

Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications
Answers to Senate Estimates Questions on Notice
Additional Estimates Hearings February 2016
Communications Portfolio
Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Question No: 39

Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Hansard Ref: Page 58, 9/02/2016

Topic: Australia's copper network – fit for purpose article

Senator Ludlam, Scott asked:

Senator LUDLAM: Now I think we are getting close. In your view, why was that second piece, 'NBN alternative: Is Australia's copper network fit for purpose?' withheld? Mr Ross is of the view, on the basis of the evidence that he spent a fair bit of time going over, that it is not. He goes through material that came to one of the Senate standing committees. It was a fair bit of research. Why was that piece held up from publication—

Mr Scott: I would have to check. I do not have advice on that.

Senator LUDLAM: That is what this whole question hinges on. It is that piece that was ready to run in May—

Mr Scott: I can take that on notice. I am sorry, I do not have the detail on that chronology.

Senator LUDLAM: You are aware of the article that I am referring to?

Mr Scott: Yes, I have seen that article.

Senator LUDLAM: It is the one that is referred to in the tape recording—not the first one that caused *Media Watch* and *The Australian* and the News Corp press to go on one of their character assassination ventures. It is the one that is being schooled on in this recorded conversation in May. That piece was held up for six months; it was not published until about a fortnight after the election.

Mr Scott: I will come back to you on that, Senator.

Senator LUDLAM: I would appreciate that.

Answer:

Mr Ross was provided with a direction to seek editorial balance. There was no prohibition on Mr Ross covering the NBN.

The copper wire article was submitted to ABC News management by Mr Ross as a further instalment to an 11,000 word piece that analysed the Coalition NBN plan. That previous piece had already addressed the issue of the state of the copper network and had followed a series of other articles by Mr Ross that had focussed on the Coalition's NBN plan.

ABC's Head of Current Affairs was concerned that Mr Ross had not published any equivalent analysis of the then Government's NBN policy, which was also subject to public criticism over its design, roll-out, cost and delays. In this context, the Head of Current Affairs advised Mr Ross that imminent publication of the piece, without first exploring issues on the other side of the debate, could lead to the impression that he was involved in partisan advocacy. The Head of Current Affairs was also concerned with Mr Ross' compliance with ABC Editorial Policies, which direct content makers to "*present a diversity of perspectives so that over time no significant strand of thought or belief within the community is knowingly excluded or disproportionately represented* (Editorial Standard 4.2)".

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Mr Ross agreed, however, he did not ultimately submit a subsequent piece representing another perspective on the then Labor Government's NBN plan.

The decision to publish the copper article after the federal election was made by Mr Ross without consultation with management.