

How the media frames ecological debates

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Most of you will have done field work in country NSW and be familiar with the kind of fellow who has his favourite position at the end of a bar in a country pub, and if you are unfortunate enough to catch his eye, will harangue you until the cows come home about some hobby horse. He will have seen something or read something which gives him unique insight into some aspect of public policy. It will rely purely on anecdote, and it will be declaimed with a fervour that brooks no argument, is unswayed by contrary evidence.

These are the kind of people that, once encountered, you always subsequently avoided, and you would have no more interest or belief in their views on the topic they were declaiming than you would in listening to a used car salesman on the merits of a used car, or to a Phillipines faith healer who could remove your liver without an operation. But now such people have come out of the shadows of the country pubs and are featured on national TV, have the ear of ministers, appear in front of parliamentary committees, are the subject of major newspaper profiles.

When their recipes for, say, managing a forest with fire, or solving the salinity problem, or estimating the numbers of kangaroos in Australia in a drought year, or determining the impact of cattle on the high country are questioned by scientists with extensive research experience on the topic concerned, it is they who win out, not the scientists or the government departments concerned with the particular problem. Indeed when their recipes and pronouncements are queried they will receive massive support in the media, support at the ministerial level, and their views will become policy by ministerial decree over any objection.

The media support and the ministerial support of course are directly linked. It is mainly the pressure from media outlets that will get a minister to overrule the scientists in his department. But why the media pressure?

Television covers stories by creating a narrative. Once they have decided which narrative applies then the characters slot into place and the story line and outcome are as predictable as the old time music hall, or Chinese opera, or a mediaeval mystery play. Sometimes there is a choice to be made as to which role the main protagonist will play, but once made (an attractive accused drug smuggler is a tragic victim, an ugly one is an evil villain) everything else flows naturally. I don't know whether these narratives are used because they reflect the world view of television owners; or if it is simply easier these days where there

are no tv journalists, only "presenters". I suspect that the narratives are now kept on computer and all a producer has to do is fill in some blanks with relevant names and places and hand the script to the presenter.

In the case of environmental stories of a certain type, there are really no choices to be made. The hero is the salt of the earth, battler, school of hard knocks, horny-handed son of the soil. Uneducated, but so close to the land that he knows it better than any academic. He has fought to get his views accepted but is met with an unfeeling and stupid wall of resistance from bureaucrats and ivory tower academics who have spent all their lives in the laboratory and know nothing of the real world. He has tried to speak out, and everyone in his small community knows that he is the real expert, but all to no avail.

Then the media takes him up and the public know who they are meant to cheer for. There have been narratives like this before, the bureaucrats and academics are always the bad guys. Besides, there are others in the community who also have ideas that are not listened to by the 'so-called experts' and know the feeling. If there is any doubt left the media will quote famous men who were right but were not listened to. Letters to the editor and talk back radio calls build momentum and then the minister is intervening and away we go. With ministerial intervention our wise man from the bush will be on committees and even just advising the minister directly.

The reality is of course completely the reverse of the media presentation. Ecologists spend years learning the techniques of their discipline, then many more years, often decades, in the bush, sleeves rolled up, collecting and analysing data, studying earlier work, debating their peers. Ideas which are accepted are based on hard work, good data, and credibility. The ecological academic world as a whole is based on all of the people who have done such work. The man from the bush has had no training on the topics he talks about, has no knowledge of the history of thought in the discipline, has done no study of the issue, has collected no data. His view of the ecological world from the seat of a tractor has no more credibility than say the view of the international world from the driver's seat of a taxi.

In years to come when the foolishness of the man becomes obvious, and the damage that has been caused by following his prescription is evident, the minister will have long moved on, and the media will have no interest in yesterday's news or doing follow up, having already moved on to a new narrative.

There are cases where the wild man from the bush is also a scientist of some kind, any kind, and although the narrative is a little different the outcome is the same. This wild man, or occasionally woman, is the lonely scientist with unpopular ideas. Ideas unpopular because they are outside mainstream academic thought. The lonely scientist is an unsung genius, but never fear, the media will adopt him and bring his genius to light in spite of the attempts at suppression by academia. When the ideas do see the light of day popular acclaim will convince the public that he is right after all, and then the mainstream scientific community will be forced to change their minds. The scientists concerned will emphasize the truth by comparing themselves to earlier unsung geniuses who were eventually found to be right – Galileo perhaps, Darwin, Wegener.

The most insidious effect of this narrative is how it corrupts scientific discourse in the media. The set of a breakfast television show is a small place. Room for a couple of guests in easy chairs. The format itself determines the narrative for politics which goes like this. Politics is, like a football game, a matter of two teams debating or fighting with each other. The teams have the same number of players, and the best team wins the game or the debate. Before a match or an election you simply bring in a representative from each party, a coach from each team, and put them head to head for 5 minutes and you have informed the public.

Until recently, science wasn't easy to fit into this format, and consequently was little represented in the mainstream media. There were thousands of scientists, hundreds of years of idea development, theory testing, subtle differences in ideas, different sets of data from different regions or countries or animal groups, libraries full of literature on subjects. No room for that lot on breakfast television in between shark attacks and Kylie Minogue and UFOs.

But then came the breakthrough that suited the interests of television and of certain scientists. In the past if you came up with ideas that proved to be, after extensive discussion in scientific journals and at conferences, not supported by data, theoretically unjustified, untestable or tested and failed, in other words, simply wrong, you either developed new ideas, or changed your field of work.

This failure in a workplace of idea testing didn't sit well with people who saw that in a time of instant media celebrity and the riches it brings to some popular scientists they needed some way to grasp the golden ring, obtain the glittering prize without the hard work that was previously necessary. And the trick was this: oppose something that everyone in the scientific world accepts. Don't oppose it in scientific journals or at conferences where the idea will be tested and fail (and in fact may have already been tested and failed), but oppose it loudly in the media.

The media can't deal with (boring, boring) thousands of scientists from the whole range of relevant disciplines, all providing different kinds of evidence for say the reality and extent of global warming. But if you can get some charismatic and media savvy character to stand up and say there is no global warming, the media will find this

newsworthy. He will be instantly interviewed in a range of media and obtain the celebrity and fame that he considers his due. The more the rest of the scientific world points out the fallacy of the argument, the more the story of the lonely genius against the establishment is strengthened and the more the media will love it. The process builds upon itself, in particular by the television studio now having a narrative that will fit their format. They have a protagonist for one of the chairs on the set, and all they have to do is find some scientist from the opposing view. Since there are thousands of scientists in opposition it is not hard to find one.

The media will provide no context for this debate. The dissident scientist's credentials will remain unexamined. Is he a recognised expert in any relevant field? What qualifications does he have, what original research has he done, what has he published? How do his qualifications and experience match those of the other scientist, and, more importantly, what support does each have in the scientific community and why? These questions are never considered, perhaps because no tv presenter is qualified to ask them, and no executive producer has the time to research them, perhaps because they would muddy the water of the narrative that has been established, one that requires the dissident to be as smart, as well educated, as well researched, as his opponent, and to have support among thousands of other scientists.

Now the game is complete. The debate about global warming (or prescribed burning, or kangaroo culling, or shark netting, or grazing high country) is just like an election or a football match. There are two opposing views, represented here, in the studio, sitting in these two chairs, clearly equal in weight, the narrative being 'some scientists believe that global warming is a threat to the planet and some do not. We have a representative of each of these teams in the studio, and because they are matched one against one the subject in question must be, just like a debate on, say, health care, one where opinions are equally divided'.

The public viewing such a debate will think that with opinions so equally divided, it is impossible to know the truth about global warming, and politicians, seizing upon this artificially created public ambivalence, can decide to do nothing until the 'debate' is resolved.

The wild men from the bush, when adopted by the media, can and do cause a lot of environmental damage on issues like prescribed burning, and cattle in high country. Generally though the damage is restricted to a particular region or a particular issue, and is certainly restricted to a country. The problem with the media support for the 'dissident scientist', particularly on global warming, is that the damage that has been done is affecting the whole world.

If you are invited to fill the empty chair in the television studio and represent 140 years of ecology while debating a wild bushman or wild scientist, be aware that the outcome is predetermined. You have a role to play in a narrative written earlier and you cannot win the debate because there is no debate. What we need to do is to create our own narratives.