



Information Rights

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

Jim Thomas

request-553348-fa9ed02c@whatdotheyknow.com

2 May 2019

Dear Mr Thomas,

Freedom of Information request – RF120190757

Thank you for your request to the BBC of 29 April 2019 seeking the following information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 ('the Act'):

My concerns relate to expressions of opinion by members of the public, not relating to journalistic integrity or editorial policy. I do not require any justifications or explanations - just raw data on public opinion as provided to you which is not covered by exemption.

I would like to know numbers of people who have complained for the purposes of statistical awareness of public opinion on state broadcasting.

Please can you provide statistics of the volume of complaints of bias received related to:

- 1. Overly Pro-Scottish Independence content bias; and*
- 2. Overly Pro-Unionist (relating to Scotland) content bias.*

I would like this information relating to each calendar year to date since 2012 please.

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 activities¹.

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.

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.

In this case, you have requested information that relates to editorial complaints. Editorial complaints form part of the on-going review of the standards and quality of particular areas of programme making with a view to further enhancing these standards; the complaints themselves and the information associated with them plays a significant role in helping to inform editorial discussion and decisions going forward. In this way information relating to editorial complaints is used to inform future content and improve the quality of journalistic output; this is an important part of the BBC’s process of creating and improving programmes.

The Information Commissioner has issued a number of decisions supporting the BBC view that information relating to editorial complaints is held for the purposes of ‘journalism, art or literature’. One such Decision Notice specifically addresses the number of complaints made to the BBC concerning political bias (FS50295017). The Commissioner determined that information about editorial complaints was held for the purposes of journalism, art or literature as complaints information – including the numbers of complaints - is used to inform the BBC’s editorial choices and direction, and remains held to inform future output. It was the Commissioner’s view that the information held about the number of complaints is necessary to provide an overview of the editorial complaints and is created as part of the management and enhancement of the standards and quality of journalism.

For more detail regarding the above ICO decisions please see the following link:
<https://icosearch.ico.org.uk/s/search.html?collection=ico-meta&profile=decisions&query>

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

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 <http://www.ico.org.uk>

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,

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.