

## King, Simon. Legal Move Threatened After Media Watch Report

**Credit:** Simon King, Senior Reporter, Sydney | The Australian | 23 February 2015 | [www.theaustralian.com.au](http://www.theaustralian.com.au) ~~

Acoustic expert Steven Cooper is considering launching legal action against the ABC's *Media Watch* program for its portrayal of him and his research on the effect of the Pacific Hydro wind turbines on local residents.

On the February 16 edition of *Media Watch* host Paul Barry dished out a stinging criticism of Mr Cooper's seven-month study conducted at Cape Bridgewater in southwest Victoria — and the reporting of it by *The Australian's* environment editor Graham Lloyd and Network Seven's *Today Tonight*.

However, in damning the report, the *Media Watch* team hand-picked a group of pro-turbine “experts” — with no real expertise in the field — ignored submissions from genuine acoustic experts, misrepresented Mr Cooper, selectively and incorrectly quoted the National Health and Medical Research Council, ignored balancing quotes in the newspaper reports and made a number of factual mistakes.

Following his utter disbelief at *Media Watch's* misrepresentation, as well as pending legal action, Mr Cooper has also sent a letter to the ABC demanding a retraction.

“*Media Watch* should be investigating themselves because in that very article they presented so much information that was incorrect and not factual,” Mr Cooper told *The Australian*.

*Media Watch* opened its attack on the first paragraph of Lloyd's January 21 front-page story which states: “People living near wind farms face a greater risk of suffering health complaints caused by the low-frequency noise generated by turbines, a groundbreaking study has found.”

Barry said: “Well, not according to several eminent scientists we talked to and, remarkably, not according to Steven Cooper, the study's author, who told *Media Watch*: ‘No, it's not correct ... You can't say that noise affects health from this study’.”

*Media Watch's* blatant misrepresentation of Mr Cooper is one of the key reasons for his letter demanding a retraction and pending legal action.

*Media Watch* selectively quoted the Cape Bridgewater report author to give the impression he rejected certain things in both the *Today Tonight* report and *The Australian's* article when in fact he does not.

Mr Cooper told *The Australian* his comments were completely taken out of context by *Media Watch*.

Mr Cooper said by giving his answer in isolation and not explaining the broader context, *Media Watch* had deliberately misrepresented the facts.

He said that when you looked at all the evidence — not just his report — Lloyd was completely right in his opening.

What the Cooper study found was that sensations, including sleep disturbance, were occurring with specific wind conditions leading to acoustic results.

So despite *Media Watch's* nicely edited and manufactured contradiction between the pair, Mr Cooper actually believes Lloyd “is the best journalist writing about wind turbines in Australia”.

In a written response to *The Australian*, prior to the *Media Watch* episode, Mr Cooper said: “The study does show a link between the operation of the wind farm and the disturbances reported by the residents. There is a trend not a correlation (because there is not enough data and that wasn't the brief). However, one can take the reports of the residents who form the view there is a link to their health impacts.”

*Media Watch* next marched out its so called experts to the tune of, “So how come *The Australian* and *Today Tonight* got it so wrong?”

*Today Tonight* wasn't given much of a chance to defend itself against that allegation as it was not contacted for comment by the show. *Today Tonight* Adelaide producer Graham Archer told *The Australian* he was disgusted at the way *Media Watch* conducted itself and the way it misled the public.

“They didn't contact us and I would have thought that was the very minimum of journalistic ethics to call somebody to at least give them a chance to respond to whatever the allegations were, I thought that was pretty shoddy,” he said.

“*Media Watch* were taking a particular point of view that went beyond a critique of the media and they were actually pushing a particular barrow and I'm not sure that's their role.”

*Media Watch's* first “expert” was the head of medicine at Adelaide University, Professor Gary Wittert, who said: “The way *The Australian* reported this study was really the antithesis of good science reporting. I think a newspaper like *The Australian* should know better.”

Mr Cooper, and other properly qualified acoustics experts, have said *The Australian's* reporting of the study was correct in every respect.

What *Media Watch* failed to report was that Professor Wittert has repeatedly given expert evidence to court cases stating that the nocebo effect rather than infrasound and low-frequency noise are directly causing the reported symptoms but Mr Cooper's data from his acoustic investigation suggests Professor Wittert's expert opinion is wrong.

Other experts lined up to slam the report included the Australian National University's Jacqui Hoepner and Will Grant, who wrote about it for *The Conversation*. Grant has a PhD in politics and Hoepner is a journalist and neither has either acoustic or medical training.

Then came the most damning of them all, Sydney University's professor of public health, Simon Chapman. Professor Chapman is also neither an acoustician nor a medical practitioner.

Professor Chapman has declined to ever directly investigate or visit people immediately affected by wind turbines and, despite this, is happy to refer to them very publicly on Twitter as "anti-wind farm wing nuts".

He is, in fact, an expert on cigarette advertising, a sociologist and a vocal advocate for the wind industry.

And this is the supposedly unbiased "expert" *Media Watch* lined up to say: "Scientifically, it's an absolutely atrocious piece of research and is entirely unpublishable other than on the front page of *The Australian*."

When *The Australian's* Gerard Henderson wrote to *Media Watch* to ask why it had chosen Professor Chapman in support of the view that "scientifically" there was no proven causal link between wind farms and illness, *Media Watch* producer Timothy Latham replied: "I am comfortable quoting a professor of public health on the matter, who has previously written on wind farms and health concerns and has, according to his CV, a PhD in medicine."

He does not have PhD in medicine.

When Henderson pointed this out to Latham he replied: "I outlined in my previous email as to why I believe Simon Chapman is qualified to talk about health and wind farms. Therefore no correction or clarification is required."

The opinion of *Media Watch's* "experts" is in stark contrast to those actually trained in the field who understand the significance of what the Cooper study found.

The Cooper study has been reviewed by some of the world's most highly qualified acoustic experts who were quoted by *The Australian*.

Dr Bob Thorne, a psycho-acoustician who is qualified to assess health impacts from noise and is considered an expert witness in court, said in a written statement that the Cooper report was "groundbreaking" and had made a "unique contribution to science".

US acoustics expert Robert Rand, the principal of US-based Rand Acoustics, said in a peer review of the Cooper study: "The correlation of sensation level to wind turbine signature tone level in the infrasonic and audible bands brings wind turbine acoustics right to the door of medical science."

And after the broadcast, in a line-by-line appraisal of *The Australian* story, Ray Tunney, principal acoustics engineer with RCA Acoustics, told *Media Watch* every aspect of it was “true and accurate”.

This is some of what he said: “None of the above in the Lloyd article is misleading or inaccurate nor is it overly emotive by comparison with current media practice.

“So the only reason for *Media Watch* to take this on is if *Media Watch* is simply unable to accept the outcomes of the (Cooper) study and presumably believes that the study is flawed and Mr Cooper is incompetent. This was certainly the impression given by the *MW* presentation.

“I submit that *MW* is not qualified to make such a judgment in such a complex technical area and has gotten carried away with itself in this instance because of its own paradigms and beliefs. My view is that for whatever reason *MW* has lost its objectivity in this case.”

But what is particularly alarming about the program was that *Media Watch* researcher Flint Duxfield deliberately ignored the large pool of positive reviews about Mr Cooper’s study.

*The Australian* has written evidence Duxfield was made aware of the significance of the Cooper report in direct interviews with Mr Rand, but did not make that information available to *Media Watch* viewers.

In an email to colleagues following the *Media Watch* program, Mr Rand said he had told *Media Watch* that after the Cooper findings: “It would be unethical of me as a member of Institute of Noise Control Engineering to wait for the years required for such careful medical research work to be completed. I have sufficient correlation already from the neighbours’ reports and affidavits and the measurements done thus far to inform others for designing properly to be good acoustic neighbours.” *Media Watch* did not disclose this information.

*Media Watch*’s attempt to discredit the study — and prove why it should not have been headline news — was also riddled with errors.

Barry attacked the tiny sample — three households and six respondents. But in his peer review of the Cooper research, Dr Paul Schomer, director of acoustics standards and chairman of the American delegation to the International Standards Committee, said: “It only takes one example to prove that a broad assertion (that there are no impacts) is not true, and that is the case here.

“One person affected is a lot more than none; the existence of just one cause-and-effect pathway is a lot more than none. The important point here is that something is coming from the wind turbines to affect these people and that something increases or decreases as the power output of the turbine increases or decreases.”

Barry didn't bother reporting Dr Schomer's comments or professional qualifications but said there was what scientists call selection bias, because all those people already had health problems which they blamed on Pacific Hydro's wind farm at Victoria's Cape Bridgewater, 1.6km or less from their homes.

But the *The Australian* has written advice from a professor of epidemiology that selection bias was irrelevant when the study design is identical to a prospective case series with a crossover component, where people are their own controls, and what varies is their exposure to operating wind turbines.

*Media Watch* was advised of this but did not disclose it on air.

Barry said all those involved in the study knew if the wind farm was operating because they could see the blades. Here again he is wrong. Mr Cooper said the subjects could not see the blades — especially when they were inside their homes, in their beds, and woken up from a sleep.

This is at best a pointer to Barry and his team not reading the research and at worse false reporting to make a point. Duxfield has admitted to Mr Cooper he "skimmed" the report.

If misrepresentation, hand-picking evidence, dodgy reporting and industry-invested "experts" with no qualifications were not enough, the less than 10 minute segment was littered the errors.

*Media Watch* blankly asserted that Mr Cooper's theories were dismissed by a Senate inquiry into wind farm noise in 2011.

Wrong — Mr Cooper didn't give evidence in the 2011 inquiry.

He did give evidence to the 2012 inquiry chaired by Doug Cameron which had two dissenting reports.

*Media Watch* pointed out that *Today Tonight* and *The Australian* "also omitted to tell us that, as Professor Chapman puts it, there are 24 high-quality reviews about wind farms and health, and overwhelmingly they have been found to be safe". Again any thorough research would find this is not true. Many of the reviews Professor Chapman cites state there is not a lot of scientific evidence.

The National Health and Medical Research Council recently reviewed 4000 pieces of literature and found only 13 were suitable for evaluation and said none could be considered high quality. As a result it said the impact of wind turbines on health remained an open scientific question and that it would call for targeted, high quality research. A priority area is low frequency and infrasound.

But to bend the facts even further to its cause, *Media Watch* then selectively quoted the NHMRC to give wind turbines a clean bill of health.

The program failed to tell viewers the NHMRC position is that the quality of existing research is poor and that it will fund more high-quality research.

The show chose only to say the NHMRC had declared: “There is no consistent evidence that noise from wind turbines ... is associated with self-reported human health effects.” In fact what the NHMRC statement said was “there is currently no consistent evidence that wind farms cause adverse health effects in humans”.

It is a subtle but very important difference and the NHMRC went on to conclude: “Given the poor quality of current evidence and the concern expressed by some members of the community, there is a need for high-quality research into possible health effects of wind farms, particularly within 1500 metres.”

NHMRC chief executive Warwick Anderson, in a conference call with journalists, said: “It is important to say no consistent evidence does not necessarily mean no effect on human health.

“From a scientific perspective I see the question as still open.”

*Media Watch* admitted an error with its reporting of the NHMRC statement but “stands by it’s story and the expertise on those quotes”.

The program said the Pacific Hydro Cape Bridgewater wind farm acoustic study was just that, an acoustic study.

In its presentation *Media Watch* failed to make available relevant and available information that would have allowed viewers to arrive at a conclusion other than one predetermined by it.

It misquoted authorities, bent facts, wheeled out pro-industry experts and hand-picked evidence in a report full of mistakes.

**Source:** Simon King, Senior Reporter, Sydney | The Australian | 23 February 2015 | [www.theaustralian.com.au](http://www.theaustralian.com.au)