



Information Policy & Compliance

bbc.co.uk/foi

John Walker

request-6709-a7ac1600@whatdotheyknow.com

February 20th, 2009

Dear Mr Walker

Freedom of Information request – RFI20090171

Thank you for your request of January 26th under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 making the following request for information about a Susan Watts report on Newsnight on January 20th:

1. *Why did the BBC splice that tape in such an extraordinary way?*
2. *Please supply copies of all correspondence relating to the making of this particular piece.*
3. *How many complaints has the BBC had about the manipulation that went on in this piece?*
4. *Please supply a copy of the final report of any investigation into this manipulation of the news.*

The BBC is not obliged to provide you with the information you requested as we believe it is not covered by the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (“the Act”). However we are happy to explain that the report was one part of a 50 minute programme exploring the start of the Obama presidency from various angles. We edited sections of the speech to reflect the elements in it that referred to science as a way to give people an impression or montage of what Obama said about science in his inauguration speech. This was signposted to audiences with fades between each point. It in no way altered the meaning or misrepresented what the President was saying. The piece then went on to explore the challenges facing the President in this area.

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). This means that we are not obliged to supply information held for the purposes of creating the BBC’s output or is closely associated with these creative activities.

In relation to your request for the number of complaints the BBC has received about this item I should also explain that, whilst the information is not any event covered by the Act, the BBC has also chosen not to volunteer information relating to audience feedback for several very good reasons, chief amongst them being a desire to maintain our independence and impartiality.



You may not be aware that one of the main policy drivers behind the limited application of the Act to public service broadcasters was to protect freedom of expression and the rights of the media under Article 10 European Convention on Human Rights (“ECHR”). The BBC, as a media organisation, is under a duty to impart information and ideas on all matters of public interest and the importance of this function has been recognised by the European Court of Human Rights. Maintaining our editorial independence is a crucial factor in enabling the media to fulfil this function.

The Information Commissioner’s Office has recognised the importance of Schedule 1 of the Act in protecting the independence of the media, stating that:

“It is the Commissioner’s view that the ultimate purpose of the derogation (Schedule 1) is to protect journalistic, artistic and literary integrity by carving out a creative and journalistic space for programme makers to produce programmes free from the interference and scrutiny of the public.”¹

The BBC agrees that we have the right to protect our journalistic and editorial independence by maintaining just such a private space in which to produce our content. This extends to the sifting and review of praise and criticism from audiences, which is important part of the BBC’s process of creating and improving programmes. Despite the BBC’s obligation to be independent and impartial, many bodies, groups and individuals attempt to influence our output. This pressure takes many forms and has to be resisted by programme makers across the BBC.

If the BBC and other public broadcasters were obliged to disclose audience feedback, this would damage our independence by impeding the ability of the programme maker to weigh complaints, praise and other comments alongside other elements of feedback on a programme as would his/her ability to come to their own journalistic judgement without public scrutiny.

I hope this provides you with some understanding of why this is an important concern for the BBC.

For your information, the ICO has agreed with the BBC’s interpretation that information pertaining to audience feedback falls outside the scope of the Act, stating that:

‘...fundamentally the complaints are about, and intended to influence, content. Despite other applications complaints information is intrinsically linked with the creative purposes for which the BBC was established.’

Appeal Rights

If you are not satisfied with this response you have the right to appeal to the Information Commissioner. The contact details are: Information Commissioner’s Office, Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire, SK9 5AF, telephone 01625 545 700 or see www.informationcommissioner.gov.uk

Yours sincerely

Stephanie Harris
Head of Editorial Compliance, BBC News

¹ ICO Reference: FAC0070848