

Will the ABC be fair to the truth?

Clive Hamilton

Climate deniers know they cannot win the scientific debate, just as the tobacco companies secretly admitted in the 1980s that they could never beat the medical evidence.

If there were a real debate among scientists then the climate deniers would be publishing their counter-evidence in the professional scientific journals. But they are not, because they do not have evidence that will stand up to scrutiny.

So they set out to do something else, to create the *impression* in the public mind that there is a serious debate among scientists about global warming. To do so they must shift the terrain away from the scientific journals and into the popular media, where they do not have to face the scrutiny of experts.

The strategy of doubt-mongering has been highly effective at exploiting the media's practice of presenting "two sides" to controversial issues. The media have an ethical commitment to provide "balance" and stories are more interesting if there is a conflict to report, whether that conflict is real or manufactured.

Because falls for the deniers' tactic of doubt-mongering, ABC TV's program "I Can Change Your Mind...About Climate Change" is a victory for climate denial even before it goes to air next Thursday. The program pits former Liberal senator Nick Minchin, who famously claimed that climate science is a communist plot, against youthful climate change activist Anna Rose.

The premise of the film, commissioned by the ABC, is that there is a genuine debate about climate science. But as there is in fact no debate in the scientific literature about the main propositions of climate science the ABC is hoodwinking its viewers.

It's certain that when asked last year to participate in the program Minchin grabbed the chance with two hands. His denialist comrades have been patting him on the back ever since.

A number of well-qualified scientists could see the program for what it was and refused the invitation to “debate” Minchin. It’s hard to know why Anna Rose, co-founder of the Australian Youth Climate Coalition, agreed to participate.

The ABC will argue that in presenting “both sides” viewers will be able to make up their own minds. For issues like euthanasia, capital punishment or conflict in the Middle East that is legitimate. But the subject of this debate is a complex body of science that only those with advanced training in a relevant discipline can properly understand and assess.

Would the ABC commission a program titled “I Can Change Your Mind on ... the Theory of Relativity”? Is its next program “I Can Change Your Mind on ... Evolution” in which an unqualified creationist debates the evidence with an unqualified “believer” in evolution?

Yet in this case—where the stakes are enormous, no less than the survival of the civilized world—the ABC takes the view that climate science is a fun topic for debate and has pitched against each other two people with zero expertise and no authority.

When the program goes to air next week, the bevy of deniers at the Lavoisier Group, the Institute of Public Affairs, and the Skeptics Party will be shouting “Sucked in ABC”. And they will have good reason to celebrate.

The ABC knows all of this. I and others have pointed it out many times. Scholars such as Naomi Oreskes have exposed the tactics of the climate deniers with a mass of documentary evidence.

Yet the ABC persists with the charade of “providing balance”. Some news organisations abroad have decided they will no longer fall for the doubt-mongering ruse. Professional pride now prevents editors and journalists from being manipulated by the denial machine.

The BBC would not air a program like this. In the United States National Public Radio has revised its ethics handbook. “Our goal”, it states, “is not ... to produce stories that create the appearance of balance, but to seek the truth”.

When it reports on questions such as climate science its aim is not the spurious fairness of presenting “both sides”; instead NPR commits itself to be “fair to the truth”.

“To be fair to the truth.” Once we simply expected that of the national broadcaster. This latest program, whose premise is a lie, tells us that the truth no longer carries so much weight at the ABC, not when it comes to climate science.

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