

Initial response on accuracy and impartiality of BBC Trust response on complaint that “Don’t Panic: How to End Poverty in 15 Years” proposed for publication on 28 July 2016

As with the complaints about BBC output (complaints from 1 November 2012 onwards, when it was explicitly suggested as a problem though never addressed by the BBC) a problem seems to be not just accuracy or impartiality separately, but the possibility that inaccuracies in the Trust’s response may add up to an impartiality problem.

1.

Legitimate expectation that Trust will respond adequately to allegations concerning accuracy and impartiality of its own statements to the public

I do not think the Trust could legitimately argue that it is exempt, in admissibility decisions, from a duty to respond to allegations that it has published or is about to publish misleading information.

It cannot have been, in my view, the intention of the drafters of the Charter and Agreement that Trustees should be held to a lesser standard of accuracy or impartiality than BBC staff whose standards they are supposed to uphold.

If it were, then inaccuracies by the staff could simply be dealt with by inaccuracies from Trustees. I cannot accept that such a situation would have been envisaged as satisfactory by those drafting the Charter and Agreement.

My view is bolstered by the fact that the Trust Unit promised to answer the allegation of inaccuracy in the Trustees’ decision of June 2015 on Woman’s Hour material.

I am still waiting for a substantive response to that allegation.

It is also bolstered by the withdrawal from publication of the Trust decision of January 2016 on More or Less and associated output.

The Trust Unit made a reference to “not offering” appellants the chance to comment on admissibility decisions. However, it seems a reasonable inference from the communications would be that the Trust would reconsider the text to be published. It is not clear what other reason there could have been for the Trust withdrawing the publication for seven weeks or so while saying it would consider the points and respond fully.

2.

Trustees' statement

"the complainant raised a number of new points relating to the programme"

does not seem sufficiently accurate.

I had, for example, raised the point in 2013 that Professor Rosling was claiming the new goal was to eradicate extreme poverty, when the World Bank in fact said it was 3% of world population.

At Stage 1 in November 2015 I had directed the BBC to that previous complaint, which was, and is, unanswered at Stage 2.

3.

In the appellant's view an accurate account of the complaint would include the following:

The appellant asked for clarification within ten working days, but was not given any more time to formulate a response to the Adviser's letter.

An accurate account would reflect this, and not give any impression that points made in the course of asking for clarification were the appellant's substantive response.

4.

The Trustees' account omits a key aspect of the complaint: the reference to "previous complaints". This was clearly important in the context of a complaint that the material contributed to a pattern of BBC imbalance.

The "previous complaints" included unanswered complaints to Audience Services – which Audience Services seemed to recognise on 9 November 2015 as a series of related complaints.

The complaint had referred in particular to the previous complaint unanswered at Stage 2 about the BBC2 programme of 2013, The Truth about Population.

Clearly, since much of the relevant content was similar, the BBC was here being asked to consider the same aspects which appeared in both.

An example was the presentation of a goal as “ending” extreme poverty. In reality the World Bank goal is to bring the proportion below 3%, or about 280 million people.

The BBC had never answered this point, or a mention of a further example of the problem in another complaint of November 2015.

5.

The title: “*Decision of BBC Audience Services not to respond further to a complaint about This World: Don’t Panic – How to End Poverty in 15 Years, BBC Two, 11 October 2015*”

Trustees do not adequately reflect the language of the actual complaint which in fact alleged a BBC-wide problem, in the clear context of “previous complaints”.

Trustees’ statement “*The complaint concerned accuracy and impartiality in a BBC Two documentary*” and the subsequent reference to a point about BBC output, do not properly reflect that the complaint was about whether the programme contributed to accuracy and impartiality of BBC output overall, not whether it breached standards on its own.

The Trustees’ reference to overall BBC output did not properly reflect the specificity of the points previously made to the BBC, or made to the BBC by the time the BBC reply of 28 January 2016 was issued.

6.

Trustees omit a key point from the previous complaint about the “Population” programme to which he had referred the BBC:

Professor Rosling was presenting statistics he himself had rubbished in May 2013, saying the World Bank claims were “plus or minus half a billion” and in terms of “the emperor’s new

clothes”.

The complaint referred to Professor Rosling’s use of the term “data” which seemed to indicate to the audience a higher degree of precision than he himself actually believed. Trustees omit this.

The overall impression, with the figure of “12%” on a chart, seemed inconsistent with his own stated belief.

If I apply the “plus or minus half a billion” proportionally to the “12%” (his comment was about a 1.3 billion estimate, while the 12% seemed to referred to an estimate of about 880 million), I get a range of about 7 to 17%.

The complaint, and the actual situation, was far from the impression given by Trustees of “experts” giving statistics which the complainant thought should be challenged.

The presenter had a specific doubt, and the complainant had a specific complaint about that doubt.

7.

Trustees state I said “*these figures were sourced from the World Bank*”.

I had in fact made clear earlier that Professor Rosling’s “middle billion on \$10” claim came from a Utrecht University paper, not the World Bank.

It is not possible that the “middle billion” being on about “\$10” and the “extreme poverty line” being \$1.25 (which is what the presenter said the line was) were both from the same World Bank method.

The World Bank estimate (on fragile numbers) for the “middle person” was nearer to \$3.50 in those dollars, than to \$10.

8.

Trustees claim the appellant said in effect, “*these figures...were not challenged during the programme*”

Again, the complaint was about whether there was an overall imbalance in BBC output.

9.

“the programme had defined “extreme poverty” as being \$1.85 per day.”

This would help the BBC’s defence of the “\$10” figure, since that “poverty” line would be in weaker “dollars”. But in fact the programme stated that the line was a little more than a dollar.

I do think the charts were based on these weaker “dollars”, even though the presenter, apparently wrongly, referred to them being based on the stronger “dollars” previously used by the World Bank.

The last part of the following page explains the “weak” and “strong” dollars:

<http://blogs.worldbank.org/developmenttalk/international-poverty-line-has-just-been-raised-190-day-global-poverty-basically-unchanged-how-even>

The “Population” programme did use the stronger dollar for the charts, which was why its line was in the wrong place. The proportions on the 2012 chart are nothing like “more than a billion” to the left of the “extreme poverty” line and “less than five billion” on the right.

That error seems inevitably connected to his error in failing to heed his sources’ advice to double the World Bank “extreme poverty” line to fit something like a \$10 “middle billion” claim - or, alternatively, to halve (or more) the \$10.

In “Population” Professor Rosling made the error of claiming emphatically that people could go from \$1 to \$10.

In “How to End” he made the error of presenting a chart with something near \$10 in the middle while saying the extreme poverty line was a little over a dollar. This implied a similarly misleading idea, even though the proportions on the new chart were adjusted following the previous complaint.

The Trust Adviser is not quite right about the dollar changing because of prices. In fact most of the difference between the “\$1.25 in 2005” and \$1.85 in 2011” is due to methodology change, not inflation (see link above).

I did initially think, wrongly as it turned out, that “How to End” had put the line in the wrong place by using the same figures for the charts as in “Population”.

However, in this I may have been misled by Professor Rosling’s apparent mistake in “How to End” when he said the line was just over a dollar.

I don’t think it would be reasonable for the BBC to refuse to consider that mistake by Professor Rosling on the grounds that that mistake by him had misled me into thinking he had made a different error.

10.

“the exact position of the extreme poverty line varied depending on the value of the dollar”

This is part of the problem, as the complaint indicated. As with the previous programme, Professor Rosling seemed to give a likely impression that these were real dollars, worth far more than what was actually represented.

I have already explained that this added to the impression given by any exaggeration of official (weakly-evidenced) estimates of the “middle billion” “income”.

11.

The section “Request for review by Trustees” does not adequately reflect the actual situation, in which the Trust Unit refused to allow the appellant time to respond to (or correct) its clarifications.

12.

A reasonably accurate account would state the correct position about the complaint on “Don’t Panic: The Truth about Population”. If the Trust has some evidence that this was dismissed by the Executive either after investigation or on grounds of it not being a “matter of

substance” then I suggest it let me know. Otherwise it appears the Trust was not entitled to dismiss it.

Nor is it clear to me how the Trust could legitimately claim it had considered the points made in the Stage 2 complaint about that programme, which included that Professor Rosling was himself sceptical of the World Bank figures, or that the main points of the Stage 1 complaint had been properly addressed.

13.

Legitimate expectation that the Trust would take previous communications into account for new statements to the public

The Trust has made clear that although decisions are final, it takes comments into account for the future. I refer to my email of 10 May.

So even if there were a legitimate reason for the Trust not to respond or act on complaints on admissibility decisions – which I have disputed above - the Trust would still seem to have a duty to take points in such complaints into account when making new statements to the public.

On this ground too, it seems to me the Trust has a duty to assess material which it proposes to publish, or any material which should on a reasonable view be influenced by information supplied in comments on a previous admissibility decision, and ensure the public is not given information of a lesser standard of accuracy or impartiality than that expected of BBC staff.