

Complaints by Matt Berkley to the BBC about More or Less, the respected and award-winning radio programme about statistics, and other false reporting of global poverty research

Text last updated 10 December 2012

Below are extracts from and then the full text of an email I sent on 6 December 2012.

The email is to Fraser Steel, Head of Complaints at the BBC.

It requests further investigation into a complaint of factual errors, imbalance of contributors and other breaches of editorial guidelines in an edition of More or Less. The programme claimed the edition "scrutinised" how poverty is measured for the Millennium Goals.

It comments on a factually inaccurate reply by Richard Vadon, the current editor of More or Less.

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The complaint-handling complaint had been about the failure of the BBC to reply at all to the editorial complaint and more than one complaint-handling complaint for non-response, over a period of five months.[...]

The argument "we could not cover everything" has nothing to do with the fact that the BBC has given factually wrong information on what the Goal is, its monitoring methodology and results or the fact that the first two of these errors combine to create a misleading bias towards the economic method used by the World Bank.

On available space within the More or Less 2012 programme and article, they used time and words on the BBC's erroneous ideas that the World Bank had taken special steps to collect prices faced by the poor and implying that needs were taken into account over time, which was not true.

It is hard to see how giving the correct information would have taken longer.

Further large amounts of time and words were devoted to the idea that the line was too low, so it seems odd to imply that no other problems could have been discussed.

RV: Take for instance your first point about the use of the term "basket of goods".

MB: [My point] was not about that term - which I did not use - but in fact "Persistent error that the World Bank adjusts for poor people's inflation: "essential items" etc". The words "persistent" and "etc" indicated other terms with similar meaning, and in several items.

RV: You are correct that they use CPI...We chose not to go into that level of complexity...

MB: But the truth was in fact simpler.

...If the BBC knew that the World Bank was stating that they used the CPI rather than looking at prices for the poor, why did the BBC imply strongly in the programme and article that the economists had worked out what it would take to buy certain goods that could be bought in the USA for a dollar, which the More or Less team thus knew was impossible?

RV: ...and instead [we chose] just to say an essential basket of goods...

MB: That is not true. The team clearly did not choose to "just say" "an essential basket of goods" - they used other terms with similar meaning. The impression given as a whole by the relevant sections in the programme and article dealing with prices and inflation were misleading, using a range of terms such as "basket of food".

Having mischaracterised my point about inflation as if it related to one term, Mr Vadon here mischaracterises what the BBC said.

RV: ...because we thought it was clearer to the non-expert.

MB: ...To a non-expert, the programme and articles clearly indicated prices for the poor were researched when they were not.

The BBC wrongly presented a complex story rather than stating the simple fact: the researchers do not have prices faced by the poor.

RV: The Office for National Statistics uses the term basket of goods in describing what CPI [sic]...

MB: Inaccurate. They use the term "basket of goods and services". I am surprised that the editor of Money Box does not know that.

Anyone familiar with the long-running argument between the World Bank research director on the one hand and Sanjay Reddy and Thomas Pogge on the other, which began ten years ago, knows that the latter make the point that it is the cheap services of the poor themselves (because they are paid little) which may be artificially biasing the virtual exchange rates used by the World Bank so that the dollar may be overvalued for the extremely poor. Whether this changes over time - and changes over time are the whole point of the MDG exercise - is not known.

RV...so this seems entirely reasonable.

MB: Mr Vadon's word "this" refers to the inaccurate statement that the team chose "just" to say "essential basket...".

RV: Many of your other criticisms are because we did not focus on the problems with dollar-a-day that you feel are most important.

MB...In fact my criticism was that the BBC has as a whole failed to consider problems which in reality a) academics have stated are important and/or b) are fairly obvious common-sense issues such as whether poverty is adequately assessed by looking at what people spend but not whether that spending is financed by asset sales or debts. It is hardly a big demand to make given the fact that the financial crisis grew in the context of economists ignoring this kind of thing in their assessments of prosperity.

...More or Less in 2007 and the two Dollar a Day series failed as well. As it turns out, there is a whole lot more BBC output that fails to challenge the World Bank in these ways, which are reasonably obvious to a person who does not assume that official statements are true or comprehensive.

...Mr Vadon here also fails to answer the types of allegation I made which are not about problems with the method, but, for example, problems in the BBC's reporting of the wrong statistical trend, or imbalance of contributors. [...]

RV: But having considered your points I have decided to make one small change. The use of the word essential in describing the basket of goods could be misinterpreted as I take your point that much of the CPI is not essential for life. I am not sure if it misleads the audience in any real way but I have asked the online team to remove it just in case.

MB: First, on whether the readership is misled, see [below in the full text of the email of 6 December] and my previous submissions on prices and inflation. Second, if that word is wrong, why not change it in the 2012 programme and the translated article as well? Third, why leave the other parts which imply the same thing unchanged? Fourth, why no comment about the same error in 2007 and 2008? Do those instances not at least provide a context for the errors in 2012?

Also, the BBC has now introduced another inaccuracy. As well as changing the page without acknowledgement, the page now reads with an inaccurate date for "last updated".

RV: I'm sorry that it took so long for your complaint to reach the More or Less team. Your email to Ruth Alexander went to the BBC Scotland Ruth Alexander unfortunately.

MB: Misleading. There was no delay in the complaint reaching the team, because I sent it myself by email. Mr Vadon wrote to me a few days beforehand that it did not reach him at all. So this should read "did not reach us despite three complaint handling complaints". Further, the emails to Ms Alexander and to him were on the same date, so are irrelevant to complaint handling complaints not being answered.

I therefore consider the complaint handling complaints, as well as the editorial complaint of May and my additions of November, essentially unanswered.

From: Matt Berkley <matt@mattberkley.com>
Date: 6 December 2012 17:58
Subject: Request for further investigation
To: fraser.steel@bbc.co.uk, jessica.cecil@bbc.co.uk

Dear Mr Steel,

I request further investigation of my editorial complaint of 27 May with additions from November, answered as below by Richard Vadon, editor of More or Less, on 8 November. I comment on his reply.

The complaint was of bias, factual error and/or other breaches of BBC editorial guidelines over an extended period in coverage of global poverty.

I also request investigation into the handling of all my related complaints and complaint-handling complaints.

Yours sincerely,

Matt Berkley

Utrecht, Netherlands.

RV: I am sorry for the delay replying but I have now had the time to consider and research your complaint.

MB: (CH) That is a pointless apology. There was no significant delay in Mr Vadon's replying after a few days. The complaint-handling complaint had been about the failure of the BBC to reply at all to the editorial complaint and more than one complaint-handling complaint for non-response, over a period of five months. That is a matter which needs an explanation and apology - as is the quality of Mr Vadon's reply. He should have taken longer to get his facts right.

RV: Firstly I think it would be helpful to make it clear what we were trying to do with the radio piece and the online article. The idea was to explain to a non-expert audience the history of dollar-a-day and to raise some of the problems surrounding it. We had a few minutes of radio and a few hundred words of text to put across a complex issue. Such limitations mean you cannot cover everything and you have to simplify things.

MB: I am fully aware of the time and space limitations, and that the material was for a general audience and readership, as my point 3 implied.

The BBC stated that the programme examined and scrutinised the statistic. The programme's stated basis is "what do statistics actually measure?". The significance of this can be seen in context: it is not apparent that the BBC has done such an examination about this use of statistics by the World Bank in any coverage.

My email to Mr Vadon had made clear that the allegations were of factual error, bias and/or other problems over an extended period, using examples from 2007, 2008 and 2012. The BBC did not have "a few minutes" but twelve years to get the facts right and provide a reasonably balanced set of contributors. Instead it chose followers of one tradition in one branch of one academic discipline without challenging it.

The argument "we could not cover everything" has nothing to do with the fact that the BBC has given factually wrong information on what the Goal is, its monitoring methodology and results or the fact that the first two of these errors combine to create a misleading bias towards the economic method used by the World Bank.

On available space within the More or Less 2012 programme and article, they used time and words on the BBC's erroneous ideas that the World Bank had taken special steps to collect prices faced by the poor and implying that needs were taken into account over time, which was not true.

It is hard to see how giving the correct information would have taken longer.

Further large amounts of time and words were devoted to the idea that the line was too low, so it seems odd to imply that no other problems could have been discussed.

RV: Take for instance your first point about the use of the term "basket of goods".

MB: That is an inaccurate characterisation of my point, which was not about that term - which I did not use - but in fact "Persistent error that the World Bank adjusts for poor people's inflation: "essential items" etc". The words "persistent" and "etc" indicated other terms with similar meaning, and in several items.

RV: You are correct that they use CPI.

MB: Mr Vadon is incorrect. As I had already explained in my email, I later discovered that information from the World Bank on which I based that statement turned out not to be correct: the World Bank researchers subsequently gave a different account of their method. I had given him the details.

RV: We chose not to go into that level of complexity...

MB: But the truth was in fact simpler.

On the idea that the team chose not to talk about the CPI:

If the BBC knew that the World Bank was stating that they used the CPI rather than looking at prices for the poor, why did the BBC imply strongly in the programme and article that the economists had worked out what it would take to buy certain goods that could be bought in the USA for a dollar, which the More or Less team thus knew was impossible?

I cannot exclude the possibility that Mr Vadon is incorrect in saying that the More or Less team decided not to say the obvious and short version of what the World Bank was at that time telling the world, which was that they used national inflation rates.

It is not clear who Mr Vadon is referring to when he says "we". The podcast credits Nicola Meyrick, not him, as editor. Perhaps he had some other role in the programme, or perhaps the podcast credit is wrong.

RV: ...and instead [we chose] just to say an essential basket of goods...

MB: That is not true. The team clearly did not choose to "just say" "an essential basket of goods" - they used other terms with similar meaning. The impression given as a whole by the relevant sections in the programme and article dealing with prices and inflation were misleading, using a range of terms such as "basket of food".

Having mischaracterised my point about inflation as if it related to one term, Mr Vadon here mischaracterises what the BBC said.

RV: ...because we thought it was clearer to the non-expert.

MB: I am unable to exclude the possibility that Mr Vadon is somehow wrongly representing the BBC's decision here.

The sections in the 2012 article and programme about economists - which are naturally taken to refer to the economists looking at the "extremely poor" - collecting hundreds of prices are clearly unnecessarily complex and misleading.

In reality the economists claiming to look at poverty merely (as it turned out according to the World Bank's revised information from later in 2012, only for the period 1990-2005) took the conversion rates already calculated for whole economies by the International Comparison Programme.

At the time of broadcast, the output of the World Bank for public consumption clearly stated, as I wrote originally, that they used the CPI rates. To a non-expert, the programme and articles clearly indicated prices for the poor were researched when they were not.

The BBC wrongly presented a complex story rather than stating the simple fact: the researchers do not have prices faced by the poor.

RV: The Office for National Statistics uses the term basket of goods in describing what CPI [sic]...

MB: Inaccurate. They use the term "basket of goods and services". I am surprised that the editor of Money Box does not know that.

Anyone familiar with the long-running argument between the World Bank research director on the one hand and Sanjay Reddy and Thomas Pogge on the other, which began ten years ago, knows that the latter make the point that it is the cheap services of the poor themselves (because they are paid little) which may be artificially biasing the virtual exchange rates used by the World Bank so that the dollar may be overvalued for the extremely poor. Whether this changes over time - and changes over time are the whole point of the MDG exercise - is not known.

RV...so this seems entirely reasonable.

MB: Mr Vadon's word "this" refers to the inaccurate statement that the team chose "just" to say "essential basket...".

RV: Many of your other criticisms are because we did not focus on the problems with dollar-a-day that you feel are most important.

MB: what is this ad-hominem argument about someone's motivation doing in an answer to an editorial complaint about inaccuracy and bias?

Mr Vadon has engaged here in speculation without knowing what I think is important.

In fact my criticism was that the BBC has as a whole failed to consider problems which in reality a) academics have stated are important and/or b) are fairly obvious common-sense issues such as whether poverty is adequately assessed by looking at what people spend but not whether that spending is financed by asset sales or debts. It is hardly a big demand to make given the fact that the financial crisis grew in the context of economists ignoring this kind of thing in their assessments of prosperity.

My email did not just say that More or Less in 2012 failed in this regard. It is that More or Less in 2007 and the two Dollar a Day series failed as well. As it turns out, there is a whole lot more BBC output that fails to challenge the World Bank in these ways, which are reasonably obvious to a person who does not assume that official statements are true or comprehensive.

Mr Vadon here also fails to answer the types of allegation I made which are not about problems with the method, but, for example, problems in the BBC's reporting of the wrong statistical trend, or imbalance of contributors.

RV: We raise some problems that even you concede make counterbalancing points.

MB: I do not know what problems he is talking about here, or how many, or what he thinks is counterbalanced.

RV: However we cannot cover every aspect of this topic in journalism of this kind.

MB: Repetitious use of invalid argument "we cannot cover everything therefore we cannot cover X".

RV: Your complaint is far longer than the original article.

MB: Misleading in several respects. Firstly, Mr Vadon ignores the More or Less programme from 2012. Secondly, he ignores the other items mentioned as having similar problems. Thirdly, Mr Vadon appears to refer misleadingly to the email to him as "your complaint". In reality this email contained additional observations and suggestions in the light of the BBC's repeated failure to answer the original complaint or complaint-handling complaints.

The original complaint followed the procedure specified on the More or Less web page, which was to submit a complaint via the 1500-character web form.

That complaint was not answered at all, and nor were two complaint-handling complaints of non-response to that complaint. For all I knew, a reason for non-response could have been that the number of problems alleged mitigated against clarity given the 1500-character limit.

The email to News Online forwarded to Mr Vadon, and some of the text of the email to him, contained not just an editorial complaint but other material including suggestions on how the BBC might proceed given its multiple failures; and an explanation of the current political context.

RV: We chose to write one kind of article you could have chosen to write a different one with a different critique both would be equally valid.

MB: Irrelevant speculation. Again fails to mention any other items.

RV: I think Ruth Alexander's article is an excellent introduction to the subject.

MB: What about the other items I mentioned?

RV: But having considered your points I have decided to make one small change. The use of the word essential in describing the basket of goods could be misinterpreted as I take your point that much of the CPI is not essential for life. I am not sure if it misleads the audience in any real way but I have asked the online team to remove it just in case.

MB: First, on whether the readership is misled, see above and my previous submissions on prices and inflation. Second, if that word is wrong, why not change it in the 2012 programme and the translated article as well? Third, why leave the other parts which imply the same thing unchanged? Fourth, why no comment about the same error in 2007 and 2008? Do those instances not at least provide a context for the errors in 2012?

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Appendix: Full text of response from Richard Vadon, editor of More or Less, 8 November 2012, with correspondence to which he was replying:

I am sorry for the delay replying but I have now had the time to consider and research your complaint.

Firstly I think it would be helpful to make it clear what we were trying to do with the radio piece and the online article. The idea was to explain to a non-expert audience the history of dollar-a-day and to raise some of problems surrounding it. We had a few minutes of radio and a few hundred words of text to put across a complex issue. Such limitations mean you cannot cover everything and you have to simplify things.

Take for instance your first point about the use of the term "basket of goods". You are correct that they use CPI. We chose not to go into that level of complexity and instead just to say an essential basket of goods because we thought it was clearer to the non-expert. The Office for National Statistics uses the term basket of goods in describing what CPI so this seems entirely reasonable.

Many of your other criticisms are because we did not focus on the problems with dollar-a-day that you feel are most important. We raise some problems that even you concede make counterbalancing points. However we cannot cover every aspect of this topic in journalism of this kind. Your complaint is far longer than the original article. We chose to write one kind of article you could have chosen to write a different one with a different critique both would be equally valid.

I think Ruth Alexander's article is an excellent introduction to the subject. But having considered your points I have decided to make one small change. The use of the word essential in describing the basket of goods could be misinterpreted as I take your point that much of the CPI is not essential for life. I am not sure if it misleads the audience in any real way but I have asked the online team to remove it just in case.

I'm sorry that it took so long for your complaint to reach the More or Less team. Your email to Ruth Alexander went to the BBC Scotland Ruth Alexander unfortunately.

Regards

Richard Vadon

Editor

More or Less & Money Box

BBC Radio Current Affairs

Work 020 3614 0969

Mobile 07718585101

Twitter @richardvadon

From: mattberkley@gmail.com [mailto:mattberkley@gmail.com] On Behalf Of Matt Berkley

Sent: 01 November 2012 22:59

To: Richard Vadon

Subject: Request for on-air corrections: More or Less

Dear Mr Vadon,

Thank you for your reply.

The original complaint was as follows.

.....

Summary: Request for on-air correction: global poverty

Global poverty errors

More or Less, World Service 3 Mar.

Web: "Dollar benchmark" 9 Mar; "El Problema..." 10 Mar.

Perhaps other items.

Guidelines: Accuracy, including links. Impartiality. Editorial integrity online. Controversial subjects. Range of views: 4.4.7. Major matters. Assumption and bias: 4.4.14. Range of links: 14.4.19.

1. Persistent error that World Bank estimate inflation for the poor: "basket of essential goods", etc. They use CPI.

2. "Essential" may mislead. Bank does not estimate any consumption-need trend.

3. "Consumption" misleads a general audience.

4. Erroneous implication that Bank can assess progress on Goal 1 without FAO, WHO-UNICEF and ILO estimates on nutrition and employment. Conflation of goal with subsidiary money target or indicator. No challenge to Bank research director's errors on these matters in person and in a link.

5. Failure to note WB stats are outliers for Goal 1's and all goals' indicators.

6. Did Bank "recalculate everything" in respect of trends?

7. Economist and Bank/ex-Bank speaker imbalances, including presenter. Links unbalanced.

8. Reasonable steps not taken to "scrutinise" (More or Less, 10 Mar) or assess, statistic for data reliability; survey comparability over time; what is included (housing, public services, etc); or relationship to real life (assets, debts, needs).

9. Failure to question whether

a) "the target's been met";

b) people were richer if crossed the line;

c) their money buys more or less.

.....

I append further details below.

The email of yesterday to News Online, which forms the bulk of the text appended, contains further observations, requests and suggestions in light of BBC delays.

My intention in sending these observations and suggestions to you is that they should inform the BBC investigation.

Where relevant, the intention is that the World Service and any BBC staff dealing with these complaints would work in a similarly productive way to what I outlined to News Online: liaison between the parts of the BBC, and prioritising remedy.

The priority I suggest is the following: that the BBC act to nullify the effects of the contribution it has made to confusion in the world as to both what the World Bank evidence is for its claims and any false implications that may have been drawn as a result.

One kind of consequence is on people's beliefs about what kind of information macroeconomists in general in reality have had for claims about the benefits of policies or countries' progress when talking about income or consumption levels or adequacy among the poorest.

There is at least one other error in the programme. It cited the World Bank's claim for the \$1 level as the Millennium Goal indicator trend, which had a faster reported fall; the actual basis of the indicator is at the \$1.25 level.

Is there in addition systematic bias?

Having listed all these errors and problems, I find it hard not to think that there is systematic bias:

- overwhelmingly toward listening to World Bank and ex-World Bank contributors rather than critics of the approach;

- overwhelmingly toward asking economists;

- overwhelmingly toward a current fashion in macroeconomics whose axiom is that the more people spend, the richer they must be - which was proven unwise in the extreme by the financial crisis which followed people spending borrowed money;

- greatly exaggerating the importance of one World Bank indicator among nine monitored by various organisations for MDG1, through wrongly presenting it as "the goal";

- exaggerating the World Bank claim of progress towards the target by using the wrong dollar level;

- exaggerating the relevance of World Bank data to finding out about trends in consumption levels among people who may be severely malnourished, by wrongly talking about a "basket of essential goods" and failing to note either the absence of the use of any such basket before 2005 or that poor people's prices for such "basket" items were not researched;

- exaggerating by wrongly using the word "essential" the known relevance of the data on spending to consumption adequacy in light of demographic trends towards more food being needed per person as child/adult ratios decline, and towards paying rent in cities.

There may be some features of the programme which counterbalance these errors by erring in the opposite direction and so underestimate the quality of work at the World Bank, the relevance of the data to what people could buy, the relevance of the one indicator to the goal, the appropriateness of relying on one fashion in one subdivision of one academic subject and so on; but I am not sure how that would add up.

Other programmes

Several of the problems in relation to BBC guidelines also apply to the article by the More or Less reporter Mukul Devichand in 2007 and perhaps to the programme linked to that article.

Those problems include the error about prices and inflation; and the imbalance of contributors towards World Bank and ex-World Bank employees.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/7122356.stm>

There are similar errors on prices and inflation in the programme "Dollar a Day" broadcast on the World Service on 11 April 2008 and perhaps in a shorter version on Radio 4 on 5 July 2008.

http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/aboutus/2008/04/080411_dollar_a_day_china.shtml

http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/podcasts/worldservice/docarchive/docarchive_20080411-2038.mp3

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0090qmb>

To be fair, at the end of the podcast of that edition of "Dollar a Day", the reporter Mike Wooldridge did raise with the World Bank economist one problem which I mention: the claims ignore declining land ownership levels.

However, the World Bank macroeconomist was left with the last word; he unfortunately represented the issue of land loss as only one of vulnerability rather than as also of economic loss, and then confused the issue by talking about people moving in and out of poverty. He was not challenged again with the obvious idea that if your assets are lower than last year, other things being equal you are clearly worse off economically; or with any of the consequences of having less land, such as having to pay rent.

Further notes

1. I am aware that the programme's publicity raised a question about whether the figures did more harm than good.

But that question was restricted to

a) whether the amount was too low,

b) a related question about whether people's lives were much better if they just crossed the line,

rather than

c) whether the method had a sensible relationship to real life or

d) whether it was biased.

Simply by omitting obvious real-life features of people's economic status, it is structurally biased towards countries where costs rise relative to incomes; where people lose land; where food needs go up. The idea that a sceptic would need to prove these things are significant would be crazy, when it is the scientist making claims who is using assumptions that they are not.

2. First minute of the programme: The words "a common standard" and the reference to "the estimates" being updated mislead in the impression given of the variety or otherwise of views or research on this topic.

3. The section "more accurate price information.... they recalculated everything..." may have falsely implied, or have been reasonably taken to imply, that price information for years prior to 2005 was improved.

In conjunction with the overall error that a "basket of essential goods" was used for the long-term trends, this might give a listener reasonable cause to believe a false idea that previous data (which has in reality been compiled for no year) on actual prices faced by the poor was improved in 2008 by better data for those years.

The object of the exercise was ostensibly to compare consumption-adequacy levels in 1990 with subsequent years. Improvement of price data for 2005 or 2008 does not help the World Bank's difficulties that the price inflation data are wholly from the CPIs before the nominal compilation date of 2005 for surveys and of no known relevance to the poor for any year.

Dr Ravallion may reply that the research by Deaton and Dupriez for 2005 prices showed little difference between the CPI and an index for items the poor buy.

My response is that he still does not know price trends for the poor, and he still has not thought about whether people's needs went up or down.

The point of the exercise is about trends, not one year; we do not know what cumulative differences there were between inflation rates for basics versus luxuries over the period 1990-2005, even if it were possible to agree what the basics were; and as Deaton and Dupriez acknowledge, they did not look at prices faced by the poor for those "basket" items even for 2005. The only "basket" exercises that have been done are their estimates for reweightings of items in the CPI which may not reflect actual prices faced by the poor for the quantities they require, and Dr Ravallion's use of food prices since 2005 for some countries.

4. "...this number...it became the first United Nations Millennium Development Goal to "halve between 1990 and 2015 the proportion of people whose income is less than a dollar a day".

Comments: This misleads on what is required officially to assess progress on Goal 1. The goal is to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. It does not mention income. It is not to halve anything. It has indicators monitored by WHO/UNICEF, the ILO, the World Bank and FAO, not just the World Bank.

a) The dollar a day number did not "become" the goal. It became one indicator of a total of nine for progress towards the goal.

b) MDG 1 is not to "halve...the proportion of people whose income is less than a dollar a day". That is a subsidiary target.

Why does this matter? The original complaint said there was a failure to note that the World Bank statistics are outliers for the goal and for all goals' indicators. That means the claimed trend is out in the front of the indicators as a whole. The FAO estimates are not very good either, but it is a gross distortion to single out one indicator which has fast reported progress and say it is the goal.

Similar errors appear later: it is said that if China is removed, the world has not "met" the goal; while the passage "And we've got some news on that first Millennium Goal" is followed by numbers wrongly limited to one indicator out of nine. These errors are being reinforced in the listener's mind by repetition.

5. The "news on the goal" is also followed by the wrong trend from the World Bank for the Millennium Goal indicator, which error exaggerated the actual claim the World Bank makes about progress on the indicator. The passage, "the global poverty line....31%...2008....less than half...14%" presented figures from the World Bank's

claim about the \$1 level. This contradicted both the BBC's and the World Bank employee's mentioning that the \$1.25 statistic is what is used for the MDG indicator.

6. The presenter said "Three cheers for economic growth, then" just after the World Bank research director spoke of worse progress for the trends at a higher level than a dollar a day. The presenter's comment was apparently based on the idea that people must be better off if they spend more.

In the forwarded version of the email below, I have removed blank lines for the sake of clarity. If you receive it again from News Online as I requested them to ensure, please note that the text is the same.

Here is an extract from the email I sent to Ruth Alexander earlier today:

"You will see from the details listed in the complaint of 26 October, also appended below, that the BBC appears to have had some communication or other difficulties in rectifying the situation outlined in the original complaint, and perhaps in sending information to the people who can investigate it.

Given the passage of time since the original complaint, and the possible urgency of a correction by the BBC in time for the current High-Level Panel on post-2015 global goals to be guided by an informed public, perhaps you would agree that the most constructive thing would be if the BBC could act with some speed.

I am therefore sending you this email with the request that you make sure that the appropriate management staff are aware of the original request, which was to take a step which I presume only senior management can decide on - of making a broadcast correction."

What I am referring to is the hope that given its history with this complaint, and the nature of the subject matter, the BBC will choose appropriate principles to guide its response, including direct communication and clarification between parts of the BBC and between the BBC and myself. I say that in the expectation that some of what I say here may need further information or explanation from me.

All communication will need to be by email.

Yours sincerely,

Matt Berkley

Utrecht, Netherlands

.....
On 1 November 2012 16:04, Richard Vadon <richard.vadon@bbc.co.uk> wrote:

My presenter Tim Harford sent me your email about a problem you have with something we have on global poverty. Could you send me the detail of the complaint? I'm sorry if you have sent it already but it hasn't made it to me.

I apologise for any delay and will respond quickly to your reply.

Richard Vadon

----- Forwarded message -----

From: Matt Berkley <matt@mattberkley.com>

Date: 31 October 2012 09:21

Subject: Re: FW: Complaint handling. No response on global poverty.

To: NewsOnline Complaints <newsonline.complaints@bbc.co.uk>

Dear News Online,

Request for on-air correction on global poverty: factual error in the World Service programme More or Less, and its accompanying News Online article

Thank you for the response of 29 October to my complaint of 27 May.

Below are the original complaint and URLs you requested.

The News Online article and its translation into Spanish were linked to the World Service programme; the writer of the former, Ruth Alexander, was the producer of the latter.

Please therefore send this message to the World Service complaints team and the team for the World Service programme More or Less.

Please also send this message to Audience Services so that it is clear to them that I am not aware of the overall BBC approach to my complaint, having heard nothing from the World Service. Audience Services have not informed me whether that part of the complaint is being or will be dealt with.

Those requests are intended, in view of the failures to answer this complaint, to ensure that liaison can be prompt and effective on investigating the allegations and rectifying all problems caused by the BBC's errors.

.....

Note to BBC News Online, World Service and Audience Services:

Please adopt the principle of rectifying the situation to (as far as common sense can determine) what the situation in the world would have been had the BBC taken reasonable steps to provide the correct information on global poverty monitoring in past years as well as these recent items.

Please let me know if the BBC does not intend to take that approach.

The BBC appears never to have reported correctly the facts about official claims of progress on global poverty since 2000.

Please bear in mind also that the BBC's failure to report correctly, or alternatively its rectifying the situation, could have already played and may still play a significant role in current discussions on global post-2015 goals.

.....

Problem: BBC has, for instance, falsely stated that the World Bank uses a "basket of essential items" to determine prices paid by poor people in different countries at different times, and has never stated the correct position in its reporting since 2000. BBC has failed to ask basic questions of those providing the information.

Possible/likely effect on the real world: See section "Why is this important?" below.

Suggested solutions would include: a) Immediate provision of the correct information with prominence designed to counterbalance negative effects of the misreporting, exacerbated by several months' delay in responding to original request for correction.

b) Special programme or series investigating the truth of these matters.

The original complaint was as follows.

.....

Summary: Request for on-air correction: global poverty

Global poverty errors

More or Less, World Service 3 Mar.

Web: "Dollar benchmark" 9 Mar; "El Problema..." 10 Mar.

Perhaps other items.

Guidelines: Accuracy, including links. Impartiality. Editorial integrity online. Controversial subjects. Range of views: 4.4.7. Major matters. Assumption and bias: 4.4.14. Range of links: 14.4.19.

1. Persistent error that World Bank estimate inflation for the poor: "basket of essential goods", etc. They use CPI.

2. "Essential" may mislead. Bank does not estimate any consumption-need trend.

3. "Consumption" misleads a general audience.

4. Erroneous implication that Bank can assess progress on Goal 1 without FAO, WHO-UNICEF and ILO estimates on nutrition and employment. Conflation of goal with subsidiary money target or indicator. No challenge to Bank research director's errors on these matters in person and in a link.

5. Failure to note WB stats are outliers for Goal 1's and all goals' indicators.

6. Did Bank "recalculate everything" in respect of trends?

7. Economist and Bank/ex-Bank speaker imbalances, including presenter. Links unbalanced.

8. Reasonable steps not taken to "scrutinise" (More or Less, 10 Mar) or assess, statistic for data reliability; survey comparability over time; what is included (housing, public services, etc); or relationship to real life (assets, debts, needs).

9. Failure to question whether

a) "the target's been met";

b) people were richer if crossed the line;

c) their money buys more or less.

.....

The News Online URLs for pages to which I referred are:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-17312819>

http://www.bbc.co.uk/mundo/noticias/2012/03/120309_economia_politica_un_dolar_bd.shtml

The second is a Spanish version of the first.

The phrase "perhaps other items" refers to the possibility that there were, for instance, other items on BBC News Online making similarly inaccurate reports. That is not a high priority in terms of timing.

The priority is for the named items to be examined, a common-sense appraisal to be made of likely real-world effects of the misinformation, and appropriate action to rectify the problems.

.....

Why is this important? Public belief in wrong information on global poverty

As correctly implied by the presenter's introduction for the World Service programme, this matter affects many people's lives, and perhaps whether some people live or die.

That is because if the public and/or public servants and/or others are misinformed on official information about global poverty, they may accept or urge policies which are not helping the poor, worse than alternatives, or damaging to the poor. They may do this because either:

i) they believe on the basis of false media reports that there is more reliable information about progress than there is in reality, thus acquiring false ideas about what has been achieved by current politicians and policies;

and/or because

ii) they are led to believe, by implication from those false media reports, that economists' information is better than it is in reality as to which policies have more positive effects on the consumption adequacy, assets, debts, and/or other aspect of economic life of the poor.

Point (ii) follows because unsurprisingly:

Economists use the same kind of survey data - without relevant price data, or any estimate of changing needs or any estimate of how far the people are spending money they have earned or money they have borrowed or raised by selling assets rather than becoming richer - for policy recommendations.

That should not surprise anyone because if the World Bank which compiles the data from the national statistical offices do not have information about poor people's prices, needs, assets, shared assets or debts over the last 20 years, then clearly it is unlikely that any economist had such information when they advised governments or the public that a policy is better or worse for the poor.

[The BBC may wish to consider the fact that while the financial crisis was building up over the years to 2008, economists thought prosperity was rising because GDP per capita rose - without looking at how much of the spending was financed by debt. A simple and devastating mistake. The BBC might consider whether it is unreasonable to question experts who make assumptions of a similar nature in relation to poverty as were made in relation to prosperity.]

The BBC's reporting of the situation as regards the truth behind the World Bank statements therefore has further implications for democratic scrutiny and contributions to solving or otherwise the problems of world poverty.

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Please do not delay further rectifying the political situation caused by the BBC.

This section identifies a risk of what may happen internally at the BBC concerning this complaint. It presents the information using several different forms of words in the hope that it will be well understood.

The BBC could make the problem it has caused worse by prioritising matters relating to its own performance rather than giving attention to rectifying the problem.

The intent of my communications on this matter is that for reasons which may be obvious:

- the first priority must be to publish and broadcast corrected information in an effective way as outlined below and

- the questions on the BBC's performance can be tackled second.

I suggest that any institutional desire to save face, discover what went wrong with the original broadcast and onlin items, discover what went wrong in the complaints process, or use time on apologies or explanations for failures, be left for later.

The contents of this email are designed to encourage a prompt and appropriate rectification of the original problem.

If this principle of proceeding without further delay due to distractions is not explicitly accepted by the BBC staff dealing with this complaint then I request that I be informed immediately.

Otherwise, given the failures which have already occurred in relation to the original complaint, and the points in the present email, and absent any convincing explanation by the BBC, I may regard as deliberately obstructive any delay in dealing with the original complaint which a BBC employee may ascribe to

a) dealing with the complaint about complaint handling

or

b) dealing with those parts of the original complaint which relate more to problems at the BBC than to the task of rectifying the problems caused by the BBC which need rectifying in the outside world.

In respect of all the points I make here relating to my two basic complaints (original and on complaint handling) it would be counter to my intentions for any points I make about the unsatisfactory nature of any response to be taken as indications that complaints handling matters should in any way hinder or delay the process of the BBC making amends for factual and other errors as described in the original complaint.

.....

Suggestion: Liaison between World Service and News Online

The News Online respondent wrote on 29 October:

"I'm sorry you have not had any response to your complaints concerning global poverty coverage on the BBC News website. Could I ask you to please re-send your complaint, including the URLs, for the news website articles to you which you refer."

I requested on-air correction. That is because the complaint was about not only the article but also the radio programme to which it relates.

The article in English, which was also translated into Spanish, had the byline of the producer/reporter on the programme.

That is why I listed points relating to both media. The producer who wrote the article, and the presenter of the programme who writes books on economics, should have no problem understanding the relevance of the News Online material in conjunction with a transcript of the programme.

I therefore cannot see any viable alternative to News Online liaising with the World Service over the response. I request that you send this email to the World Service as well as to the World Service producer who wrote the News Online article, Ruth Alexander, and to the presenter, Tim Harford.

I have had no response from the World Service to any of my complaints. I have had no indication from the BBC that the part of the complaint which is about the programme is being dealt with.

I therefore request that you send Audience Services this email, so that the responses to both the original complaint and the complaint handling complaint can be coordinated. I am not suggesting that the two complaints be coordinated in the sense of being dealt with together, but that the elements for each be coordinated.

The priority in terms of timing is the rectification of the problem that the public has been given the wrong information, exacerbated by the BBC's delay in responding to the original complaint. I repeat my insistence that the complaint on complaint handling not get in the way of making amends for the situation caused in the real world by the erroneous information.

If there is a risk for some reason that this may happen - that the BBC may end up wasting time on dealing with the complaint handling matter first or on deliberating about its own failures rather than correcting and compensating for the impression given to the audience and readership and harmful effects in the real world on policies to help the poor, I request that the BBC let me know immediately.

.....

Suggestion: BBC carry out brief but appropriate common-sense political analysis of problems caused by the misinformation

If the BBC has misled the public on a matter which the presenter of the programme described as very important, then appropriate amends would appear to consist of rectifying the position to what it would have been had a reasonably responsible report been produced.

That would mean the public being informed with appropriate prominence being given to corrections.

Appropriate prominence would appear to mean:

- a) adequate for the public to be able to understand correctly the position;
- b) voters being able to ask questions of those who make policies or claim success;
- c) the public to be able to question adequately those experts who supply scientific data and/or conclusions as to trends in global poverty; and
- d) the public now to be able to achieve these things as well as if they had been correctly informed by the BBC.

I am not saying that this can be done precisely, but I hope the general principle is clear.

I also hope that given the BBC's failures in reporting the correct facts and questioning officialdom the BBC will take the approach that the appropriate way is to err on the side of caution - to ensure that the public does have the correct information, rather than to risk the public still being under the wrong impression about what information is available on world poverty.

A political analyst at the BBC may be in a better position than broadcast or online news staff to assess the damage and suggest appropriate action.

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Suggestion: BBC political analysis of likely harmful effects of BBC errors and failures to question official information, on post-2015 planning process, to inform appropriate correction

As regards the last point, I suggest that the BBC take special note of the current international discussions on post-2015 global goal setting.

Further delay by the BBC in examining and acting on the original complaint may jeopardise further the chances that those setting goals will understand either the true evidential position on global poverty or the reliability of institutions and methods which may be used in the future.

I hope it is now clear that it is not just the errors, but also the past delays and any future delays in correcting the errors, which may be harmful to billions of people. It is billions because the same methods used for assessing the progress of those identified as the poorest are used for others as well.

I hope it is also now clear that of the points in the original complaint, those in most urgent need of correction are those which relate to the evidential position on global poverty. Other failings of the programme and article such as imbalance of contributors are matters which while important from the point of view of the public understanding what has happened with the BBC's process of making the programme and article, are not so urgent. I have in mind the fact that if the BBC contests some of the points made, the appeal process could take months more.

So I strongly suggest that the appropriate course of action is for the BBC to make initial corrections on matters which are both important and urgent.

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Suggestion: Interim correction within a week

It is easy to check, for example, the BBC's error about a "basket of essential items" in point 1, since the World Bank media release for the news which the BBC was reporting stated that the researchers used the CPI instead:

"The researchers first convert those numbers to local currency units using the purchasing-power parity rate, and then convert the line to the prices prevailing at the time of each household survey, using the best available Consumer Price Index."

<http://econ.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTDEC/0,,contentMDK:23129612~pagePK:64165401~piPK:64165026~theSitePK:469372,00.html>

The World Bank research director, Dr Ravallion, did later (after my complaint, which gave a correct account according to all the available information from the World Bank) give a different account of his method, stating that he had used food prices for some countries in the last few years.

But he does not have specific prices faced by the poor even for food for any year. A simple telephone call to him can confirm all this, and if there is any doubt his methodology papers can be consulted.

I suggest that for this error, and the obvious errors such as that about whether it is the goal or the target or just the indicator which has achieved the intention, it would be extremely easy for the BBC to find out the truth and broadcast it with appropriate prominence as described, and for the reasons, above.

I see no reason why this cannot be done within a week.

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Suggested interim correction

In view of the urgency due to current discussions on post-2015 goals, a suggested initial approach to rectifying the problem is as follows.

1: Principle to adopt

The BBC's multiple delays in responding to the request for correction have resulted in a longer period in which influential people may have been under a false impression at a time when the post-2015 agenda is being drawn up.

Therefore the appropriate principles to inform decisions on action would include the corrections being given greater prominence than the original erroneous items, guided as outlined above by a common-sense political analysis of how to rectify the likely damage from the BBC's failures over many years to report the correct situation.

2: Substance

Text for interim on-air and online announcements could be along the following lines.

"Contrary to the information in the World Service programme.... and in a News Online article, the World Bank does not have information on global trends in poor people's prices. They have not been monitoring, as the BBC claimed, prices for a basket of essential items.

"The "dollar a day" monitoring for the Millennium Goal does not measure consumption in the ordinary sense of the word but largely spending. Economists call this consumption expenditure. Contrary to the impression given by the BBC, economists do not know what poor people could buy with their money in 1990 compared with 2010 and so cannot know what people consumed.

"Secondly, the World Bank do not consider how much of each item is essential, even though this may vary due to larger meals being needed as people grow up, or such things as how much they need to spend on rent if they move to cities. The BBC therefore accepts that its use of the word "essential" was misleading.

"Thirdly, the BBC acknowledges that it should have challenged the World Bank research director's erroneous claims that he had measured consumption adequacy and that Millennium Goal 1, which is the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, had been achieved. Other organisations besides the World Bank are responsible for monitoring other parts of Goal 1's targets and the BBC should have pointed out that without those progress towards the goal could not be reported by one organisation."

.....

The failures of the BBC both to carry out its responsibilities in reporting and to act when those failings were pointed out are serious matters, but are for the longer term.

I think people's jobs should be safer if they own up to errors rather than compounding them by failing to put them right. I also think this is an unusually important matter. Do you agree?

Thank you.

Yours sincerely,

Matt Berkley.

On 29 October 2012 21:51, NewsOnline Complaints <newsonline.complaints@bbc.co.uk> wrote:

Dear Mr Berkley,

I'm sorry you have not had any response to your complaints concerning global poverty coverage on the BBC News website. Could I ask you to please re-send your complaint, including the URLs, for the news website articles to you which you refer.

Kind regards,

BBC News website

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/>

From: Audience Services [mailto:bbcaudienceservices@capita.co.uk]

Sent: 26 October 2012 18:32

To: NewsOnline Complaints

Subject: Complaint handling. No response on global poverty.

I have received no response to any of the following complaints. They have the same text - identifying factual error and other problems covered by editorial guidelines in the BBC's analysis of global poverty claims. 27 May: via online web form, CAS-1469786-SX4GR2. 29 August: via online web form, CAS-1654743-M5VHDP. 19 September: telephone 1686513. On the third occasion the staff member taking the call told me that it was very rare for the BBC to fail to respond even once. He asked me whether I wanted to complain about complaint handling. I answered that that was the lesser concern. He told me that he would inform the World Service and online news. It is still the lesser concern, but the fact that both the presenter of the original programme and I identified the matter as a major matter may raise further questions about how this failure to respond has come about. The present complaint is designed to ensure that a different section of the BBC is aware of the original complaint and the BBC's handling of both the original and reminders.

www.mattberkley.com