

COMMENT

# A CONTROVERSIAL CONVERSATION

A personal view from  
**Roger Harrabin**, BBC  
Environment Analyst



**THE FLAK'S BEEN FLYING** again over BBC coverage of climate change. We've been criticised by mainstream scientists for putting too many sceptics on air, a view reiterated in Professor Steve Jones's recent review of all BBC science coverage for the Trust. But the more common complaint – repeated again over the last two weekends in the Mail on Sunday – is that environment scientists unduly influence us.

Most – not all – of the climate sceptics I know are libertarians who find climate policy objectionable because of its implied government intervention. This presents a challenge because whilst the BBC is bound by impartiality rules to give sceptics proportionate coverage, we are also bound by the guidelines not to over-emphasise those views because the balance of evidence about climate change lies heavily on the side of the scientific establishment. That calls for fine reflexive judgement from correspondents and editors and it's impossible to define a 'correct' balance of coverage.

Climate sceptics seeking more space on the BBC helped provoke the Trust's investigation into science impartiality but the Trust said we were already giving them too much space – not too little. We should bear this in mind when we hear new accusations of bias. Take the Mail on Sunday's latest articles, which focused partly on the BBC 'Real

World' seminars I helped to run. They began in the late 90s after I wondered which stories would still appear significant in 100 years. I concluded that long-term changes in environment and development might prove very important, and judged that these slow-burn issues were under-covered at the time.

In those days the environment was a lower order story and leading scientists were already complaining that we treated environment science like politics – as though the weight of opinion on each side was equal. There was also a gathering consensus among UK parties and corporate leaders on the issue. That's why Tony Hall, then Head of News, asked me to create seminars for editors and managers to discuss global environmental change and development. Over several years I worked under the supervision of senior BBC management with Dr Joe Smith, a senior lecturer at the Open University, to devise meetings with politicians, business people, think-tanks, academics from many universities and specialisms (science, technology, economic and social sciences, and history), and policy experts and field workers from NGOs – particularly from the developing world.

The seminars, held under Chatham House rules, have contributed to the BBC's strong reputation for reporting on environmental issues – not just on climate change. Lifting editors away from deadlines for creative conversations proved popular, so the environment seminars morphed into diverse gatherings ex-

↑ **The Antarctic has seen rapid warming in recent years**

← **Gentoo penguins make their home in the rock-strewn Antarctic habitat**

↓ **Roger Harrabin**

amining trends in society, the economy and culture as well as the environment. They include a broad spread of views and if they had been captured by any agenda, BBC management would have squashed it instantly. One meeting proved contentious in the blogosphere after a climate sceptic invitee wrote about it. A senior scientist present had told us the debate on climate change was 'over' and urged us to stop reporting the views of climate sceptics. I said the balance of the science suggested that we should not always feature sceptics but that we should continue to represent their views on a case-by-case basis because many legitimate science debates remain and because of the politicised nature of the policy debate. Helen Boaden endorsed the advice.

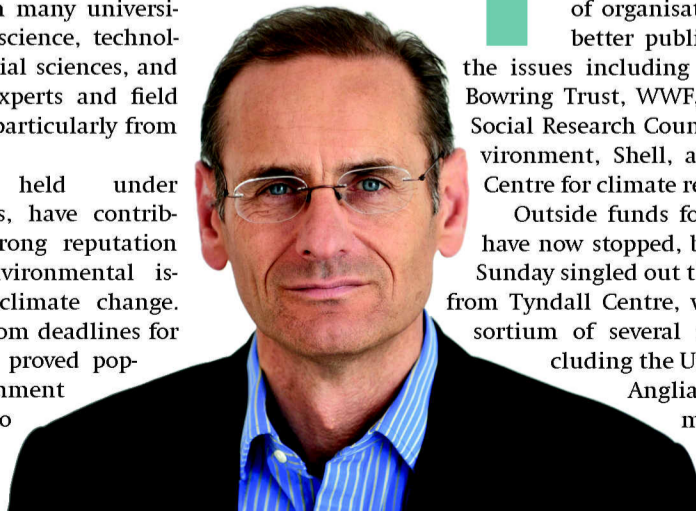
**T**he BBC paid its own way with the seminars but Dr Smith's expenses and time were funded by a spread of organisations wanting a better public debate about the issues including HSBC, Vivendi, Bowring Trust, WWF, Economic and Social Research Council, Dept of Environment, Shell, and the Tyndall Centre for climate research.

Outside funds for the meetings have now stopped, but the Mail on Sunday singled out the contribution from Tyndall Centre, which is a consortium of several universities including the University of East Anglia, where the Climategate controversy hap-

pened. Tyndall is a bona fide body and part of its remit was improving communication of climate science. The BBC sought advice from many different experts on trying to make climate change coverage more accessible and interesting to our broad audiences. Professor Mike Hulme – the director of Tyndall – proved particularly influential in his advice for us to adopt measured tones, avoid inflammatory reporting, accept that some areas of the science are impossible to resolve and to treat the issue more as one of societal risk than scientific certainty. He is an odd target for sceptics as some mainstream scientists think he's too sympathetic to sceptic views.

The BBC has told the Mail on Sunday that the funding arrangements for the seminars raised no issues about impartiality for the BBC or its output. I believe we can be much more robust over our coverage. Our journalists have met and interviewed many of the world's leading climate sceptics, some of whom have actually praised both our reporting of the Climategate affair and my own *Uncertain Climate* documentaries. Correspondents and editors strive to be fair at all times when reporting this vexed topic. Generally, though, we seem to be trusted by our audiences to be offering impartial information. However controversy about our coverage won't disappear, because some players on either side will never be satisfied with that.

**Roger Harrabin is taking unpaid leave on a Knight Wallace Media Fellowship at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor**



> ARIEL ONLINE BBC NEWS AS IT HAPPENS [BBC.CO.UK/ARIEL](http://BBC.CO.UK/ARIEL)<