

Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications

Answers to Senate Estimates Questions on Notice

Supplementary Budget Estimates Hearings 2015

Communications Portfolio

Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Question No: 154

Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Hansard Ref: Page 9-11, 30/11/2015

Topic: Broadcast data – definition of marriage

Senator Abetz asked:

Senator ABETZ: Seeing that you are so sure about the plurality of these views, could you take on notice: from August until the end of November of this year, what were the number of interviews that were broadcast that mentioned or included voice grabs from those who support the definition of marriage and those who seek to change the definition of marriage?

Mr Scott: What I am not able to do is provide you with a breakdown over a period of time, because we do not keep radio logs and the like from that. But what I can attempt to provide for you on notice are examples of where this matter was debated, from the records that we do have, and I can identify who was on those programs and the perspectives that they were bringing to bear.

...

Senator RONALDSON: The point that Senator Abetz is making, surely, is that you are not retaining data. You give a bland statement about plurality but then say that 99 per cent to one per cent would not meet your definition of plurality—but you are not keeping data. It is a very bland statement to say, 'We are doing X' when there is no evidence, which is the case if you are not keeping that data. I think that was the point Senator Abetz was making.

Senator ABETZ: I think we have agreed that the data is available—

Mr Scott: That is not right. We are required to keep data for a certain period of time—

Senator ABETZ: For how long?

Mr Scott: I think it is about 60 days.

Senator ABETZ: In that case, can you provide it for the months of October and November?

Mr Scott: You have put the question on notice and we will do our best to answer it.

Senator ABETZ: I just have.

...

Mr Scott: There are a few safeguards. The first one is that we have a panel internally who are totally separate from any of the content divisions. Their decisions can be reviewed by the ACMA. Around some of these contentious issues, the ABC board has now, for a number of years, commissioned independent audits of coverage. For example, this is what currently Ray Martin and Shaun Brown are doing around *Q&A*, where we scoop up for them a sample of our broadcasts, and they take a look at our editorial policies and they make a judgement on our performance—a subjective judgement, but with the guidelines and programs in place they come to a view. Colleen Ryan, a former editor of *The Australian Financial Review*, did one of those around our budget coverage last year, which was valuable for us.

The board is commissioning about four of those reviews a year, and the board gets quite detailed reports around editorial performance as well. Finally, it is the board's responsibility to sign off that we are meeting and passing these editorial standards. There are a number of different tests and safeguards. There is no precise science around it. I am not sure that a stopwatch and a clipboard would really answer it well, but we do have some robust processes

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in place and they are spelt out in our editorial policies. I am happy to give you more detail on that.

Senator ABETZ: These robust processes, if you can tell us on notice what they were after the *Media Watch* segment in August that would be helpful.

Answer:

In relation to ABC News, there were programs that dealt exclusively or substantially with the arguments for and against same-sex marriage during October 2015 and November 2015. There were, however, two news events that provoked ABC news stories related to the issue: firstly, the proposal on 22 October 2015 by the Hon Warren Entsch MP that a bill should be introduced into Parliament to define the question for the proposed plebiscite on same-sex marriage; and secondly a comment by the Hon Julie Bishop MP that was widely interpreted as a declaration of support for same-sex marriage on 3 November 2015.

The ABC subsequently broadcast two stand-alone live interviews concerning these issues on the AM program on 22 October 2015: one with Senator the Hon Eric Abetz in favour of traditional marriage and one with Mr Rodney Croome in favour of same-sex marriage.

During October and November, ABC Radio also conducted the following interviews which included commentary on the same-sex marriage debate:

Religion and Ethic website

15 October 2015 – Article by Archbishop Anthony Fisher O.P., which discussed democracy and religious liberty in Australia -

<http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2015/10/15/4331899.htm>

Religion & Ethics Report

21 October 2015 – Interview with Senator the Hon Eric Abetz about media bias and the coverage by the media of public policy areas like same-sex marriage.

4 November 2015 – Interview with Human Rights Commissioner Tim Wilson, which discussed whether freedom of religion is adequately protected in the law.

Radio National Breakfast

22 October 2015 – Interview with Senator Matt Canavan, who is publicly opposed to changes to the Marriage Act.

22 October 2015 – Interview with Professor of Constitutional Law at Sydney University, Professor Twomey, who discusses the constitutional challenges if a plebiscite to legalise same-sex marriage were successful.

22 October 2015 - Interview with Member for Leichhardt and marriage equality advocate, the Hon Warren Entsch MP.

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29 October 2015 – Interview with Professor of History at Evergreen State College, Stephanie Coontz, who argues marriage is an evolving institution and same-sex marriage is part of that evolution.

The ABC's Editorial Policies require the Corporation to present news and information with due impartiality, present a diversity of perspectives, and not unduly favour one perspective over another. The ABC's coverage of the marriage debate presents the diversity of views on this matter.