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No neutrality: how the carbon lobby blackens media coverage

Paddy Manning

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The resource industry's spin on global warming is pervasive. Through lobby groups - the Minerals Council, the Australian Petroleum Production and Exploration Association (APPEA) and the cleverly titled Australian Industry Greenhouse Network, which hopes to *accelerate* the greenhouse effect - the likes of Rio Tinto and BHP Billiton stop real action on climate change.

Former Liberal staffer-turned-author and Greens candidate Guy Pearse has shown how the self-titled "greenhouse mafia" - the carbon lobby - has dominated climate change policy under prime ministers from Bob Hawke to Kevin Rudd (and especially John Howard).

Less well documented so far has been the industry's influence on the media. Take the powerful News Corporation, which publishes two-thirds of our remaining newspapers. Despite a spectacular about-face on climate change in 2007 by News Corp's chairman Rupert Murdoch, no media group can match the Murdoch press for consistently fomenting global warming scepticism and arguing against climate change mitigation measures.

News Corp's tabloid provocateurs Piers Akerman and Andrew Bolt rail against greenies every other day but don't have the attention to detail to influence national debate on climate change science, emissions trading and reduction targets, and international negotiations on global warming.

The Australian - Rupert's baby and local flagship - does. But nothing you read on climate change in *The Australian* can be taken at face value. Its coverage of the issue is effectively sponsored by the resources industry.

Confirmation came this week when *The Australian* had the gall to trumpet a media award given by the oil and gas lobby group, APPEA, to editor-in-chief Chris Mitchell: "... the JN Pierce Award for Media Excellence for leading the newspaper's coverage of climate change policy. For the first time, the judging panel presented the award to an editor rather than a reporter or columnist. APPEA chief executive Belinda Robinson said that over the past 12 months *The Australian's* 'in-depth coverage of a range of public policy issues affecting Australia's upstream oil and gas industry has been of a consistently high standard'."

Gobsmacking. A disgraceful admission.

Bob Burton, author of the book *Inside Spin* and editor of Sourcewatch, which tracks the PR industry, says industry media awards are proliferating and are used to identify potentially sympathetic journalists, improve access and shape their coverage. It is unnecessary in this case - News Corp has been trashing the climate change debate forever.

Murdoch, always fervently pro-business, has supported right-wing think tanks such as the Institute of Public Affairs (by donating and at one stage joining its advisory council) and the Cato Institute in the United States.

University of NSW associate professor David McKnight has studied News Corp's climate change coverage and has an essay coming out on the topic. Until 2007, he says, Murdoch papers scorned the idea that burning fossil fuels could affect the climate.

"Climate science was seen as a form of political correctness," McKnight says. "Many people have said if you want to know what

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Rupert Murdoch really thinks, read the editorial and [opinion] pages of the *New York Post*. If you do that on climate, you find a virulent platform for climate deniers. There were quite vicious attacks on Al Gore, for example. It gave a platform to Exxon-funded climate sceptics. It supported [former president George] Bush's rejection of Kyoto several times in editorials."

Then on May 9, 2007, apparently at the urging of son James, Murdoch announced News Corp would go carbon neutral by 2010.

In a speech to worldwide staff, Murdoch said the planet should be given "the benefit of the doubt".

He went further. News Corp, he said, "can do something that's unique, different from just [about] any other company. We can set an example, and we can reach our audiences. Our audience's carbon footprint is 10,000 times bigger than ours. That's the carbon footprint we want to conquer.

"We want to inspire people to change their behaviour ... for too long, the threats of climate change have been presented as doom and gloom - because the consequences are so serious. We need to do what our company does best: make this issue exciting. Tell the story in a new way."

This put *The Australian* in a quandary. Mitchell's then 2IC, Michael Stutchbury, was still freely describing climate change as "bullshit" and joked after the announcement, "What would the Murdochs know?" (He is now the paper's economics editor.)

What did *The Australian* do? In late 2006 Matthew Warren, former PR for the NSW Minerals Council, was appointed - get this - environment reporter. His standard line was how difficult, how expensive, measures to combat global warming would be. He practically never quoted the environment movement or its representatives. (He now runs business group the Clean Energy Council, which is meant to promote renewable energy but has been taken over by the carbon lobby.)

The Australian had long published advertising-driven special reports on the "oil and gas" and "coal" industries. Regular writers included former APPEA executive director Keith Orchison.

In 2008 these were rebranded the "Business & Environment Series". Same writers, same pro-industry stance. (Lately it's the "Climate Series".)

But a leopard can't change its spots. An October 2007 leader worried that a victorious Rudd would "withdraw Australia from the ANZUS alliance, shut down the coalmines, declare Australia a republic, make gay marriage compulsory and transform the nation into a wind-powered, mung-bean-eating Arcadia".

Once the emissions trading debate got serious, *The Australian* reverted to type. Last year a global group of scientists working on climate issues, publishing at RealClimate.org, gave *The Australian* their "most consistently wrong media outlet" award.

The back-scratching happens routinely. *The Australian* was journal of choice for a leak from the Minerals Council, which led to a front-page story on May 22 on the alarming number of jobs that might be lost if the proposed carbon pollution reduction scheme was introduced. Zero scepticism in that story.

Another example: last month, the paper went big on the front page on a story about how recent research showed Antarctic ice was growing, not shrinking. They were forced to back-pedal embarrassingly a fortnight later. Bureau of Meteorology scientist Andrew Watkins accused the reporter of misrepresenting the results of a study by the British Antarctic Survey.

"You kept going until you got the answer you wanted," Dr Watkins told the paper's reporter, in a story published on page 7.

Far from reporting without fear or favour, *The Australian* is waging a war on climate change. And it is winning.

McKnight says Murdoch's landmark 2007 speech "almost daily ... is being effectively contradicted by the coverage of climate that *The Australian* publishes ... [Today it is] the only News Corp publication which still consistently promotes climate scepticism."

Mitchell is a powerful individual. Before the 2007 election, no pollie made the lonely trek across the newsroom to Mitchell's office as often as Kevin Rudd.

Last year a former editor of this newspaper and publisher of Crikey.com.au, Eric Beecher, was lauding Rupert Murdoch's News Ltd as the "future of newspapers" here and saying *The Australian* was our "sole remaining commercially owned source of serious journalism".

Earlier this year, Beecher wrote: "Despite *The Australian's* often strident right-leaning editorial and ownership bias ... it does not publish political commentary and analysis viewed exclusively through a single lens."

Well, that's not true on climate change. And the joke is on the rest of us.

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