

Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications
Answers to Senate Estimates Questions on Notice
Supplementary Budget Estimates Hearings November 2013
Communications Portfolio
Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Question No: 126

Program No. ABC

Hansard Ref: Page 51-52 (19/11/2013)

Topic: ABC Fact Check unit

Senator Ruston asked:

Mr Scott: Let me see what I can find here. I have some information on the fact-checking unit. It has been operational from just before the election campaign. There have been numbers of stories that you will have seen have appeared on it—about 70 stories. I do not have the precise staffing level here now; but, yes, it has produced 70 stories over two months. The top 20 stories were viewed a total of 650,000 times online. I must say that, even though there were some suggestions here that this would be a very controversial undertaking, I think it has proven not to be the case. I am very happy with its performance. Unlike some other fact-checking units that have emerged I do not think it is particularly florid in how it executes its work. It is pretty factual and fact based. One of the things I am particularly pleased with about it is that, in addition to the staff that we have employed, we have a robust panel of advisers around economic matters and also around broader political matters that our staff can go to as a reference point. I can give you details around the exact staffing numbers on notice.

Every now and again I see a reference to a \$10 million fact-checking unit. That is emphatically untrue, as the answer on notice will show you. We had numbers of things that were done out of the funding that was provided, which was a funding total of \$10 million including regional staff, specialist staff, regional offices that we were opening and the fact-checking unit; but I will provide you with the detail of that on notice...

Senator RUSTON: ...Would it be easy to access a copy of what the complaints actually referred to, or not?

Mr Scott: Our complaints are protected by privacy in that we offer privacy to those people who are complaining, and privacy around why. In an answer on notice I might be able to give you a bit of the shape of any complaints. That is fine. But it has been noteworthy for the absence of complaints. The ABC has a well honed complaints policy. There will be times when we get numbers of complaints—although I would say, on the back of this election campaign, given the amount of coverage we were doing we had really relatively few complaints, and the complaints were actually quite even-handed in their outcome. I am happy to give you a bit more detail.

Senator RUSTON: What would be really quite an interesting comparison would be, broadly, what the content or the nature of the complaints were as opposed to the specific subjects. For instance, how many of the complaints to your agency were, broadly speaking, directed towards bias?

Mr Scott: Yes, sure.

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Answer:

ABC Fact Check employs approximately 12 full-time equivalent staff. The positions that make up the ABC Fact Check team are listed below:

- Editor
- Presenter
- Senior Researcher / Journalist
- Social Media Producer
- Digital Producer
- Researcher/Writer (x 3 positions)
- Junior Researcher / Writer
- Production Manager
- Administrative Assistant
- Graphic Designer

To date, the \$10 million in funding has enabled ABC News to:

- Create ABC Fact Check
- Create the National Reporting Team for specialist national affairs reportage
- Open new bureaux in Parramatta, Geelong and Ipswich
- Place video journalists in Renmark, Newcastle and Bunbury
- Create camera operator positions in Wollongong, Broome and Alice Springs
- Invest in camera, editing and live linking equipment in all capital city newsrooms and 19 regional locations.

Approximately 64 full time staff have been recruited to support these initiatives.

During the period 5 August 2013 to 7 September 2013, the ABC's independent complaints unit, Audience and Consumer Affairs (A&CA), received 21 complaints related to the ABC Fact Check. Twelve were claims of inaccuracy, five were allegations of bias or lack of balance, three related to news values and one was about technical difficulties from an audience member attempting to contribute to online comments. Twelve of the complaints were also in relation to election coverage.

By way of comparison, during the same period, A&CA received 812 complaints of bias. These included complaints about Australian politics (federal and state), international affairs, sport, science and other matters. 481 of these complaints were specifically in relation to election coverage. Of these, 204 were claims of pro-Coalition/ anti-ALP bias, 228 were complaints of pro-ALP/ anti-Coalition bias, and 49 were unspecified or alleged other bias.