EDITORIAL REVIEW 9:

SHENHUA MINE COVERAGE

Scope and Subject

Review selected coverage of the proposed Shenhua coal mine on ABC television, radio and online. The proposed mine has prompted strong grassroots opposition, along with local support for the economic activity it would provide. This report examines a range of reportage and discussion about the project, focussing on the ABC's Editorial Guidelines dealing with Impartiality and diversity of perspectives.

Time span

July 8, 2015 to March 1, 2016.

Programs & Services

Radio National Breakfast, PM, AM, The World Today, ABC Rural, Earshot, Background Briefing, Fact Check, The Science Show, ABC New England, NSW Country Hour, Landline, 7.30, News Online.

Specific questions for review

- 1. Were interviews, panel discussions, packages and online reports presented fairly, having regard to the indicators of fair treatment in the ABC Editorial Policies Impartiality Guidance Note 4
- 2. Were interviews and panel discussions carried out in an open-minded fashion as described in the Impartiality Guidance Note in that the interviewer or host appeared to be open to the evidence and arguments irrespective of their personal views or predispositions? Did the interviewer or host appear to unduly favour one perspective over another?
- 3. Were packaged reports and published articles constructed as objectively as possible, reflecting an appropriate diversity of relevant experience, perspective and opinion? Were any perspectives either misrepresented or unduly favoured over another?

The reviewer

Mark Skulley is a freelance journalist based in Melbourne. He previously worked for the Financial Review for about 18 years, where he filled a number of roles including Melbourne bureau chief and national IR correspondent. He also covered the Australian car industry, major infrastructure topics such as the national electricity market, company reporting and many federal and state elections.

Before that, he was Melbourne correspondent for the Sydney Morning Herald and a business reporter based in Sydney. He started in country newspapers in Western Australia, before working for The West Australian and Western Mail.

INTRODUCTION

The public controversy over the proposed Shenhua Watermark coal mine in NSW is part of a broader national struggle over competing uses of Australian land, in particular the tension between farming and mining.

There is ongoing controversy over the proposed Adani coal mine in Queensland, focused on its impact on the Greater Barrier Reef which is a both a natural wonder and a massive drawcard for domestic and international tourism.

In most states and territories, there is also grassroots opposition to Coal Seam Gas exploration and production, particularly when it is produced using fracking. However, business groups argue that CSG risks are manageable and it is needed to boost Australia's declining conventional gas reserves.

Most of these disputes involve competing claims over the impact of mining on water supplies, especially ground water.

In 2008, Shenhua Australia paid \$300 million to the NSW government for an exploration licence in the Liverpool Plains, about 25km south of Gunnedah. The \$1.2 billion Watermark coal project was approved by the NSW Planning Assessment Commission in 2015, and was then approved by the Federal Environment Minister Greg Hunt.

Shenhua Australia - which is a subsidiary of a major Chinese state-owned enterprise – plans to construct an open-cut mine that will mine 10 million tonnes of coal per year for 30 years.

In granting approval, Minister Hunt argued that the project had been subject to four expert reviews and two reviews by the Independent Expert Scientific Committee (IESC) that reports to him.

Hunt said he personally met the IESC and asked further questions, before imposing 18 conditions on the project and giving the Federal Minister the power to issue stop-work orders if there were significant breaches.

Shenhua's project manager, Paul Jackson, argued the environmental approvals should end the debate. "It's time to put aside the emotive arguments and acknowledge that the science clearly shows the project should proceed."

However, there is still strong opposition from local farmers, land care groups, the NSW Farmers' Association, environmental campaigners and Indigenous leaders.

They cite concerns over the impact on water supplies, given the black soils of the Liverpool Plains are highly productive, particularly for cropping.

These same groupings also opposed an earlier coal mine project by BHP, meaning the opposition from farmers and others has put down strong roots over a number of years.

The material reviewed indicates a possible "town and country" divide over the project. The Gunnedah Chamber of Commerce and a Mayor of Gunnedah supported it, referring to jobs that would be created during the mine's construction phase and when the mine is operating.

Shenhua claims its surveys show majority support for the project, but does not appear to have released any supporting evidence.

The politics surrounding the project are complicated and are still being played out in the federal election campaign.

The project was approved despite strong criticism by the local Federal MP, Barnaby Joyce, who is also the Federal Minister for Agriculture. At the time of approval, Joyce was deputy leader of the Nationals. He was seen as the likely successor as Nationals leader to Warren Truss, which occurred this year.

The row over the mine encouraged the former independent MP for New England, Tony Windsor, to come out of retirement and take on Joyce at the July 2 election.

Meanwhile, there are differences within State and Federal Nationals and within the Coalition on the project.

Two local State Nationals MPs, Kevin Anderson and Kevin Humphries, support the mine. As does NSW Liberal Premier Mike Baird.

Last year, then Prime Minister Tony Abbott fuelled the row when he observed: "It's actually a mine in the hill country; it's not a mine that is on prime agricultural land."

Minister Hunt made the same point – that the proposed mine is on ridge country rather than the prized black soils of the plain. But opponents still argue the risk to groundwater remains.

NOTE: My brief was to review a range of ABC stories and discussion against the indicators of fair treatment in the ABC Editorial Policies Impartiality Guidance Note 4.

I did not fact check individual stories, apart from one point. This related to whether the Federal Minister for the Environment, Greg Hunt, issued an initial press release stating that he approved the project. He appears not to have done so.

The review focused on the journalism, not fact-checking the subject matter such as risks to groundwater, climate change and coal.

I recognise that most of the stories were produced under deadline pressure or, in the case of radio discussion, went live to air.

CONCLUSIONS

The review was asked to address three specific questions:

1) Were interviews, panel discussions, packages and online reports presented fairly, having regard to the indicators of fair treatment in the ABC Editorial Policies Impartiality Guidance Note 4?

Answer: Yes, I believe the media segments met the ABC's editorial policies for fairness and impartiality when viewed as a whole. The environmental approval of the Shenhua coal mine was contentious and the views of local farmers had to be reported. The ABC regularly sought comment from the mine's developer and from supporters of the project, although these requests for comment were not always taken up. As mentioned in the body of the report, I would have liked to see more examination of the underlying science which led to approval of the project.

Question 2) Were interviews and panel discussions carried out in an open-minded fashion as described in the Impartiality Guidance Note in that the interviewer or host appeared to be open to the evidence and arguments irrespective of their personal views or predispositions? Did the interviewer or host appear to unduly favour one perspective over another?

Answer: The ABC interlocutors came across as being open to the evidence and the arguments of the people they questioned. In practice, the questions were usually being asked of a person who stood in either the "For" or "Against" camps. This meant the ABC employees were often questioning or exploring the views held by the interview subject, but this was balanced by seeking comment from a variety of sources over time.

Question 3) Were packaged reports and published articles constructed as objectively as possible, reflecting an appropriate diversity of relevant experience, perspective and opinion? Were any perspectives either misrepresented or unduly favoured over another?

Answer: I believe the reports and articles were constructed objectively when considered as a whole. The developing nature of the story meant that individual items often dealt with a particular angle. For example, longer reports on 7.30 and on radio explored why farmers opposed the project. On the political front, the Deputy PM and leader of the Nationals, Barnaby Joyce, was in the difficult position of an opposing a project that his government had approved. Then Joyce was challenged at the recent election by former independent MP Tony Windsor. As required by the Guidance Note 4, opportunities were given over time for principal perspectives to be expressed.

OVERALL CONCLUSION: The ABC gave opponents of the Shenhua mine a good run, but their passionate opposition is part of the story. ABC reporters and announcers regularly sought balancing comment and viewpoints. Given its footprint, the ABC has a big following in rural Australia and many communities are facing competition between mining and agriculture. There is a need to report the human side of this story – and the economics – but it is important to focus on what the science says. On this point the coverage should have done better. As with the issue of climate change, the ABC should give weight to the majority scientific view.

DISCUSSION

My initial view was that opponents of the mine got a good run in the coverage, better than the project's proponents or pro-mine figures.

For example, the PM report on July 8, 2015, quoted Minister Hunt and two critics – Lock the Gate's Phil Laird and the NSW Farmers Association's Fiona Simson – at some length.

The Shenhua Watermark project manager, Paul Jackson, got in one lengthy sentence.

"We've diligently done our work, we've quietly gone about our business, and we've satisfied the regulators and we've satisfied the independent experts that we can actually do what we say we're going to do," he said.

On 7.30 on July 13, 2015, the Shenhua Group declined the program's request for an interview.

The report quoted from a company statement, which said: "The Project has demonstrated time and time again there will be no adverse impacts on the region's groundwater and impacts on sensitive ecological areas have been appropriately managed and offset."

Compare this with the comments of Tim Duddy, a farmer who has led the fight against the project.

"What they are contemplating here is agriculture genocide," Duddy said. "We are not talking about a co-existence model. We're talking about mining coming and farming going and it's as simple as that."

Duddy and the other opponents are passionate about their cause and clearly feel a deep connection with the land.

They are entitled to their views, yet this is strong language. The project has been subject to numerous scientific and planning reviews, and Duddy concedes in his numerous interviews that no evidence would convince him that it would not threaten water supplies and farming.

However, it should be noted that the same report on 7.30 included comment from the Gunnedah Chamber of Commerce and the local Mayor, who supported the project.

Tim Duddy is clearly a leading figure in the local opposition to the Shenhua project and was regularly quoted. One could argue that Mr. Duddy was quoted too often, but effort was put into quoting and interviewing other opponents of the project, such as farmers Andrew Pursehouse, John Hamparsum and others.

So did the stories contain a balance which "follows the weight of evidence", as required in the ABC's editorial policies?

In my view they did, despite some rhetorical flourishes, because they presented a "diversity of perspectives over time". Reporters and presenters gave time to opposing voices, and Shenhua was given opportunities to comment, which the company did not always take up.

The ABC should be exploring the breadth of the opposition to coalmining on farm land (and to CSG) because, as one report noted, it includes some strange bedfellows. They include the "knitting Nannas", rugby player David Pocock and the former NSW Governor Marie Bashir, who grew up in Narrandera in western NSW. After leaving office, Dame Marie said the destruction of fertile Australian farmland for mining is a "crisis" that must stop. "I have never been so emphatic or political in my life".

(See: http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/nsw-state-election-2015/nsw-state-election-2015-marie-bashir-lashes-out-at-loss-of-farmland-for-mining-20150310-13zsjm.html)

Furthermore, there were mitigating factors, with numerous later stories indicating that Shenhua declined to comment.

In July 2015, a local Mayor said in a radio interview that the Shenhua spokesman, Paul Jackson, had been in hospital, which might have been a factor in the company not commenting on some stories or making relatively brief comment.

Around the same time, ABC New England radio announcer Kelly Fuller said on-air that she had made at least six written, but unsuccessful attempts to get an interview with the NSW Minister for Resources and Energy, Anthony Roberts.

The farmer groups got a better run than those lobbying on behalf of the mining industry such as the Minerals Council of Australia, but sometimes peak groups like the MCA are reluctant to speak on individual projects.

The ABC's early reporting concentrated on the approval of the project, despite the continuing local opposition, and how this would play out in federal politics.

This political emphasis was natural given that the Nationals' Minister for Agriculture, Barnaby Joyce, was soon locking horns with the former independent MP (and one-time Nat) Tony Windsor. As they say in the bush, you can't keep two bulls in the same paddock, and the exchanges between these two politicians were of strong public interest.

Another complicating factor in the coverage was that politicians and officialdom sought to argue that they had fulfilled their role in scrutinising the project, whilst trying to play down their role in the overall process. To (politely) paraphrase one of my early editors – the pollies were trying to cover their own rear-end.

In 2008, Shenhua Australia paid \$300 million to the then NSW Labor government for an exploration licence in the Liverpool Plains and faces a big further payment if a mine proceeds. International coal prices have slumped since then, leaving questions over whether the project will proceed.

The first report in the review material is the PM program on 8 July 2015 after the project was approved by the Federal Minister for the Environment, Greg Hunt.

The Minister does not appear to have issued a press release to announce his decision on that day (judging by a check of his ministerial media website). Politicians usually do this when they are trying to reduce coverage of a controversial or sensitive decision.

The PM program appears to have developed its story from information on the Department of the Environment's website, based on the project's assessment under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999. The PM program also quoted a variety of perspectives on the project, including Minister Hunt.

These early reports concentrated on the political fallout over the project getting the goahead.

This is understandable given that the local Federal MP, Barnaby Joyce, who was also the Minister for Agriculture, criticised the approval. Furthermore, the green light for the mine encouraged former independent MP Tony Windsor to come out of retirement and challenge Joyce in the current election.

However, I would like to have seen more information given in these early reports on the extent of the environmental checks that were made. They were extensive, despite the scepticism of farmers about the project's risk to water.

I have covered objections to proposed coal mines in the NSW Hunter Valley, which faced strong objections and lobbying from the horse industry. Writing such stories involves working through environmental assessments that ran to thousands of pages, and trying to comprehend hydrology reports that are dense to the layman.

It appears that the Federal government did not allow interviews with members of the Independent Expert Scientific Committee. But, after the initial reports about the project getting the go-ahead, I would have liked to see stories that went to some independent scientific voices to give their views of the approval process and the final decision.

A later Background Briefing report named the head of the Independent Expert Scientific Committee as being a senior scientist within the CSIRO, Dr Andrew Johnson (who declined to comment). It would have been useful to have more information on the IESC and how it works

(See: http://www.iesc.environment.gov.au/system/files/resources/a00df4f0-cecd-4d2f-aa43-f8a039eac0c0/files/committee-factsheet_1.pdf).

The key underlying question was whether the proposed coal mining would damage local water supplies. The judgment of the IESC was based on an assessment of risk and I would like to have seen a better early exploration of this.

In my view, the early coverage of the political angles tended to overwhelm the environmental questions which, while specific to that location, are similar to other projects around Australia.

The political angles often had a "bull-in-a-China-shop" undertone of "Barnaby's in trouble again" which was true, but which was not the only angle. As events showed, controversy over the mine did not prevent Joyce from becoming leader of the Nationals and Deputy PM, even though his comments still sent the crockery flying.

The environmental aspects were covered more thoroughly in later reports, such as Landline ("At the Coalface"). This report quoted a water resources engineer at the University of NSW, Doug Anderson, who was commissioned by the Caroona Coal Action Group to independently

peer review Shenhua's water modeling. He concluded that more information was needed before mining occurred.

The environmental issues also were also covered in more depth by Background Briefing ("Shenhua's mine: Is It worth the risk?") in July 2015. The full BB report ran to just over 32 minutes, with a shorter version broadcast on Radio National.

Background Briefing reporter Wendy Carlisle examined the explanation of the approval process given by Minster Hunt, in particular the comment that the Independent Expert Science Committee had assured him the risk posed to ground water by the mine was manageable.

Her report featured a former member of the IESC (and farmer), Jim McDonald, who argued the scientists outlined the risks, and how they might be managed. But the decision to take the risk was made by the Minister.

McDonald said the chance of an "unlikely event" might be from 0% to 30%, so there was still a one in three chance that groundwater would be affected by coal mining.

The same report noted that Hunt declined to comment, while the chair of the Independent Expert Science Committee, the CSIRO's Dr Andrew Johnson, did not respond to guestions.

A later Background Briefing report in August 2015 quoted a former chief of CSIRO Land and Water, Dr John Williams, as querying why the IESC had changed the way it defined risk from accepted scientific conventions to definitions that were based on "common usage".

The report said the term "unlikely" would have previously meant that there was an up to one in three chance that the groundwater could be damaged by the mine, but the new standard meant that "unlikely" was essentially undefined.

The Shenhua project was examined by the ABC Fact Check unit which is now defunct, but which, in my view, played an important role in cutting through claim-and-counter claim.

The Fact Check unit did speak to a range of experts, but concentrated on the question of whether the proposed mine was on the "best" agricultural and in Australia which had been a point of contention in political discourse.

To me, this was a secondary point. It was accepted that the Liverpool Plains was prime agricultural land and the primary, underlying question remained unanswered – what was the risk to ground water from allowing a coal mine?

One feature of the coverage and discussion of this issue was that it was delivered at many levels - local radio, national radio, rural programs, current affairs and news. I have never worked for the ABC, but I did wonder about whether the overall coverage was hindered by people working in silos.

There was evidence of information and comments being shared between formats, such as comments on radio being used in online news reports. But the points made in the Background Briefing report did not seem to be picked up in other coverage.

I assume that the ABC has, like other media outlets, had to rationalise its system of reporting

rounds, meaning there are fewer reporters who have a strong suit in reporting environmental matters. The ABC has a national environment and science correspondent, Jake Sturmer, but he has a very wide brief.

What I would like to see is more concentrated and in-depth coverage of key environmental "hot spots" - like CSG and coal mining on farmland nationally, the bleaching of the Great Barrier Reef and using brown coal for electricity generation in Victoria.

Coverage of the Shenhua project would benefit from a more collaborative approach — combining input from a reporter with knowledge of environment/rural issues with, say, a reporter who knows the coal industry and somebody who is familiar with the Liverpool Plains.

Reportage that combined these perspectives would add depth to the coverage. For example, low coal prices lessen the chances of the Shenhua mine proceeding and there is a global trend of banks (and some investors) turning away from investing in new coal mines and dumping existing ones.

All newsrooms have competing demands and set budgets, and the pace of reporting has quickened with online news and social media. But spending more time on a difficult topic periodically is often better than covering every twist and turn.

I note that one report says that a series of radio programs by Tom Morton's series, "After the Coal Rush" will air in September 2016 on The Science Show. It would be worthwhile ensuring that relevant content was picked up in news/discussions of the Shenhua Watermark project.

OVERALL CONCLUSION: The ABC gave opponents of the Shenhua mine a good run, but their passionate opposition is part of the story. ABC reporters and announcers regularly sought balancing comment and viewpoints. Given its footprint, the ABC has a big following in rural Australia and many communities are facing competition between mining and agriculture. There is a need to report the human side of this story – and the economics – but it is important to focus on what the science says. On this point the coverage should have done better. As with the issue of climate change, the ABC should give weight to the majority scientific view.

INDIVIDUAL REPORTS/SEGMENTS

1) PM - July 8, 2015

Shenhua Watermark coal mine approved, despite concerns it will 'destroy' farmland http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2015/s4270039.htm

Opponents of the mine got a good run, despite the Watermark project having just been approved by Environment Minister Greg Hunt.

The report quoted Minister Hunt and two critics – Lock the Gate's Phil Laird and the NSW Farmers Association's Fiona Simson – at some length.

In contrast, the Watermark project manager, Paul Jackson, got one lengthy sentence.

"We've diligently done our work, we've quietly gone about our business, and we've satisfied the regulators and we've satisfied the independent experts that we can actually do what we say we're going to do," Jackson said.

Subsequent stories indicate that Jackson tended to give brief, matter-of-fact comments which stuck to the theme that Watermark had faced lengthy expert scrutiny and had been given the go-ahead. In some later reports, Shenhua declined to comment at all.

In contrast, critics of the mine use emotional language. In this report, locals were said to be "gutted" and "disgusted" in what was a "very dark day".

This report shows the tricky political positioning that was underway. Minister Hunt defends the federal approval process, while arguing that his role was limited with no discretion.

2) ABC News Online - July 8, 2015

Liverpool Plains: Barnaby Joyce slams Government's conditional approval for new NSW coal mine

http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-07-08/shenhua-coal-mine-conditional-approval-liverpool-plains-nsw/6603676

This is a fairly straight-forward piece on the colourful reaction of local Federal MP Barnaby Joyce to the project being approved ("the world has gone mad").

NSW Farmers Association president Fiona Simson criticises Minister Hunt's decision to approve the project.

But Hunt says there will be no impact on the availability of water for farming and gives some worthwhile detail.

"The conditions I have imposed limit water use to less than 0.09 per cent of available groundwater - that's less than 1/1000th of the resource and less than the amount of water from one agricultural bore."

3) PM July 7, 2015

Agriculture Minister refuses to step down from cabinet over public criticism of mine approval

http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2015/s4270752.htm

Comment: It's always worth reporting when a senior Minister is at odds with the PM and another ministerial colleague. Barnaby Joyce had scoffed at having a coal mine in the middle of prime farmland.

Then PM Tony Abbott disagreed: "It's actually a mine in the hill country, it's not a mine that is on prime agricultural land, so I think this is another one of those situations where high-quality agriculture and mining can continue to coexist."

But Abbott said he understood why Joyce was speaking out. "Local members are required from time to time to give voice to the feelings of their constituents - that's what local members do."

So who was suggesting that Joyce should quit Cabinet? Tasmanian Senator Jacqui Lambie and Labor frontbencher, Joe Fitzgibbon.

To me, the differences between Abbott and Joyce were worth examining but the angle that the Nationals MP was rejecting calls for him to resign was not the best angle.

4) The World Today - July 9, 2015

Former independent MP Tony Windsor considers political comeback after mine approval http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2015/s4270376.htm

This was national political news, pointing to a peppery electoral contest between Windsor and Joyce. Local campaigner Tim Duddy gets a chance to query whether Joyce has done enough as a local member.

ACT Senator Zed Seselja snuck into the story with an ad hominem attack on Windsor, which could have been cut without loss.

5) RN Breakfast - July 9, 2105. 7.25 minutes

Environment Minister Greg Hunt gives conditional approval to controversial open cut coal mine

http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/breakfast/environment-minister-greg-hunt-gives-conditional-approval-to/6605980

This exchange gave a prominent critic of the project, Tim Duddy, a lot of air time to criticise the process and Barnaby Joyce. Fran Kelly asked some reasonable questions, but I would have liked to see a bit more balancing comment.

6) ABC News Online/ABC Rural - July 9, 2105. 5.27 minutes

Take our fight to Tony Abbott, NSW farmers opposing Liverpool Plains open-cut coal mine tell Barnaby Joyce

http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-07-09/take-fight-to-the-pm-nsw-farmers-opposing-coal-mine-tell-joyce/6606642

Another story concentrating on the political heat on Barnaby Joyce. Shenhua spokesman Paul Jackson given a reasonable go, despite being outnumbered by mine critics. Jackson cited the 2015 NSW election where an anti-mine candidate polled poorly and the sitting Nationals MP – who supported the mine - increased his majority by 4%. Story has link to useful factual explainer.

7) ABC Rural Online - July 10, 2105.

Analysis: Liverpool Plains farming community 'gutted', Shenhua vindicated by Federal approval for controversial Waterman coal mine

http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-07-10/analysis-community-gutted-shenhua-vindicated-watermark-coal/6611432

Concerns over water expressed by Cotton Australia and Lock the Gate were balanced by Shenhua's Paul Jackson and the Gunnedah Chamber of Commerce. Included a broader look at future demand for coal.

8) 7.30 - July 10, 2015. 8.06

Shenhua open-cut coal mine approval raises wider concerns says Nationals Senator http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2015/s4271736.htm

Sabra Lane interviewed Nationals Senator John "Wacka" Williams, who made the worthwhile point about needing to protect Australia's food resources. "If there's damage done, it could be enormous damage, could be very hard to repair."

Williams said he wouldn't have a problem with the mine if it was 100% guaranteed not to affect water supplies or cause major dust problems, but he doubted this was possible.

But again, much of the questioning related to the political impact on Joyce.

Lane observed: "The government looks like it really didn't want much coverage to this story. The details of the mine were released on Wednesday when Bill Shorten was in the Royal commission. The minister's now gone on holidays too where he hasn't been able to talk about or indeed defend it."

9) RN Breakfast - July 10, 2015

Barnaby Joyce on the Shenhua Watermark coal mine

http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/breakfast/barnaby-joyce-on-the-shenhua-watermark-coal-mine/6609228

10) ABC News Online - July 10, 2015

Liverpool Plains: Barnaby Joyce takes open-cut mine concerns to NSW Premier http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-07-10/joyce-takes-liverpool-plains-mine-concerns-to-nsw-premier/6609742

11) The World Today - July 13, 2015. 4.31 minutes

Shenhua mine protest groups build legal challenge http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2015/s4272634.htm

12) ABC Rural July 13, 2015. 4.31

Fran Kelly speaks to Federal Environment Minister Greg Hunt and Cassie Hough speaks to Agriculture Minister Barnaby Joyce about alleged coalition split over Shenhua mine approval

http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-07-13/coalition-denies-split-over-shenhua/6615812

This report notes that The Australian newspaper has quoted the Shenhua Watermark project manager, Paul Jackson, describing Barnaby Joyce as a "xenophobic looney".

I'm in two minds about including such a comment secondhand. On one hand, it indicates the level of tension that has arisen over the project. On the other, it's hearsay – and the ABC is repeating a wisecrack/insult that was allegedly made to another media outlet. On the overarching issue, the concerns that Joyce raised about the mine in the ABC's coverage were NOT xenophobic, but centered on prize farmland being used for a coal mine and the risk that posed to water

13) ABC Rural Online - July 13, 2015. 4.31 minutes

Coalition denies Cabinet split over Shenhua approval

http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-07-13/coalition-split-ove-shenhua-denied/6615656

14) 7.30 - July 13, 2105. 7.23 minutes

Farmers promise legal action and civil disobedience in face of Shenhua coal mine approval http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-07-13/farmers-promise-legal-action-and-civil/6616992

Worthwhile story because it shows the depth of local feeling among opponents. But critic Tim Duddy refers to the mine as "agriculture genocide". Shenhua declined to comment but a one-paragraph statement quoted.

15) PM July 14, 2105. 4.03 minutes

Mike Baird fails to convince farmers on the Shenhua coal mine http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2015/s4273564.htm

The Premier tells the NSW Farmers Association: "The best minds in the country have looked at this, the best minds in the country, and their advice is that in terms of all the modeling, is that they actually think the impacts are going to be less than anticipated."

But he fails to sway the farmers, who passed a motion calling on the State Government to halt the project.

16) ABC News Online - July 14, 2015. 5.09 minutes

Barnaby Joyce's party standing damaged by opposition to Shenhua mine http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2015/s4273633.htm

More focus on the fallout for Barnaby Joyce, claiming it has damaged his standing within the Nationals while some Liberals says it's more evidence Joyce should not become the Nationals' leader.

As it turned out, Joyce became Nationals leader and Deputy PM. But fair to say his electoral standing damaged by Windsor running against him in seat of New England.

17) ABC News Online - July 14, 2015

Shenhua coal mine opposition reignites debate over whether Barnaby Joyce could be deputy

http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-07-14/coal-mine-debate-barnaby-joyce-leadership/6619210

See comments to item 16.

18) Rural Online - July 15, 2015.

Explainer: Shenhua's Watermark coal mine in the Liverpool Plains in NSW http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-07-09/shenhua-watermark-coal-explainer/6607142

Useful explainer on the Shenhua project. But difficult to address the crucial water issues in this format.

19) AM - July 17, 2015. 2.40

Farmers wary of new Fed Government review of Shenhua's proposed coal mine on Liverpool Plains

http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2015/s4275455.htm

The influential commercial broadcaster Alan Jones blasts Environment Minister Greg Hunt over the project. Tim Duddy repeats that he has "absolutely no confidence that they can mine that area and not harm those water resources."

20) ABC Rural Online - July 21, 2015.

Liverpool Plains coal mine: Shenhua project approval divides federal and state Nationals http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-07-21/shenhua-mine-approval-divides-state-and-federal-nationals/6637988

Interesting story on how two local NSW Nationals MP support the Shenhua project based, as on the facts and the approval process. This at odds with their federal counterpart, Barnaby Joyce. Tim Duddy chips in, expressing doubt that development approval will be limited to one coal mine.

21) Earshot - July 27, 2015.

People of the Liverpool Plains

http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/earshot/the-people-of-the-liverpool-plains/6633770

This magazine-style report is worthwhile because it gives an insight into local opposition into BHP's proposed Caroona coal mine which started back in 2006.

It explores the Duddy family's emotional ties to the land and why they think it is special, including the rare white kangaroos. Includes moving detail on how Mr Duddy's brother, Eric, was buried in the land they love.

22) Landline - August 4, 2015, 16.18 minutes

At the Coalface

http://www.abc.net.au/landline/content/2015/s4285159.htm

This report aired on Landline and was justified in therefore talking to sceptical farmers. Tim Duddy reckons that building a mine anywhere on the Liverpool Plains is "completely insane". Landline interviews a water resources engineer at the University of NSW who has been commissioned by mine opponents, but there's balancing comment from NSW Premier and others.

23) 7.30 - August 5, 2015, 5.34 minutes.

Adani coal mine suffers major setback or minor delay, depending on who you ask http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2015/s4287823.htm

As a viewer, I find the theme and headline of this report a cop-out. I want to know whether it's a major setback or small delay ... so which is it?

24) ABC News Online August 6, 2015

Approval of Adani's \$16 billion Carmichael coal mine in Queensland's Galilee Basin set aside by Federal Court

http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-08-05/federal-court-overturns-approval-of-adani's-carmichael-coal-mine/6673734

Report mostly dealt with the Adani project.

25) 7.30 August 6, 2015. 7.04 minutes

Shenhua coal mine company not 'fit and proper' claim farmers http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2015/s4288599.htm

This was a worthwhile story, which was underpinned by serious allegations involving the Chinese parent company and some of its officers. But I would have liked to see greater clarity on who dug up the allegations.

Fiona Simson, a former president of NSW Farmers, says "we had a look at what Shenhua had been doing in some of its activities", and detailed them in a letter to the State Government.

But then the 7.30 says it "has discovered" other allegations. The story refers to Chinese courts documents, but does not say who dug them up. Has there been any follow up on this story?

26) RN Breakfast - August 7, 2015.

Shenhua's mine: is it worth the risk?

http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/breakfast/shenhuas-mine-is-it-worth-the-risk/6679862

See comment for item 27

27) Background Briefing - August 9, 2015. 32.16 minutes

Shenhua's mine: is it worth the risk?

http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/backgroundbriefing/shenhuas-mine-is-it-worth-the-risk/6997098

Items 26 and 27 are canvassed in detail in the earlier discussion. Background Briefing does a good job of digging into the approval process even though Minister Hunt and the Independent Expert Science Committee refused to comment. But were these lines of inquiry picked up elsewhere in the ABC, or did they sit in the Background Briefing silo?

28) ABC Rural - August 21, 2015

Farmers use tractor power for Shenhua mine protest on the New South Wales Liverpool Plains

http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-08-21/tractor-protest-against-shenhua/6713962

This story is a bit soft, but provides some images and quotes from younger voices which was worthwhile.

29) Fact Check - August 26, 2015. Updated same day and March 10, 2016.

Fact check: Is the proposed Shenhua Watermark coal mine located in the middle of Australia's best agricultural land?

http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-08-26/shenhua-watermark-coal-mine-barnaby-joyce-fact-check/6660140

Good to hear from some scientific experts like Professor Snow Barlow from the University of Melbourne, who specialises in the impact of climate change on agricultural crops. But as mentioned in the discussion above, this Fact Check examined whether the Liverpool Plains was the "best" farmland in Australia, which I regard as a secondary point behind the likely impact of mining on ground water.

30) RN Breakfast - August 31, 2015. 5.29 minutes

Landcare group takes Shenhua to court arguing open cut coal mine fails to consider impact on koalas

http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/breakfast/landcare-group-takes-shenhua-to-court-arguing-open-cut/6736946

This and later stories on the legal challenge over the likely impact on the local koala population were worthwhile. One of those quoted was an expert, Dr Mathew Crowther, who had been engaged by Shenhua to review their koala management plan, and researcher John Lemon. The Australian Koala Foundation was also quoted.

31) ABC Rural - August 31, 2015

Koalas the centre of a court challenge to Shenhua Watermark coal mine's planning approval

http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-08-31/land-court-hears-koala-challenge-to-shenhua-

32) Background Briefing - September 1, 2015

Koalas could bring down Shenhua coal mine

 $\underline{http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/backgroundbriefing/koalas-vs-the-state-of-nsw/6740806}$

33) PM - September 8, 2015. 5.11 minutes

Shenhua hasn't done its homework about mine impacts, says author of ground water study

http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2015/s4308536.htm

34) RN Breakfast - October 12, 2015. 5.25 minutes

Tony Windsor responds to Barnaby Joyce

http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/breakfast/tony-windsor-responds-to-barnaby-joyce/6847142

35) ABC New England/News Online November 9, 2015

Community calls on PM Malcolm Turnbull to stop Shenhua mine on Liverpool Plains http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-11-09/call-for-pm-to-intervene-on-shenhua-mine/6923724

36) The Science Show - November 17, 2015.

Unlikely bedfellows on the Liverpool Plains

 $\underline{http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/scienceshow/unlikely-bedfellows-on-the-liverpool-plains/6945164}$

As noted in the discussion, this is a worthwhile topic because the opposition to mining has brought together disparate people – including younger "greenies" and older farmers who are often critical of their traditional political representatives in the Nationals.

Strictly speaking, it did not contain much "science" but was interesting nonetheless.

37) ABC New England/NorthWest - December 15, 2015. 4.51 minutes

Fears artefacts could be destroyed if Shenhua mine plan is approved http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2014/12/12/4147339.htm

Worthwhile discussion of Indigenous concerns, which were also covered in an on-air discussion on ABC New England between announced Kelly Fuller and NSW Premier Baird in November 2015.

38) PM - February 17, 2016. 3 minutes

Future of Shenhua coal mine in doubt

http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2016/s4408389.htm

39) PM - February 19, 2016

Shenhua Watermark mine: conservation groups worried for koala population after court challenge fails

http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2016/s4410337.htm

40) NSW Country Hour - February 19, 2016. 14.20 minutes

Landcare group loses court case over koalas needing protection from Shenhua mine construction

 $\frac{\text{http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-02-19/nsw-country-hour-friday-19-february-2016/7184688}$

41) News Online - February 19, 2016

Shenhua coal mine: Controversial Liverpool Plains project 'unlikely' to go ahead, Government sources say

http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-02-17/shenhua-unlikely-to-go-ahead/7177270

I have some concerns with this news story. The ABC'S editorial guidelines on anonymous sources say that: "Where a source seeks anonymity, do not agree without first considering the source's motive and any alternative attributable source."

This story says that:

Federal Government sources have told the ABC such factors indicate it is "unlikely" the mine will go ahead.

They think Shenhua is "stalling" the project because it is not financially viable, and they point to China's slowing economy and falling commodity prices.

The story quotes supporting information about falling Chinese coal imports and low global prices.

But the political heat on the Federal Government and Joyce would be lowered – particularly leading up to the federal election on July 2 – if the project was seen as being unlikely to proceed despite getting the required approvals.

The government therefore has a strong motive to play down the project's going ahead. A few phone calls to energy analysts could have produced an on-record view that it was unlikely to be a goer at current coal prices.

42) News Online - February 19, 2016

Shenhua Watermark coal mine defeats koala campaigners' legal challenge

http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-02-19/koala-activists-fail-in-court-bid-against-shenhua-coal-mine/7183580

Comment: Strictly speaking, the headline of this story is incorrect. Lawyers for those opposing the project argued that the Planning Assessment Commission did not follow correct process in considering the impact on koala habitat. That is, the case was taken against a government agency as a matter of administrative law rather than against Shenhua Watermark.

ABC New England

Interviews by announcer Kelly Fuller on USB

Kelly Fuller did a good job. In the great tradition of regional radio, she no doubt has to cover a broad range of subjects apart from the Shenhua project and is not, I take it, a specialist in political and environmental reporting.

As Fuller observed on-air, the controversy over the Shenhua project, and the broader tension over mining versus farming, have been underway for some years. This has given her some years of knowledge about the arguments. But she had clearly kept up with the latest developments and asked informed questions, with generally good follow-up.

In one case – the interview with State Nationals MP Kevin Anderson – she took an outside prompt while on-air (perhaps via a text or email) from the former NSW Farmers Association president to pull up Anderson on his claim that he had only recently heard criticism of behavior by Shenhua's parent corporation in China and its directors.

Moreover, the interviews took an appropriate approach based on the interview subject and their purpose.

The interviews with Federal and NSW politicians had an appropriately harder edge because they were with professional interviewees, who are capable of giving a perfectively good answer to a question that was not the one that was asked. Like all politicians, they often need to be pulled back to the question at hand. This sometimes requires that the question is repeated.

Again, I note that some key players appear to have repeatedly ducked requests for interviews. Fuller noted in the interview with Anderson that she has made at least six written, but unsuccessful requests for interviews with the NSW Minister for Resources and Energy, Anthony Roberts.

In contrast to the interviews with politicians, the interview with the Environmental Protection Authority's northern director, Gary Davey, was more of an explainer – a worthwhile exercise about the release of public information on air quality monitoring data.

Davey explained that the data was not historical but would provide a baseline for future comparisons. While the main point of contention about the mine is water, there will be great public interest in dust and particulate matter if the mine goes ahead.

This type of open data gives an objective yardstick for comparison, rather than subjective memory or assertion about a controversial topic

It was good to hear Fuller ask whether members of the public would be able to understand the data because it would have struck a chord with many listeners. The EPA man explained that a lot of effort had gone into making the data understandable, but what is readily comprehended by scientists does not necessarily work for non-scientists.

I note that the EPA director stressed that the data was being supplied by mining companies, meaning that they are cooperating with the project.

While Fuller mostly played an objective role as questioner, she also gave an insight into emotions that have been generated by the project by saying in one interview she had spoken to farmers who were in tears talking about it.

During the interview with Minister Hunt, Fuller said the response from a grassroots group was that his approval of the project was a "death warrant" for local farming. She noted that this was a "very emotional response", but one which showed the depth of feeling about it.

Overall, mentioning these "emotional" responses was appropriate and by no means overdone. They are part of the broader story and deserved the measured mention they received.

The interviews sought to present a range of views on the project, including support from the president of the Gunnedah Chamber of Commerce, Jamie Chaffey.

The Mayor of Gunnedah, Owen Hasler, said in one interview that the Shenhua project manager, Paul Jackson, had been unwell and undergone a second operation in Sydney, which might have explained why his comments around this time were relatively brief.

The project and the protests against it have attracted plenty of "out-of-towners" who were keen to air their views, including the leader of the Australian Greens, Richard di Natale and the Tasmanian Independent senator, Jacqui Lambie.

The questions prepared by Fuller show that she did thorough preparation. But in experience, it's sometimes good to be a bit cheeky with such visitors, like asking how much they really know about the subject at hand.

Here are some observations about the individual interviews:

Environment Minister Greg Hunt - 9 July 2015

In radio terms, this was a marathon grilling at just under 18 minutes. But it was a crucial exchange, coming just days after Minister Hunt gave his approval to the project.

In my view, Hunt was trying to work both sides of the street and Fuller doggedly questioned his role in the process.

On one hand, Hunt argued that his approval was the 15th stage of a 17-stage approval process which was largely in the hands of the NSW government.

On the other, the Minster argued that he had been at pains to put the questions of locals to the Independent Expert Scientific Committee and that he had personally met with the IESC.

Fuller noted that the IESC had made a number of interesting comments. These included noting deficiencies in the water monitoring data on groundwater systems water and calls for new modeling.

This prompted a more detailed defence of the approval process from Minister Hunt, who argued that six modeling exercises were conducted and all had taken a conservative approach on the likely impact.

Derek Schoen, president NSW Farmers - 27 July 2015

This exchange had the flimsiest subject matter of Fuller's interviews.

The hook for the interview was that the newish president of the NSW Farmers, Derek Schoen, attended a meeting in Australia where the former US Vice-President Al Gore, a noted campaigner on climate change, was present.

Schoen tweeted that Gore was aware of the protests over the Shenhua projects which sparked much on social media in Australia and overseas.

The NSW Farmers Association have been long-term critics of the project, but Schoen had little substance to add to this apparently brief exchange with Gore.

His predecessor as president of NSW Farmers, Fiona Simson, was described on air as a local, with much better knowledge of the project and the local environment/geography.

Schoen dutifully stuck to the line that approving the mine was a "criminal decision". During the interview, he did not come across as being particularly knowledgeable on the details but, as noted above, he was described as being relatively new to the position.

Kevin Anderson, NSW Nationals MP - 7 August 2015

Unlike his Federal colleague Barnaby Joyce, Anderson supports the Shenhua project for the economic benefits and the local jobs it would create.

Like any local MP, Anderson sought to stress that he was pressing Shenhua on the details, including on how many jobs would, in fact, go to locals.

Indeed, Anderson modestly sought to take credit for pushing both Environment Minister Greg Hunt and Barnaby Joyce for greater safeguards on the project. At one point, Anderson produced a wonderful mixed metaphor by saying he was a "small fish in some respects" but was able to bang a big drum about sensitive subjects.

Fuller noted that Shenhua project director Paul Jackson had claimed that Anderson was elected off the back of support for the project. Anderson said he had "chipped" the Shenhua

spokesman on being described as pro-mining. The NSW MP said he was "pro balance" and supported proper process.

Anderson was mostly responding to a report on 7.30 of allegedly suspect doings at Shenhua's parent company in China. As noted above, Fuller did well to introduce a comment from a former NSW Farmers president who said that Anderson had been present at meetings where this topic was raised.

In response, Anderson said it was the first time he had received a "formal representation" on allegations involving Shenhua's parent, which is not quite what he said in the beginning.

Mike Baird, NSW Premier - 23 November 2015

Always worthwhile getting the Premier on for a live interview, even if they try to give a helicopter overview without tripping over the many on-the ground details.

In my view, Baird played the "good bloke" card by saying it was his job to ensure there was confidence in the decision-making process. "We need to do much better." In fact, it's the Premier's primary duty to oversee political structure processes that produce the right decisions, not primarily to manage how those decisions are perceived.

The interview was useful in part because it got Baird on the record saying that the view of the PAC was "very clear" that the project should proceed.

Baird was less clear when Fuller asked what work had been done to compare the economic benefits of having a coal mine that ran for 30 years but put farming at some risk, with the benefit of having fertile farmland for hundreds of years.

It was good that Fuller asked Baird about a state-wide "land use conflict task force" that had been established in the Department of Premier and Cabinet. I would like to see detailed follow-up stories on this task force.

It also good that Fuller asked Baird about the concerns of the local Gomeroi people, over plans to relocate sacred grinding groove rocks, which reportedly fall within the planned eastern and western mining pits.

Last year, the NSW Planning Assessment Commission approved the relocation of sacred grinding groove rocks, after deciding that preserving two sites in situ would be impractical if the mine went ahead.

The ABC has elsewhere reported that Shenhua plans to move the artifacts, and put them back in the same location when the mining pit is rehabilitated in 17 years. But this has not satisfied traditional Indigenous landowners.

In reply, Baird said that Indigenous heritage issues were important but he was hazy on the details. Fuller could perhaps pressed him on this point, or followed up later to see if the Premier really had received 200 letters from local Indigenous people on the subject.

The interview was conducting via a scratchy mobile phone connection. As Fuller noted, locals are familiar with mobile 'black spots' which are a bugbear in many rural communities.

(See the following story for more detail on the grinding groove rocks http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-02-05/gomeroi-angered-at-pac-decision-on-shenhua/6072870

Gary Davey, director of EPA's north branch – 25 January 2016

This interview was discussed in some detail above. It was a worthwhile explainer on the release of public information about air quality. It's refreshing to hear a senior public servant being allowed to speak, rather than an elected politician. There should be more of it.

Owen Hasler, Mayor of Gunnedah - 11 February 2016

This was a worthwhile exercise in establishing some facts, even if came through a process of elimination.

Fuller said that former local MP and candidate in the coming federal election, Tony Windsor, had tweeted a rumour that Shenhua had sought a refund from the NSW government.

Fuller noted that the NSW government had denied this rumour, but also observed that Shenhua had to shortly renew their exploration licence.

The Mayor explained that the council had been trying to establish what was going on and it appeared the project was still proceeding.

As noted above, the Mayor said on-air that the Shenhua project director had been unwell, which might explain why no comment was available from the company.

Jamie Chaffey, Gunnedah Chamber of Commerce – 25 February 2016

This interview followed the NSW Premier making the case at State Parliament for the Shenhua project to go ahead. The mayors of Tamworth, Liverpool Plains, Gunnedah and Narrabri were invited to attend the meeting, which was organised by State National MP Kevin Anderson.

This interview was worthwhile because it showed majority support for the project from town-based businesses, with Chaffey quoting from a survey which found it was backed by almost two third of the respondents.

He quoted some others statistics, such as a growing population and fewer empty shop fronts in the main streets but some of the other data from a local motel and real estate agent were a bit rubbery.