

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

The complaint concerned accuracy and impartiality in a BBC Two documentary which was described on the BBC iPlayer as follows:

“The legendary statistical showman Professor Hans Rosling returns with a feast of facts and figures as he examines the extraordinary target the world commits to this week – to eradicate extreme poverty worldwide. In the week the United Nations presents its new goals for global development, Don't Panic – How to End Poverty in 15 Years looks at the number one goal for the world: eradicating, for the first time in human history, what is called extreme poverty – the condition of almost a billion people, currently measured as those living on less than \$1.25 a day.”

The complainant said that the programme used statistics to measure levels of poverty; these figures were sourced from the World Bank and were not challenged during the programme. The complainant raised the following specific points to support his complaint:

- the programme said that the world's median daily income was \$10 but World Bank estimates from spending/income surveys in 2010 gave a PPP [Purchasing Power Parity] figure of \$3.40; saying that results depended on the value of the dollar may mislead the audience; the presenter seemed to “conflate GDP \$10 and Bank household survey ‘\$/day”
- the programme used a “poverty tracker” which was unreliable in that it reflected “opinion, assumptions and value judgements about food quality, housing quality etc”
- the programme referred to the “importance” of Goal 1.1 and this required a “balance of views”; it used a chart which referred to “extreme poverty” but this figure was also unreliable in that it took no account of “changing needs, or inflation faced”; the presenter acknowledged “uncertainty” about these figures but this was not enough to mitigate the prominence given to the chart
- the programme may have created a misleading impression in failing to mention the “1996 hunger pledge and the actual pledge of 2000 with 2000 baseline”.

The complainant said that these issues formed part of a general BBC pattern in under-representing criticism of the “official statistics”.

The BBC made the following points:

- this was a BBC production in partnership with The Open University, based on expert opinion and scientific facts
- it drew on widely available public data, much of it from the Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals UN processes
- the BBC was sorry if the complainant did not agree with the facts presented in the programme. The data sources and methodologies used could be found on Gapminder's Educational Material site : <http://www.gapminder.org/news/data-sources-dont-panic-end-poverty/>

- the statistics in this area were complicated and were necessarily simplified in order to aid comprehension. However, the BBC was confident that this process was carried out in such a way as not to mislead the audience and was in accordance with BBC Editorial Guidelines.

Audience Services said they had nothing further to add and that they did not believe the complaint had raised an issue that justified further investigation.

Appeal to the BBC Trust

The complainant appealed to the BBC Trust on the substance of his complaint.

In his appeal the complainant raised a number of **new** points relating to the programme, and the Adviser noted that these points could not be considered by the Trust as the complainant had not raised them at Stage 1.

The complainant also said that the BBC had repeated an earlier programme in this occasional *This World* series (*Don't Panic – The Truth about Population*) despite the complainant **not having received a Stage 2 response** to his complaint about this programme.

Decision of the Trust Adviser

The Trust Adviser (the Adviser) decided that the point she should consider was whether the complainant's appeal against the decision of Audience Services not to correspond further had a reasonable prospect of success. She decided it did not.

The Adviser noted that all BBC output was required to meet the standard of "due" accuracy and impartiality which, under the Editorial Guidelines, was defined as follows:

"The term 'due' means that the accuracy" [and impartiality] "must be adequate and appropriate to the output, taking account of the subject and nature of the content, the likely audience expectation and any signposting that may influence that expectation."

The Adviser noted that *Don't Panic – How to End Poverty in 15 Years* was aimed at a general audience. She noted that it attempted to convey complex information in a straightforward way – for example, it used graphics to plot a period of more than 200 years, showing how countries had become richer as their child mortality rates had fallen. She noted the programme had sought to understand and illustrate in a practical way how the lives of people who lived in extreme poverty differed from those who remained poor but were no longer among the poorest in society. For example, it had noted that people in extreme poverty would tend not to have electricity in their homes and their homes would be made of material that was not durable – while people who were very poor, but outside extreme poverty, were likely to have electricity and live in houses that might, for example, have roofs made of plastic sheeting or corrugated iron. In terms of the specific points made by the complainant, she noted the following:

- the programme had created a “yardstick” of poverty which ranked the average income per person of the world’s population from lowest to highest income. The values had been expressed in terms of PPP. GDP per capita in PPP was adjusted for the value of US dollars and corrected for inflation
- the programme had defined “extreme poverty” as being \$1.85 per day. This differed from the recent official Poverty Line of the World Bank and the UN which was \$1.25 per day adjusted for international prices in 2005. The programme had adjusted the figure for 2011 because prices had changed in the intervening six years. The team had used the World Bank’s recently published global price comparisons called PPP2011 to calculate the new figure
- the programme said the exact position of the extreme poverty line varied depending on the value of the dollar, but although the value was not fixed, the meaning was clear and did not change, it was “about the daily struggle to get enough to eat”
- the programme included a film which showed what daily life was like for those living in extreme poverty in Malawi. After the film Professor Rosling said, “So now you’ve got a glimpse of how life is in extreme poverty, I hope you agree on the importance of United Nations Goal 1.1”. The Adviser considered that Professor Rosling was suggesting it was a worthwhile aim to improve living conditions for those people featured in the film, and she decided that Trustees would be likely to consider that this would not require a “balancing view” in order to achieve due impartiality
- the programme tracked over time the declining proportion of the global population who were in extreme poverty, and Professor Rosling said, “This year is not the first time the United Nations put a target, a goal for extreme poverty. The former goal was to halve extreme poverty from 1990 up to 2015.” The Adviser considered that Trustees would be likely to consider there was no requirement under the guidelines for the programme to mention other measures and goals such as the “1996 hunger pledge” mentioned by the complainant.

The Adviser noted that the programme had made its sources publicly available and she decided that Trustees would be likely to consider the information to be “well sourced” and “based on sound evidence” as set out in the guidelines. She considered that, given that this programme was aimed at a non-specialist audience, Trustees would be likely to consider there was no requirement for the programme to have given weight to any criticism of the World Bank’s figures.

The Adviser considered that Trustees would be likely to conclude that some of the complainant’s requests for further detail involved a level of complexity which would not be appropriate for a general audience and which would have reduced the clarity of the presenter’s argument whilst not being required under the BBC’s guidelines. She therefore decided Trustees would be likely to consider the programme duly accurate and impartial for a general audience.

The Adviser noted that the complainant believed that his points of complaint formed part of a general BBC pattern in under-representing criticism of the official statistics. She noted that in a previous appeal to the BBC Trust (about the BBC Radio 4 programme *More or Less*,

and associated programmes¹) the complainant had stated that there was “an accumulation of problems causing a lack of due accuracy” and “cumulative error and/or omission causing a lack of impartiality”. She noted that the Trustees had decided that this previous appeal did not raise a matter of substance and it could not therefore be brought into consideration in this appeal.

The Adviser also noted that the complainant had stated that the BBC had repeated an earlier programme in this occasional series (*Don't Panic – The Truth about Population*) despite the complainant not having received a Stage 2 response to a complaint about this programme. The Adviser noted that the ECU had chosen not to respond further to this complaint but the BBC Trust had considered the complaint and had concluded that the appeal did not have a reasonable prospect of success.

Taking this into account the Adviser considered Trustees would be likely to conclude that BBC Audience Services had given a reasoned and reasonable response to the complaint and had acted appropriately in declining to enter into further correspondence. She therefore did not consider it was appropriate, proportionate or cost-effective to proceed with the appeal as it did not have a reasonable prospect of success. The Adviser did not propose to put it before Trustees.

Request for review by Trustees

The complainant requested that the Trustees review the decision not to proceed with his appeal. He said that the adequacy of BBC information on the “world's number one goal” and leaders' pledges were not a trivial matter.

The Panel's decision

A panel of the Committee considered the points made by the complainant, the BBC and the Adviser.

The Trustees noted that the issue in front of them was whether the decision by BBC Audience Services to decline to enter into further correspondence was correct on the basis that the Editorial Guidelines had not been breached.

Trustees agreed that if they took this matter on appeal they would not be likely to uphold the matter given that:

- the programme was aimed at a general non-specialist audience
- the statistics used in the programme were based upon publicly available data from reputable sources
- the programme was produced in partnership with The Open University, involving expert opinion

¹
http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/appeals/esc_bulletins/2016/esc_bulletin_dec_jan_2.pdf

- the reference in the programme to “the importance of United Nations Goal 1.1” did not require a balancing view in order to achieve due impartiality
- the presenter’s reference to current – and past – United Nations’ targets to reduce global poverty did not require any reference to other **past** pledges in order to achieve due accuracy
- given the context of the programme and the likely understanding of the audience the complainant had raised **no evidence of a breach** of the Editorial Guidelines.

Trustees also agreed that the complainant had received a reasonable and reasoned reply from Audience Services.

Trustees agreed that the BBC’s obligations to be duly accurate and impartial on these matters were **not “trivial” but** they decided not to take the appeal, on the basis that it would **not be appropriate, proportionate or cost-effective** since there was no reasonable prospect of the appeal succeeding.

The Panel therefore decided that this appeal did not qualify to proceed for consideration.