

Refusing to disseminate statements from climate change ‘sceptics’ that are inaccurate and misleading is not censorship

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The BBC upheld a complaint regarding Nigel Lawson, a former Chancellor and climate sceptic, for an interview in which he put forward a number of inaccurate and misleading statements about the science of climate change. [Bob Ward](#), one of a number of people who complained, writes how Lawson’s spin machine cranked into action this week to try to portray the BBC’s decision as a form of censorship. He argues that we need to be wary of attempts by the former Chancellor and his small group of friends and allies to justify their campaign of misinformation about climate change.



There has been a stunning display this week of ‘climate correctness’ in parts of the UK media, exposing the unhealthy cosy relationship between ‘sceptic’ campaigners and editors. The source of this outbreak was [a leaked decision](#) by the BBC to uphold a complaint about an interview on the Today programme on BBC Radio 4 in February with Lord Lawson, who chairs the Global Warming Policy Foundation, a pressure group that campaigns against the government’s climate change policies.

Lord Lawson used the interview primarily to put forward his ideology about the science of climate change, during which he made a number of inaccurate and misleading statements. I was one of a number of people who complained to the BBC that the interview breached the editorial guidelines on “due accuracy”. Initially the BBC rejected the complaints, but on appeal, provisionally agreed to uphold them.

Letters to the complainants from Fraser Steel, the Head of Editorial Complaints, informing them of the provisional decision were distributed in May. The letter from Mr Steel to me stated:

I have understood you to say that the interviews created a “false balance” between climate scientists and climate change sceptics and as a result gave an inaccurate and misleading impression of the evidence. I have to say that I share your broad impression and I am therefore upholding your complaint.

Mr Steel also acknowledged that “Lord Lawson’s views are not supported by the evidence from computer modelling and scientific research and I don’t believe this was made sufficiently clear to the audience”. Although the final decision has not yet been published, the provisional ruling has leaked out, including through [an article](#) in *The Independent* last week.

Coincidentally, the BBC Trust has also published this week [a follow-up report](#) to [a major review](#) in 2011 of the impartiality and accuracy of BBC coverage of science. Although the new report shows that the BBC has not been monitoring its coverage of climate change since the review, it did point out that “nearly 200 senior staff have attended workshops which set out that impartiality in science coverage does not simply lie in reflecting a wide range of views, but depends on the varying degree of prominence (due weight) such views should be given”.

These developments have prompted a predictable response from Lord Lawson and his allies which further demonstrates the snug arrangement between the Global Warming Policy Foundation and the editorial ranks in parts of the UK media. It was already widely known that the ‘Daily Mail’ ramped up its cheerleading for climate change ‘sceptics’ three years ago after its editor, Paul Dacre, [had lunch](#) with Lord Lawson. In addition, in [his testimony](#) to

the House of Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology last July, David Jordan, the Director of Editorial Policy and Standards at the BBC, boasted of long meetings with climate change ‘sceptics’, including Lord Lawson and Peter Lilley.

The interview with Lord Lawson in February was a handsome return on this lobbying effort, now largely reduced in value by the BBC’s admission that it breached editorial guidelines on accuracy. However, Lord Lawson’s spin machine has cranked into action this week to try to portray the BBC’s decision as a form of censorship.



First, a member of the “Academic Advisory Council” of the Global Warming Policy Foundation, Viscount Ridley, used [his regular column](#) in ‘The Times’ to attack the BBC decision. ‘The Times’ has characteristically so far refused to publish any letters drawing attention to the gross distortions in Viscount Ridley’s article, further proof of the rumoured diktat from editor John Witherow telling his staff to be give only sympathetic coverage to climate change ‘sceptics’.

Lord Lawson then used [an opinion article](#) in the ‘Daily Mail’ to put forward his own fantastical account of events, which was promptly rejected by the BBC. Finally, another member of the Global Warming Policy Foundation, David Whitehouse, posted [a blog](#) on the website of ‘The Spectator’, [the house journal](#) for climate change ‘sceptics’, to attempt to justify the inaccuracies in Lord Lawson’s statements. This was followed up by [a leading article](#) in ‘The Spectator’ from editor Fraser Nelson which loyally championed Lord Lawson’s cause. This was a co-ordinated media blitz, relying on the help of friendly editors who apparently believe that all points of view about the science of climate change are valid and should not be judged on the basis of whether they are supported by evidence.

The articles all provided a consistent message: anyone who refuses to disseminate statements from climate change ‘sceptics’ on the grounds that they are inaccurate and misleading is guilty of censorship. It shows clearly how Lord Lawson and his small group of friends and allies attempt to justify their campaign of misinformation about climate change. But to climate researchers, and indeed everyone who believes in evidence-based debate, this is an extreme form of “climate correctness”, where one is not allowed to criticise ‘sceptics’ for making false statements. This is yet another example of how some parts of the media are betraying the public interest by allowing ideology to trump evidence in the debate about how to manage the huge risks from climate change.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting. Image credit: [Financial Times](#)

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