

Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA)

Decision notice

Date: 29 October 2024

Public Authority: British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)

Address: BBC Broadcasting House

Portland Place

London

W1A 1AA

Decision (including any steps ordered)

1. The complainant requested information from the BBC about the selection of audience members for the television programme Question Time. The BBC responded that the requested information was covered by the derogation and hence excluded from FOIA.
2. The Commissioner's decision is that this information, if held at all, is held by the BBC for the purposes of journalism, art or literature and so is not covered by FOIA. He therefore upholds the BBC's position and requires no steps to be taken in this case.

Request and response

3. On 29 September 2024, the complainant wrote to the public authority and requested information in the following terms:

"I am writing to request information under the Freedom of Information Act regarding the audience composition for the BBC's Question Time episode aired on the 26th of September [2024].

Specifically, I would like to request the following information:

1. The process by which the audience was selected for this episode, particularly how fairness and political representation were ensured.
2. The breakdown of the audience by political affiliation or voting preference, as acknowledged by Fiona Bruce during the episode. For example, if there were 100 audience members, I would like to know

how many identified with each political party or voting preference.
Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to your response.”

4. On 8 October 2024 the BBC responded to the request. The BBC explained that it believed that the information would be held for the purposes of “art, journalism or literature” and would therefore not be caught by FOIA. As a result, the BBC did not consider it was obliged to provide the information.

Reasons for decision

5. The following analysis covers whether the information requested is excluded from FOIA because it was held for the purposes of “journalism, art or literature”.
6. FOIA only applies to the BBC to a limited extent. Schedule One, Part VI of FOIA provides that the BBC is a public authority for the purposes of FOIA but it only has to deal with requests for information in some circumstances. The entry relating to the BBC states:

“The British Broadcasting Corporation, in respect of information held for purposes other than those of journalism, art or literature.”
7. This is known as the “derogation”. This means that information that the BBC holds for the purposes of journalism, art or literature - in broad terms, its output or related to its output – is not covered by FOIA. If information falls within the derogation, then that is the end of the matter; there is no public interest test or similar provision to consider the merits of disclosure.
8. Although it is publicly funded through the licence fee, the BBC competes with other commercial broadcasters who are not subject to FOIA. Releasing information about its output, or related to its output, could therefore commercially disadvantage the BBC. However, for the derogation to apply, the BBC does not need to demonstrate that it would suffer commercial harm if the information were to be disclosed. It only has to demonstrate that the information is held for a derogated purpose.
9. Broadly, BBC information that is covered by FOIA includes information about: how the BBC is managed and run, including the TV licence; the BBC’s employees and its human resources practices; and the BBC’s performance.
10. BBC information that is not covered by FOIA includes the following: information about the BBC’s on-screen or on-air “talent” including its presenters and journalists; information about BBC programmes

including any spend or editorial decisions associated with its programming; materials that support the BBC's output, such as the script of a television programme or a source drawn on for an investigation; and viewer and listener complaints to the BBC about the above.

11. The derogation as it applies to the BBC is discussed in more detail in numerous published decisions made by the Commissioner, such that he does not consider it necessary to reproduce that detail again here. However, key to the derogation is the Supreme Court decision in *Sugar (Deceased) v British Broadcasting Corporation and another* [2012] UKSC 4¹
12. The Supreme Court explained that "journalism" primarily means the BBC's "output on news and current affairs", including sport, and that "journalism, art or literature" covers the whole of the BBC's output to the public (Lord Walker at paragraph 70). Therefore, in order for the information to be derogated and so fall outside FOIA, there should be a sufficiently direct link between the purpose(s) for which the information is held and the production of the BBC's output or the BBC's journalistic or creative activities involved in producing such output.
13. The Commissioner adopts a similar definition for the other elements of the derogation, in that the information must be used in the production, editorial management and maintenance of standards of those art forms.
14. As explained above, information about audience selection processes and audience demographics, if held at all, is derogated information. This type of information would be associated with the BBC's output because it is directly linked to decisions relating to the content of a specific television programme.
15. This finding is consistent with the Commissioner's previous decisions in cases FS50819396², FS0690052³ and FS50401168⁴.
16. The Commissioner is satisfied, based on the very well established precedent set in the numerous other decisions he has made in cases involving the BBC, that, if held at all, the information requested by the complainant would be held for the purposes of journalism, art or

¹ <https://www.supremecourt.uk/cases/docs/uksc-2010-0145-judgment.pdf>

² <https://ico.org.uk/media/action-weve-taken/decision-notices/2019/2615145/fs50819396.pdf>

³ <https://ico.org.uk/media/action-weve-taken/decision-notices/2017/2014778/fs50690052.pdf>

⁴ https://ico.org.uk/media/action-weve-taken/decision-notices/2011/667382/fs_50401168.pdf

literature. It is therefore not covered by FOIA and the BBC is not obliged to provide it.

17. The Commissioner finding is, therefore, that the BBC was not obliged to comply with the complainant's information request.

Right of appeal

18. Either party has the right to appeal against this decision notice to the First-tier Tribunal (Information Rights). Information about the appeals process may be obtained from:

First-tier Tribunal (Information Rights)
GRC & GRP Tribunals,
PO Box 9300,
LEICESTER,
LE1 8DJ

Tel: 0203 936 8963

Fax: 0870 739 5836

Email: grc@justice.gov.uk

Website: www.justice.gov.uk/tribunals/general-regulatory-chamber

19. If you wish to appeal against a decision notice, you can obtain information on how to appeal along with the relevant forms from the Information Tribunal website.
20. Any Notice of Appeal should be served on the Tribunal within 28 (calendar) days of the date on which this decision notice is sent.

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