



Information Policy & Compliance
bbc.co.uk/foi

Mr Ian Dawson
request-18648-6e285851@whatdotheyknow.com

October 26th, 2009

Dear Mr Dawson

Freedom of Information request – RFI20091362

Thank you for your request to the BBC of September 29th making the following request under the Freedom of Information Act 2000:

“Could you please clarify the News department policy on coverage of the Climate change/global warming debate? I have heard reports that the BBC has decided not to broadcast any news or reports which disprove, disagree, or cast doubt on global warming theory. If this is true, could you please provide some form of justification for this partisan approach to such a contentious and uncertain issue.”

Please note that your request is outside the scope of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (“the Act”) but I am happy to explain our approach and should like to reassure you that there has been no such decision – indeed the BBC’s commitment to impartiality means that we must reflect all shades of opinion.

The BBC News approach to this issue has been very well set out in this entry on the BBC News website by environment correspondent, Richard Black, and environment analyst Roger Harrabin:
http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors/2007/11/climate_sceptics.html BBC News currently takes the view that our reporting needs to be calibrated to take into account the scientific consensus that global warming is man-made. The BBC’s Editorial Guidelines state that “we must ensure we avoid bias or an imbalance of views on controversial subjects” and, given the weight of scientific opinion, the challenge for us is to strike the right balance between mainstream science and sceptics, since to give them equal weight would imply that the argument is evenly balanced. The BBC Governors and BBC Management jointly commissioned a report, “From Seesaw to Wagon Wheel – Safeguarding Impartiality in the 21st Century”, published in June 2007, which noted that:

“There may be now a broad scientific consensus that climate change is definitely happening and that it is at least predominantly man-made... the weight of evidence no longer justifies equal space being given to the opponents of the consensus”.

BBC News policy is that while we do need to reflect the views of sceptics, we also need to put our reporting in the context of the mainstream scientific consensus; Roger Black and Roger Hermiston's website article explained: “We are still living with criticism over our coverage of MMR when we gave the



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impression that each side was underpinned by approximately equal weight. We must get it right on climate”.

In summary, BBC News takes the view that when the vast majority of scientists, who are expert in this field, believe there is evidence of climate change, and the associated research suggests that this is mainly caused by man’s activities, it would be unbalanced always to refer to the opponents of their view and could be detrimental to exploring the range of views among mainstream scientists, for example, and the range of solutions. This is in keeping with the Editorial Guideline on impartiality which states that “we seek to provide a properly balanced service consisting of a wide range of subject matter and views broadcast over an appropriate time scale across all our output.” That said, it is also right that we reflect the views of sceptics, and we should apply the same rigour in testing views about climate change as we do in any other area of journalism.

We hope you find this helpful. Please note that the information you have requested is excluded from the Act because it is held for the purposes of ‘journalism, art or literature.’ 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”¹. The BBC is not required by the Act 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; however, on this occasion we’re happy to provide the above information in response to your request.

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 telephone 01625 545 700. <http://www.ico.gov.uk>

Yours sincerely

Stephanie Harris
Head of Accountability, BBC News

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.

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 and S4C are the only broadcasters 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 Information 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 Information](#).

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

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 Europe’s most widely visited content site. Across the world, the BBC broadcasts radio programmes in 33 languages on the BBC World Service and the 24 hour television service, BBC World.

The BBC’s remit as a public service broadcaster is defined in the BBC Charter and Agreement. It is the responsibility of the BBC Trust to ensure that the organisation delivers against this remit by setting key objectives, approving strategy and policy, and monitoring and assessing performance. The Trustees also safeguard the BBC’s independence and ensure the Corporation is accountable to its audiences and to Parliament. The Trust is supported by a network of advisory bodies across the UK.

Day-to-day operations are run by the Director-General and his senior management team, the Executive Board. The BBC is funded by an annual Licence Fee. This is determined and regularly reviewed by Parliament. Each year, the BBC publishes an Annual Report & Accounts, and reports to Parliament on how it has delivered against its public service remit.