These are not the only threats to freedom of speech in Australia today. In the June edition of the IPA Review, I outlined the extraordinary call by the host of the ABC’s Media Watch, Jonathan Holmes, to have the government’s regulator enforce ‘balance’ on a number of climate sceptic radio hosts. In a Media Watch segment in March titled ‘Balancing a hot debate’, Holmes pointed out that hosts like 2GB’s Alan Jones, ABC’s Gary Hardgrave and MTR’s Chris Smith tended to interview climate scientists they agreed with.

Fair enough—but you’d think, in a society which values freedom of expression, that was their prerogative. Nevertheless, Holmes suggested that this contravened the Commercial Radio Australia Code of Practice which insists that broadcasters must ‘present significant viewpoints when dealing with controversial issues of public importance’. This regulation may be on the books, yet it is practically defunct. The left-wing activists GetUp filed a complaint—necessary for the Australian Communications and Media Authority to act—the next day.

It seems amazing to have to do so, but in 2011 we need to remind ourselves why freedom of speech matters.

The first issues paper of the media inquiry even asks what the purpose of a free press actually is—as if its existence is up for debate. The paper first asked whether the ‘marketplace of ideas’ theory assumes that the market is open and readily accessible?

The marketplace of ideas theory suggests that freedom of speech is desirable because the only way to come to the truth about a topic is to freely debate it—the ‘market’ for speech will ensure that the best and most ideas float to the top, and wrong ideas fade and die. Then ‘Are there alternative or preferable justifications for freedom of the media?’

There certainly are. Freedom of speech is a subset of a larger right—that of liberty of conscience. People should be at liberty to express what they privately believe (subject to small limits on defamatory speech and overt threats).

‘The marketplace of ideas’ theory is high-minded and idealistic—imagining a world where the only public debate is academic, rational, and focused on coming to the ‘truth’ of any given proposition. And it implicitly limits freedom of speech. If speech is necessary to the functioning of a democracy or to merely to resist illiberal violations of freedom of speech, the threats in the last few months has been woefully inadequate. That the media inquiry can think of this as its only justification is deeply concerning. And it emphasises the challenge—not merely to resist illiberal violations of freedom of speech, but to demonstrate that freedom of speech is a value worth defending at all. While the threats may seem disparate—the media inquiry and the Racial Discrimination Act have their own origins and their own political supporters—the reaction to the threats in the last few months has revealed that freedom of speech is not at all safe in Australia in 2011.

Here is a long and dismal history of alarming forecasts that were literally too bad to be true. But many people believed these predictions that human actions would harm the environment and thereby cause disaster for people. As early as 1798, Thomas Malthus predicted that the human population would grow beyond the ability of the environment to support it. Before him, Socrates bemoaned the loss of forests around Athens. Arguably the most harmful alarm was about DDT, the banning of which has cost many millions of lives.

The alarms were based on forecasts, but not ones from proper scientific forecasting methods. The alarmists make their alarming forecasts to be accurate, except by chance. The unscientific methods that alarmists use are biased towards making alarming forecasts. Most of the alarmists’ forecasts were categorically wrong. The rest were wrong in degree: the effects the alarmists were concerned about turned out to be too trivial to cause problems.

The media are culpable in promulgating these false alarms. Though regrettable, the weakness exists and extrapolating that it will become important over time or over a large population. The third of these unscientific forecasting methods is the one most favoured by alarmists.

There is no reason to expect their alarming forecasts to be accurate, except by chance. The unscientific forecasting methods is understandable. Alarms are news. Rational sceptical responses require time and effort to assemble, and don’t have the same emotional urgency. We have to follow closely to ever learn that an alarm has been shown to be false, and most of us are too busy to do that. Alarmists are often rewarded for their efforts. They typically ask government to ‘do something’. As a result, laws are often passed and regulations implemented that decrease the freedom of people to use their own judgement and to make their own decisions, in ways that the alarmists prefer. These policies inevitably impose financial costs and have unforeseen consequences.

Moreover, government research funds and recognition tends to flow to alarmists. Paul Ehrlich, author of The Population Bomb, is evidence that a record of raising false alarms can be reward. But many people believed these predictions that human actions would harm the environment and thereby cause disaster for people. As early as 1798, Thomas Malthus predicted that the human population would grow beyond the ability of the environment to support it. Before him, Socrates bemoaned the loss of forests around Athens. Arguably the most harmful alarm was about DDT, the banning of which has cost many millions of lives.

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20 environmental alarmists

10 ELECTRICAL WIRING AND CANCER, ETC, 1979

A small epidemiological study reported an association between exposure to electromagnetic fields and childhood leukaemia. In the US, regulations intended to reduce exposure cost $1 billion annually. Thousands of studies have failed to establish a link between actual exposure and any health effect.

13 RADON IN HOMES AND LONG CANCER, 1985

The gas historically caused lung cancer in miners working in dusty uranium-rich mines. A small survey found elevated levels in some houses, and the US EPA estimated 8 million homes were affected and forecast up to 30,000 lung cancer deaths per annum. Proper studies have shown any effect is small, or nonexistent.

17 DIOXIN IN BELGIAN Poultry, 1999

Dioxins occur naturally, as well as incidentally and deliberately from industry. Some are toxic. When breeder chickens became ill, the cause was traced to dioxin contaminated feed. Seven million chickens and 60,000 pigs were destroyed. But people were exposed to more dioxin by substituting fish for chicken in their diets.

18 MERCURY IN FISH: ON NERVOUS SYSTEM DEVELOPMENT, 2004

Extrapolating from insignificantly low ‘safe’ levels, a US EPA employee predicted 630,000 babies born with potential brain damage each year. Women were warned to avoid fish. Mercury occurs naturally in the environment and most Japanese have higher than EPA ‘safe’ levels from eating a health-promoting high-fish diet.

19 MERCURY IN CHILDBIRTH, INFANcy, INOCULATIONS, AND AUTISM, 2005

Robert F Kennedy, Jr claimed on CBS News that ‘The science connecting brain damage with thimerosal is absolutely overwhelming’. Thimerosal is a vaccine preservative that contains mercury that the industry claims is safe. When it was eliminated, autism cases continued to climb. Researchers found no link.

20 MOBILE PHONE TOWERS AND CANCER, 2008

Periodically, community activists raise alarms that the towers will cause cancer and miscellaneous other health problems. The towers transmit and receive weak radiofrequency signals. The signals are centimetres-long wavelength non-ionizing radiation that, like heat and visible light, cannot damage DNA. Scientific studies have found no health effects.