



Information Policy & Compliance  
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18 February 2011

## Freedom of Information Act 2000 – RF120110125

Thank you for your request under the Freedom of Information Act ('the Act') of 31 January 2011 seeking the following information:

*“ a written transcript of the speech made by the BBC Director General Mr Mark Thompson at the Institute for Government's seminar 'Future of News and Current Affairs: BBC, Fox or Third Way?' held on Thursday 16th December 2011, in which Mr Thompson stated that the BBC had been weak in its coverage of Immigration and Europe in recent years.”*

You may be aware that the Act applies to recorded information held by a public authority and you seek a written transcript of a speech delivered by Mr Mark Thompson. While the BBC does not hold a verbatim transcript of the requested information, we do hold a copy of Mr Thompson's speaking notes that were prepared in advance of the seminar. Please find attached as disclosure document 1 the information that the BBC holds of relevance to your request.

We note that the Institute for Government has published a podcast of this event at the following URL: <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/our-events/75/future-of-news-and-current-affairs-bbc-fox-or-third-way>

The speaking notes provided to you as disclosure document 1 largely mirror Mr Thompson's speech, however if you listen to the podcast you will note there are several instances where he speaks 'off script', either providing additional information or using different language.

I trust that you will find the above response helpful.

## **Appeal Rights**



If you are not satisfied that we have complied with the Act in responding to your request, you have the right to an internal review by a BBC senior manager or legal adviser. Please contact us at the address above, explaining what you would like us to review and including your reference number. If you are not satisfied with the internal review, you can appeal to the Information Commissioner. The contact details are: Information Commissioner's Office, Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire, SK9 5AF, telephone 01625 545 700 or see <http://www.ico.gov.uk/>

Yours sincerely,

Katie Paxie  
Advisor, BBC Information Policy and Compliance

### A few observations on impartiality

First – what is it? In the context of broadcast journalism, it means reporting and making sense of what's happening rather than offering your own opinion about what *should* be happening. In framing discussions and debates, it means not loading the dice or excluding some perspectives, but letting all the voices be heard. It means giving people the information and the tools to make their *own* minds up about the big issues of the day, not telling them what to think.

Avoiding party political bias is a subset and only a subset of impartiality. It's possible for all major parties to agree on a given subject and for there still to be a legitimate opposing view which should be heard and scrutinised or a debate. In this year's election, none of the main parties wanted immigration to be a significant topic during campaigning, but our research suggested that the public did want to talk about it, so we ensured it came up.

Again, people sometimes confuse impartiality with centrism, i.e. a bias towards more 'moderate' world-views as opposed to more 'radical' ones. Now it's true that more widely-held opinions should generally be given greater air-time than those which have less support, but it's a mistake to assume that opinion of every topic is always distributed on a crude left-right bell curve, or indeed any kind of bell curve, with the weight of 'sensible' opinion always lying broadly in the middle. You could make the case that political debate in the UK for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century oscillated between centrism and anti-centrism. Impartiality has to be broad and open enough to encompass all of that.

The public moreover have the right to hear even very extreme views if they have sufficiently demonstrated popular or electoral support to have an influence on the national debate. Giving Nick Griffin a seat on one edition of Question Time and allowing his views to be debated and challenged by other panel members and by the audience is an example of that. Think of the counter-factual: that the BBC should decide to exclude some political views because they're controversial or, in our opinion, in some way beyond the pale. When you start to censor the national debate, where do you stop?

The BNP example illustrates something else. Impartiality in 2010 is itself both controversial and disputed. For some, other values come first – whether humanitarian need in the case of the BBC's and Sky's decision not to broadcast the DEC appeal for Gaza, or our decision a few weeks back to run a Panorama investigation about FIFA just before that organisation decided where to hold two future World Cups. At the BBC, we believe that the duty to broadcast fair and accurate journalism to maintain our international reputation for impartiality is sovereign, but not everyone agrees

Don't think for a moment, though, that any of this is easy or that I'm suggesting that the BBC always gets it right. Impartiality is dynamic and almost always harder than it looks. Back to Question Time, who do you invite on in an age of coalition Government? How do you maintain real-time balance in the climate change debate, when science, public opinion, the public policy debate, are all evolving rapidly? How do you handle impartiality in contexts – student tuition fees is a good current argument – where so many different arguments and facts and political and policy choices come together?

I can point to areas – business, Europe, immigration – where I believe we've made strides towards better impartiality in recent years, but the work is never done.

Some people argue of course that impartiality is impossible – that everyone necessarily comes from a perspective and that therefore in the real world journalism is divided into honest, overt bias and hidden bias masquerading as impartiality. But that is not what the public tell us. They still value impartiality very highly, they expect it and believe they generally find it in the BBC and the other public broadcasters. Broadcast journalism is trusted much more in the UK than print journalism. A significant reason for that is because it is believed to be more impartial. And in a world of internet-fuelled plurality and saturation in a global sea of opinion, much of it extreme, I believe the premium on impartiality has grown and will grow further.

Impartial journalism is not the only valuable form of journalism. Impassioned, committed reportage and opinion have been part of our media scene for centuries and are *also* strongly valued by the public. What's happening now though is that the worlds of impartial and partial journalism, once conveniently segregated by medium – the impartial to broadcast, the partial to print – are converging and bumping in to each other online and, at least potentially, in multi-channel TV.

What does that mean? Will there be a red squirrel/grey squirrel moment where one form of journalism replaces another? Will lily-livered impartiality necessarily wilt in the face of red-blooded partiality? Some dystopians look to America and suggest that that is

exactly what has been happening there – that Fox News versus CNN and the networks proves that there can be only one winner in that Darwinian struggle. They often go on to connect partial journalism with what they see as the polarisation of American politics.

Against that, others make the opposite case – that in a free country and a moment of converging media there is no case, nor indeed any logic, in allowing the impartial ethos of the public service broadcasters to have a monopoly in the broadcasting space. Why shouldn't the public see and hear, as well as read, opinionated journalism and then make up their own minds about it? Specifically, why shouldn't these see and hear not just individual carefully labelled polemical programmes but entire channels that come at the news or public affairs from a particular stand-point?

I find this second argument broadly persuasive and I do not believe that accepting it means that we also have to accept the dire consequences which seem to be implied by the previous argument and the example of America. The case I want to make about impartial broadcast journalism is *not* that it should enjoy a monopoly but that there is an overwhelming public interest in ensuring that every household in the land has access to it and that it should be properly funded – as it is in the case of the BBC – and its editorial and institutional independence should be respected. Public commitment to this kind of journalism is strong and I believe will ensure. I do not believe it would be threatened in a broadcast world where it co-existed with opinionated news channels. It might even be strengthened by them.