

## Freedom of Information Act 2000 (Section 50)

### Decision Notice

Date: 4 November 2009

**Public Authority:** British Broadcasting Corporation  
**Address:** 2252 White City  
201 Wood Lane  
London  
W12 7TS

### Summary

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The complainant made a request for information relating to an incident in 2005 where Lord Foulkes and Lord Maxon lobbied the then Director General of the BBC, Mark Thompson, to have Iain Macwhirter removed from presenting BBC programmes. The BBC argued that this information was held for the purposes of art, journalism or literature and was therefore derogated and fell outside the scope of the Act. The Commissioner upholds the BBC's position and does not require them to take any further action.

### The Commissioner's Role

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1. The Commissioner's duty is to decide whether the BBC has complied with its duties under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (the "Act"). This Notice sets out his decision.

### The Request

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2. On 13 April 2008 the complainant wrote to the BBC and requested the following information:  
  
"any information that you have on file in regard to an incident in 2005 where Lord Foulkes and Lord Maxton lobbied the then Director General of the BBC Mark Thompson to have Iain Macwhirter removed from presenting BBC programmes."
3. The BBC responded to the request on 2 May 2008 stating:  
  
"Your request falls outside the scope of the Act because the BBC and the other public service broadcasters are covered by the Act only in respect of

the information held for purposes “other than those of journalism, art or literature” (see Schedule 1, Part VI of the Act). We are not therefore obliged 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.”

4. As the BBC considered that the information which had been requested fell outside the scope of the Act no internal review was offered.

## The Investigation

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### Scope of the case

5. On 4 May 2008 the complainant contacted the Commissioner to complain about the way his request for information had been handled. The complainant asked the Commissioner to consider whether the BBC was correct to withhold the information he had requested.

### Chronology

6. The Commissioner wrote to the BBC on 5 June 2008 to inform them that a complaint had been received about the refusal to provide information in response to this request.
7. In October 2009 The High Court handed down its judgments in relation to two appeals; BBC v Steven Sugar and the Information Commissioner<sup>1</sup> (EW2349) and the BBC v the Information Commissioner<sup>2</sup> (EW2348), which addressed the application of the derogation by the BBC. Both judgements found in favour of the BBC. The Commissioner has applied the findings of the two judgments to the facts of this case.

## Findings of fact

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### Substantive Procedural Matters

#### Jurisdiction

8. Section 3 of the Act states:

“3. – (1) In this Act “public authority” means –  
(b).... any body...which –  
(i) is listed in Schedule 1.....”

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<sup>1</sup> BBC v Steven Sugar & The Information Commissioner [2009] EWHC 2349 (Admin)

<sup>2</sup> BBC v The Information Commissioner [2009] EWHC 2348 (Admin)

The entry in relation to the BBC at Schedule 1, Part VI reads:

“The British Broadcasting Corporation, in respect of information held for purposes other than those of journalism, art or literature”

Section 7 of the Act states:

“7. – (1) Where a public authority is listed in Schedule 1 only in relation to information of a specified description, nothing in Parts I to V of this Act applies to any other information held by the authority”.

The BBC has argued that the construction of sections 3, 7 and Schedule 1 means that the BBC is not a public authority where it holds the requested information for the purposes of journalism, art or literature. Consequently, the Commissioner would not have jurisdiction to issue a decision notice given the wording of section 50.

9. This issue has been considered by the House of Lords in the case of *Sugar v BBC*<sup>3</sup>. By a majority of 3:2, the Lords found in favour of the Appellant, Mr Sugar, in concluding that the Commissioner does have jurisdiction to issue decision notices regardless of whether the information that has been requested is derogated. The Commissioner adopts the reasoning set out by Lord Hope at paragraphs 54 and 55 where he said:

*“54. Section 7(1) says that where a public authority is listed in Schedule 1 only in relation to information of a specified description, nothing in Parts I to V of the Act applies to any other information held by the authority. What it does not say is that, in that case, the authority is a hybrid – a “public authority” within the meaning of the Act for some of the information that it holds and not a “public authority” for the rest. The technique which it uses is a different one. Taking the words of the subsection exactly as one finds them, what it says is that nothing in Parts I to V of the Act applies to any other “information” held by “the authority”. This approach indicates that, despite the qualification that appears against its name in Schedule 1, the body is a public authority within the meaning of the Act for all its purposes. That, in effect, is what section 3(1) of the Act provides when it says what “public authority” means “in this Act”. The exception in section 7(1) does not qualify the meaning of “public authority” in section 3(1). It is directed to the information that the authority holds on the assumption that, but for its provisions, Parts I to V would apply because the holder of the information is a public authority.”*

*55. ....The question whether or not Parts I to V apply to the information to which the person making the request under section 1(1) seeks access depends on the way the public authority is listed. If its listing is unqualified, Parts I to V apply to all the information that it holds. If it is listed only in relation to information of a specified description, only information that falls within the specified description is subject to the right of access that Part I*

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<sup>3</sup> *Sugar v BBC* [2009] UKHL 9

*provides. But it is nevertheless, for all the purposes of the Act, a public authority”.*

10. Therefore, the Commissioner has jurisdiction to issue a decision notice on the grounds that the BBC remains a public authority. Where the information is derogated, the Commissioner considers that the BBC has no obligations to comply with Parts I to V in respect of that information.
11. The Commissioner will first determine whether the request is for information held for the purposes of journalism, art or literature and if therefore the BBC is required to comply with Parts I to V in respect of the request.

## Derogation

12. As outlined above, the Commissioner must first determine if the request is for information held for the purpose of journalism, art or literature.
13. The scope of the derogation has been considered by the High Court in the cases of the BBC v Steven Sugar and the Information Commissioner [EW2349]<sup>4</sup> and the BBC v the Information Commissioner [EW2348].<sup>5</sup> In both decisions Mr Justice Irwin stated:

*“My conclusion is that the words in the Schedule mean the BBC has no obligation to disclose information which they hold to any significant extent for the purposes of journalism, art or literature, whether or not the information is also held for other purposes. The words do not mean that the information is disclosable if it is held for purposes distinct from journalism, art or literature, whilst it is also held to any significant extent for those purposes. If the information is held for mixed purposes, including to any significant extent the purposes listed in the Schedule or one of them, then the information is not disclosable.” (para 65 EA2349 and para 73 EW2348).*

14. The Commissioner interprets the phrase “to any significant extent”, when taken in the context of the judgement as a whole, to mean that where the requested information is held to a more than trivial or insignificant extent for journalistic, artistic or literary purposes the BBC will not be obliged to comply with Parts I to V of the Act. This is the case even if the information is also held for other purposes.
15. For completeness, the Commissioner considers that where information is held for non-journalistic/artistic/literary purposes and is only held to a trivial or insignificant extent for the purposes listed in Schedule 1, then the BBC will be obliged to comply with its obligations under Parts I to V of the Act.
16. Thus, provided there is a relationship between the information and one of the purposes listed in Schedule 1, then the information is derogated. This approach is

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<sup>4</sup> BBC v Steven Sugar & The Information Commissioner [2009] EWHC 2349 (Admin)

<sup>5</sup> BBC v The Information Commissioner [2009] EWHC 2348 (Admin)

supported by Mr Justice Irwin's comments on the relationship between operational information, such as programme costs and budgets, and creative output:

*"It seems to me difficult to say that information held for 'operational' purposes is not held for the 'purposes of journalism, art or literature.'" (para 87 EW2348)*

17. The information relevant to the request need not be journalistic, artistic or literary material itself. As explained above all that needs to be established is whether the requested information is held to any significant extent for one or more of the derogated purposes of art, literature or journalism.

### **Analysis**

18. The two High Court decisions referred to above related to information falling within the following categories:

- Salaries of presenters / talent
- Total staff costs of programmes
- Programme budgets
- Programme costs
- Payments to other production companies for programmes
- Payments to secure coverage of sporting events and other events
- Content of programmes / coverage of issues within programmes

In relation to all of the above Mr Justice Irwin found that the information was held for operational purposes related to programme content and therefore to a significant extent for the purposes of journalism, art or literature.

19. The information requested in this case relates to representations made to the BBC about its use of a specific presenter; namely Iain Macwhirter. The information requested can best be characterised as information related to complaint specifically about programme content (the role of a certain presenter). In some cases like this, where the request is of a broad nature the Commissioner will still require the BBC to provide details or copies of information held that fall within the scope of the request. In this case the Commissioner finds that the wording of the request is clear enough in its focus to make a finding without asking for further information from the BBC.

20. The focus of any information potentially held within the scope of the request would to some significant extent relate to programme content as the information would enable the BBC to respond to an issue relating the content of its programmes.

21. In view of the above, the Commissioner has found that the request is for information held for the purpose of journalism, art or literature and that the BBC was not obliged to comply with Parts I to V of the Act.

## **The Decision**

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22. The Commissioner's decision is that as the request is for information held for the purposes of journalism, art or literature the BBC was not obliged to comply with Part I to V of the Act in this case.

## **Steps Required**

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23. The Commissioner requires no steps to be taken.

## Right of Appeal

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24. Either party has the right to appeal against this Decision Notice to the Information Tribunal. Information about the appeals process may be obtained from:

Information Tribunal  
Arnhem House Support Centre  
PO Box 6987  
Leicester  
LE1 6ZX

Tel: 0845 600 0877  
Fax: 0116 249 4253  
Email: [informationtribunal@tribunals.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:informationtribunal@tribunals.gsi.gov.uk).  
Website: [www.informationtribunal.gov.uk](http://www.informationtribunal.gov.uk)

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.

Any Notice of Appeal should be served on the Tribunal within 28 calendar days of the date on which this Decision Notice is served.

**Dated the 4th day of November 2009**

**Signed .....**

**Steve Wood  
Assistant Commissioner**

**Information Commissioner's Office  
Wycliffe House  
Water Lane  
Wilmslow  
Cheshire  
SK9 5AF**

## Legal Annex

### General Right of Access

**Section 1(1)** provides that -

“Any person making a request for information to a public authority is entitled –

(a) to be informed in writing by the public authority whether it holds information of the description specified in the request, and

(b) if that is the case, to have that information communicated to him.”

**Section 1(2)** provides that -

“Subsection (1) has the effect subject to the following provisions of this section and to the provisions of sections 2, 9, 12 and 14.”

**Section 1(3)** provides that –

“Where a public authority –

(a) reasonably requires further information in order to identify and locate the information requested, and

(b) has informed the applicant of that requirement,

the authority is not obliged to comply with subsection (1) unless it is supplied with that further information.”

**Section 1(4)** provides that –

“The information –

(a) in respect of which the applicant is to be informed under subsection (1)(a), or

(b) which is to be communicated under subsection (1)(b),

is the information in question held at the time when the request is received, except that account may be taken of any amendment or deletion made between that time and the time when the information is to be communicated under subsection (1)(b), being an amendment or deletion that would have been made regardless of the receipt of the request.”

**Section 1(5)** provides that –

“A public authority is to be taken to have complied with subsection (1)(a) in relation to any information if it has communicated the information to the applicant in accordance with subsection (1)(b).”

**Section 1(6)** provides that –

“In this Act, the duty of a public authority to comply with subsection (1)(a) is referred to as “the duty to confirm or deny”.”