



Information Rights

bbc.co.uk/foi bbc.co.uk/privacy

Mr. Blaser

By email: request-532996-c43a89c5@whatdotheyknow.com

14 December 2018

Dear Mr Blaser,

Freedom of Information request – RF120182125

Thank you for your request to the BBC of 16 November 2018, seeking the following information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000:

“The BBC has been reporting extensively on the so called "Fake News" epidemic and efforts by various entities on social media platforms to manipulate opinion using online messages, posts, tweets, likes etc. As an internationally recognised entity with its own interactive online presence (for example, in the numerous "Have Your Say" sections on your news articles) I am wondering what activity the BBC has seen to this effect, and what efforts have been made to counter such activity.

With this in mind I wish to make the following requests for information from your organisation regarding accounts for your public websites.

- 1) Is there any activity within the BBC to identify accounts which have been created, on the face of it, to manipulate public opinion (e.g. by up or down voting comments in the "Have Your Say" section)*
- 2) Is there any activity within the BBC to terminate accounts which have been created, on the face of it, to manipulate public opinion (e.g. by up or down voting comments in the "Have Your Say" section)*
- 3) How many accounts have been terminated by the BBC since May 2015.*
- 4) How many accounts have been terminated by the BBC since May 2015 as a direct result of activity by the BBC detailed in 1) above.*
- 5) What is the total number of accounts active on your websites for each month since May 2015?*

6) *What is the total number of new accounts created on your websites for each month since May 2015?*

For questions 3 to 6 please break down this information by month, or by whatever larger unit of time is possible if this data is not available on a monthly basis.”

The information you have requested is excluded from the Act because it is held for the purposes of ‘journalism, art or literature.’ The BBC is therefore not obliged to provide this information to you and will not be doing so on this occasion. Part VI of Schedule 1 to FOIA provides that information held by the BBC and the other public service broadcasters is only covered by the Act if it is held for ‘purposes *other* than those of journalism, art or literature”. The BBC is not required to supply information held for the purposes of creating the BBC’s output or information that supports and is closely associated with these creative activities.¹ For example, this includes aggregated Account data informs discussions about technological developments, users online services and the distribution of online content, and therefore falls outside the scope of Part VI of Schedule 1.

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.

That said, the BBC makes a huge range of information available about our programmes and content on bbc.co.uk.

The BBC’s Terms of Use can be found via the following link:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/usingthebbc/terms/>. This includes the BBC’s approach to commenting on message boards and moderation of those comments.

Appeal Rights

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, tel: 0303 123 1113 or see <https://ico.org.uk/>.

¹ For more information about how the Act applies to the BBC please see the enclosure which follows this letter.

Please note that this guidance is not intended to be a comprehensive legal interpretation of how the Act applies to the BBC.

Please note that should the Information Commissioner's Office decide that the Act does cover this information, exemptions under the Act might then apply.

Yours sincerely,

Information Rights
BBC Legal

Freedom of Information

From January 2005 the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act 2000 gives a general right of access to all types of recorded information held by public authorities. The Act also sets out exemptions from that right and places a number of obligations on public authorities. The term “public authority” is defined in the Act; it includes all public bodies and government departments in the UK. The BBC, Channel 4, S4C and MG Alba are the only broadcasting organisations covered by the Act.

Application to the BBC

The BBC has a long tradition of making information available and accessible. It seeks to be open and accountable and already provides the public with a great deal of information about its activities. BBC Audience Services operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week handling telephone and written comments and queries, and the BBC’s website bbc.co.uk provides an extensive online information resource.

It is important to bear this in mind when considering the Freedom of Information Act and how it applies to the BBC. The Act does not apply to the BBC in the way it does to most public authorities in one significant respect. It recognises the different position of the BBC (as well as Channel 4 and S4C) by saying that it covers information “held for purposes other than those of journalism, art or literature”. This means the Act does not apply to information held for the purposes of creating the BBC’s output (TV, radio, online etc), or information that supports and is closely associated with these creative activities.

A great deal of information within this category is currently available from the BBC and will continue to be so. If this is the type of information you are looking for, you can check whether it is available on the BBC’s website bbc.co.uk or contact BBC Audience Services.

The Act does apply to all of the other information we hold about the management and running of the BBC.

The BBC’s aim is to enrich people’s lives with great programmes and services that inform, educate and entertain. It broadcasts radio and television programmes on analogue and digital services in the UK. It delivers interactive services across the web, television and mobile devices. The BBC’s online service is one of Europe’s most widely visited content sites. Around the world, international multimedia broadcaster BBC World Service delivers a wide range of language and regional services on radio, TV, online and via wireless handheld devices, together with BBC World News, the commercially-funded international news and information television channel.

The BBC’s remit as a public service broadcaster is defined in the BBC Charter and Agreement. It is the responsibility of the Ofcom (the BBC’s independent regulator) to ensure that the organisation delivers against this remit by setting key objectives, approving strategy and policy, and monitoring and assessing performance. Ofcom also safeguard the BBC’s independence and ensure the Corporation is accountable to its audiences and to Parliament.