



Information Policy & Compliance
bbc.co.uk/foi

Mr Paul Grimshaw
request-10849-3e136876@whatdotheyknow.com

May 21, 2009

Dear Mr Grimshaw

RFI20090602 - Freedom of Information request

Thank you for your email/letter of April 22nd making the following request:

- 1. How does the BBC News website allocate stories to the positions they appear? e.g. how does a story appear in the top three positions on the main page? Please feel free to use as much technical/statistical explanation as you need.*
- 2. Why would a story appear in the top position of a category, say politics, but a lower story on the politics page is shown in the top three on the main page.*
- 3. Specifically, a week ago a story about 'Smeargate' was listed in the politics section of the website. This story was not shown on the main page in any of the top three positions or in the Other TOP stories section, but another political story was even though the other story was lower in its own politics page. Why and how did this happen?*

The reference number for your request is RFI20090602.

Please note that your request is outside the scope of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 ("the Act") but we are happy to provide you with some information on this occasion.

The main point to make is that the website is not a linear news medium in the same way that a traditional radio or TV news bulletin is. While the top story will generally be that considered most important, the other two main slots on the front page are filled using different criteria. Clearly the importance of a story is a factor, but we also take into account those stories which are likely to be of particular interest to a web audience. So technology stories and entertainment stories, which always feature highly in the "Most Popular" lists, may be included in the second or third slots when in a normal TV bulletin they may feature much lower down the order.

As for the comparison between specialist indexes and the front page, it may be that a story will have greater resonance or be part of a long-running issue with a particular genre. So a story about house prices



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

rising or falling according to one company might be considered a lead item on the Business index, but might not feature on the main page as it is one of a number of such statistical stories. There are other considerations that may influence decisions:

- It could be that a specialist index has a lead story which is its own take on another of the day's main stories, and we don't wish to have two stories on the same topic.
- Indexes are edited by different people who may make different judgements.
- The main index turns over quite quickly, and it could be that by mid-morning, a story has already featured prominently and been replaced while still leading a specialist index.
- We could already have a story about, for example, Gordon Brown on a health or technology issue and not wish to have another Gordon Brown story on the front page.
- There are different ways of promoting stories, and while a report might not be in the top three, it could be a link from the top story or promoted elsewhere on the site from a special promotional box etc.

It's difficult to answer the "Smeargate" query without knowing which other story is being referred to. But it might be that while the Smeargate story is an important political story, for a wider audience it was felt that the latest twists and turns were not that significant. It all comes back to the fact that while a story might be worth doing, we know from page views etc the stories which are more likely to be of interest to our audience.

We hope you find this helpful. Your request is outside the scope of the Act because the BBC and the other public service broadcasters are covered by the Act only in respect of information held for purposes "other than those of journalism, art or literature" (see Schedule I, Part VI of the Act). However, on this occasion we're happy to respond to your request. For more information about how the Act applies to the BBC please see www.bbc.co.uk/foi. Please note that this guidance is not intended to be a comprehensive legal interpretation of how the Act applies to the BBC.

The BBC does not offer an internal review when the information requested is not covered by the Act. If you disagree with our decision you can appeal to the Information Commissioner. Contact details are: Information Commissioner's Office, Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire, SK9 5AF telephone 01625 545 700. <http://www.ico.gov.uk/>

Yours sincerely

Stephanie Harris
Head of Accountability
BBC News