

**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: 2**

**Program No. Australian Broadcasting Corporation**

**Hansard Ref: Page 46 (28/5/2014)**

**Topic: NBN Related Coverage**

**Senator Urquhart asked:**

There have been some recent reports in the tech press about ABC coverage of the NBN. I want to give you a chance to respond. Does the ABC have an editorial policy on coverage in relation to the national broadband network?

**Mr Scott:** No. We have no specific policy on coverage of the NBN as an issue at all. The editorial policy is that we cover all our stories. So there is no specific NBN. I can tell you that we have done lots of stories on the NBN. I am told that we have produced over 150 NBN stories across radio and television news and current affairs and online since September last year. The bulk of those current affairs stories relate to policy and governance. They are the current affairs stories. The bulk of the news stories relate to the rollout and the construction of the NBN across the country. The minister was interviewed on *Lateline* in April. As you know, he has turned up on Q&A on a number of different occasions. I believe that many times he has been questioned on the NBN.

**Senator URQUHART:** The IT website Delimiter reported last Friday on 23 May:

This week it emerged that the ABC delayed publishing until after the federal election last year an article by *Lateline* co-host Emma Alberici that was sharply critical of the coalition's alternative national broadband network policy and ended up being one of the broadcaster's most popular pieces of content on the topic. The piece was entitled 'Can the Coalition's NBN keep pace with change?' It appears to have been initially written in August or early September 2013.

Is the claim correct that the content was prepared before the election but not published until after it?

**Mr Scott:** Let me talk broadly. I am not across the specifics. In my experience in newsrooms and news operations, many times stories are created and then they are often held because there are other more pressing news stories that have to go to air. They run when there is a window to run them. I think it is fair to say—I do not want to verbal the current minister or the previous minister, who had long carriage for NBN—but I think from time to time they have both been sharply critical of the ABC's coverage of the NBN. It is one of those issues that I think we have found hard to keep ministers happy on over time. But we just have to exercise—

**Senator URQUHART:** I find that really hard to believe.

**Mr Scott:** our judgement as we see fit. But I want to go back to where I started. There is no overarching policy or direction around coverage of NBN issues. Our editors, our executive producers and our journalists exercise their editorial judgement under the window of our editorial policies on which they operate on all stories.

**Senator URQUHART:** Thanks. The same online Delimiter claims that an analysis of NBN related coverage on three of the ABC's top flagship current affairs programs over the past 18 months has found that only one—and that was *Lateline*—covers the issue regularly or in any detail. Has this claim been investigated by the ABC?

**Mr Scott:** Well, it has been investigated.

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**Senator URQUHART:** Does it have any substance?

**Mr Scott:** We have said that we have produced over 150 NBN stories across radio and television news and current affairs and online since September last year. It does not sound to me like we are avoiding the topic at all.

**Senator URQUHART:** So are you suggesting that that does not have any substance?

**Mr Scott:** I am not a close student of the blog or the website, but I am aware that there are people in the technology press who would like us to cover NBN issues all day every day. Our editors and producers make their editorial judgement. They have no overarching instructions in doing so.

**Senator Fifield:** Are you a fan of this blog, Senator Urquhart?

**Senator URQUHART:** Absolutely. Of course I am. I am very tech savvy—not. I am not sure that I clearly understand what you said. Why was the Alberici story held over?

**Mr Scott:** Well, I do not know the specifics on it. All I am saying is that it is by no means infrequent that a story is completed in newsrooms and is there ready to run but it is held for a period of time. It is usually held for a period of time because there is breaking news, there are more pressing stories or there are issues of the day that bump it out of the way.

**Senator URQUHART:** I ask you to take up some more detail on notice.

**Answer:**

The article was an analysis of an area of disputed policy. The Head of Current Affairs made an editorial decision that it was not appropriate to publish this piece on the ABC's Analysis and Opinion site, *The Drum*, one or two days before the Federal election. Although written as analysis, not opinion, it was felt that it could have been interpreted by some as the ABC or the author taking a position on a contentious issue during the election campaign. The article was subsequently published after the election.