

Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications

Answers to Senate Estimates Questions on Notice

Additional Estimates Hearings February 2014

Communications Portfolio

Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Question No: 213

Program No. Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)

Hansard Ref: Page 109 (25/2/2014)

Topic: ABC Breaking news section

Senator Urquhart asked:

On 9 April 2013 the ABC breaking news section of the website reported the release of the coalition broadband policy. It stated:

But the Opposition believes the NBN could cost more than \$90 billion ...

Did anyone complain that you had reported that unsubstantiated claim by the coalition?

Mr Scott: I would have to check on that.

Senator Urquhart: Did Mr Abbott run to the press to claim that the ABC was being disloyal to the hardworking executive in government employment by repeating that claim?

Mr Scott: I would have to see if he made that complaint. I cannot recall it.

Senator Urquhart: If you could take that on notice. The news item continued by saying that the figure was rejected by communications minister, Stephen Conroy, and: On Twitter, the chair of the parliamentary committee investigating the NBN also dismissed the number. Is this kind of reporting—an assertion, followed by direction refutation—also a standard reporting practise?

Mr Scott: What regularly happens is comments made by ministers or shadow ministers are reported and then the cut and thrust of politics takes over the story. It would not be atypical for a comment from a minister or shadow minister to be reported and then their counterparts' comments to be reported as well in the story as a whole. I do think that part of our challenge in the 24-hour news cycle and one of the big differences that has come to bear—and ABC News 24 has clearly been central to this—is that the news cycle has gotten very short. So a quarter to 10 news conference is put to air at quarter to 10 and then summarised at 10 o'clock and 11 o'clock and through the day. Once upon a time, not too long ago, the quarter to 10 news conference went to air at seven o'clock, which provided more time to check and to clarify. That is one of the reasons that I have been a supporter of the creation of fact checking. Certainly the ABC's fact checking unit has done well in this. These people are stepping back from the day-to-day rolling cycle, asking questions, going and seeking independent verification of these comments that are made and putting another perspective on it—because you are right: you often just get into this rolling cycle of assertion and counter assertion through the news cycle.

Answer:

The ABC received one complaint from an audience member on this issue. This complaint was addressed directly by ABC News.

In the context of an active political debate over NBN policy, the ABC believes that reporting across outlets was appropriate and provided important coverage of opposing viewpoints.

Assertions made in debate, by one side of politics or another, are routinely reported in this way.

The claims and counter-claims were reported online by the ABC. An example of one such story can be seen at:

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-04-08/conroy-dismisses-nbn-cost-claim/4615696>