

Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications

Answers to Senate Estimates Questions on Notice

Budget Estimates Hearings May 2014

Communications Portfolio

Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Question No: 7

Program No. Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Hansard Ref: Page 66-67 (28/5/2014)

Topic: Fact checking

Senator Bushby asked:

Senator BUSHBY: I have a couple of questions about the ABC fact checker. How are topics selected for that?

Mr Scott: It is selected the same way that any story is developed by ABC teams—by the editorial team that is responsible.

Senator BUSHBY: So it is a subjective choice by editorial teams?

Mr Scott: Well, subjective choices are made by our news teams every day when they decide what stories they are going to create and what stories they are going to cover.

Senator BUSHBY: That is fine. I have some questions about the facts check which was published on 26 March regarding a statement made by the Prime Minister on 4 March to the forest works dinner. Do you know which one I am talking about?

Mr Scott: No. I do not.

Senator BUSHBY: It regarded attempts by the government to have part of the boundary adjustment on the Tasmanian World Heritage undertaken. So you are not aware of that?

Mr Scott: I do not have a copy here, Senator. But I am happy to take on notice any questions you have about it.

Senator BUSHBY: I am interested in knowing who made the decision to initiate that Fact Check topic. What was the cost of the investigation? I am interested in knowing the resources that were applied within the ABC and whether there was any cost for the external experts or the so-called independent experts. I would like to know why the fact check was initially published without any government input. It was noted initially when it was first put up that there were comments sought by the government but none received, and yet they went ahead to publish the fact check without any input from the government. I wonder what the sense of urgency was.

Mr Scott: This is a matter of journalism. Quite regularly, if you listen to *AM* or *PM*, you will hear that contact was sought but a response was not made.

Senator BUSHBY: There is a difference between running a story and actually coming to a conclusion that a fact is correct or not and the statement is a fact and whether it checks out or not. There is, I would have thought, a higher standard required to actually check the facts.

Mr Scott: I will take it on notice about this process, Senator.

Senator BUSHBY: I am also interested in what assessment was conducted of the independence of the experts that were quoted in the conclusions. Take that on notice as that stands. What effort did the ABC take to check the facts that were presented by the experts in their conclusion, especially given that the experts that were engaged by the ABC were in effect asked to check the veracity of their own work, which was then subsequently challenged by the statement of the PM, which they were checking? What effort was made to seek any other independent expert advice? Were there any other efforts to look at anybody else? Why did the unit not recast its assessment after it actually received advice from the government through the Parliamentary Secretary to the

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Minister for Agriculture, the Hon. Richard Colbeck, which had quite different facts contained in it to those which the independent experts put to the ABC?

Mr Scott: I will take that on notice.

Answer:

The Editor of ABC Fact Check chooses the subjects for investigation after discussion with researchers and team members. They must be relevant to the national conversation and factually verifiable. Statements made by senior members of the government or the opposition are given special weight because of their potential impact on policy.

The selection of subjects invariably involves a degree of subjectivity, as any judgements about what is newsworthy do, but statements selected must be able to be tested for accuracy.

The decision to fact check the Prime Minister's statement was made by the ABC Fact Check Editor and researchers. It was a significant statement made about a contested issue on the eve of the Tasmanian election.

Clips of the Prime Minister's speech were run on ABC News 24. The specific claim tested was that the 74,000 hectares of Tasmanian forest was not pristine. The Fact Check team gathered information from a wide variety of sources to reach its conclusion. No specific data on the state of the 74,000 hectares was included in the Australian submission to UNESCO, which was subsequently rejected.

There were no costs involved in the investigation beyond the regular operating costs of the Fact Check unit. In accordance with Fact Check guidelines, no expert was paid for advice.

In the process of researching the article, Fact Check staff made contact by phone and email with the office of Environment Minister Greg Hunt. On 20 March, the Minister's media adviser replied to the email but did not address the specific question posed by the Fact Check staff.

Four subsequent emails were sent to the adviser on March 20, 21, and 24 (twice) seeking further information without reply. Follow-up phone calls to Mr Hunt's office that March 24 and 25 were not returned.

The Fact Check unit also made phone calls to the Prime Minister's office from Wednesday, March 19, and on following days, and received no response. In the absence of a substantive response from the Prime Minister or the Environment Minister, the unit also contacted Senator Colbeck, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Agriculture and Tasmanian Senator, seeking comment. On Wednesday, March 26 Fact Check published its findings.

In summary, the Fact Check unit gave the Minister and the Prime Minister a total of seven days to respond, and published the only response it had received. There was no indication that any further response would be forthcoming if publication was delayed.

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Additionally, the Fact Check team contacted Forestry Tasmania and asked for their data. Forestry Tasmania advised that they could not provide the information requested.

A reply from Senator Colbeck was received on Thursday, March 27, containing comments and data on the 74,000 hectares from Forestry Tasmania. The Fact Check team then updated the published material to include them. The data indicated that much of the 74,000 hectares is considered pristine. This supported the Fact Check determination that the Prime Minister's claim that the 74,000 hectares did not "check out". ABC Fact Check also noted that being pristine is not a prerequisite for listing by UNESCO.

ABC Fact Check Unit consulted independent experts who had conducted scientific quantitative research on the subject. These experts were employed by major academic institutions, had been engaged by state and federal governments or had worked on previous UNESCO submissions and relevant commissions of inquiry in Australia and overseas. ABC Fact Check quoted relevant people who were prepared to provide comments.