia affected 143 million mammals, not to mention birds, reptiles and insects. Last week, record temperatures for November were set in NSW, ending the hottest ever November on record in Australia. Last year, the United Nations reported that more than 19 million children in Bangladesh are at risk from devastating floods, cyclones and other environmental disasters linked to climate change. As it plays its politics hard, one wonders what News Corp thinks might be its endgame.



*Photo credit: Joanne McArthur*

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# LIES, DEBATES, AND SILENCES.

How News Corp produces climate scepticism in Australia