

Ofcom ref: 00531032

Information Requests  
Email: [information.requests@ofcom.org.uk](mailto:information.requests@ofcom.org.uk)

12 April 2018

## Ref: 00531032 Freedom of Information: Right to Know Request

Thank you for your request for information on complaints about political bias. Your request was received on 27 March 2018 and we are responding under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 ("the FoI Act").

You requested the following information:

- Since March 2017, how many complaints in number have been sent to Ofcom featuring the phrase "political bias" with regard to British television news coverage? How many of these complaints were directed at each of BBC, Channel 4, ITV and STV individually?
- Between January 2012 and February 2017, how many complaints in number did Ofcom receive featuring the phrase "political bias" with regard to British television news coverage? How many of these complaints were directed at ITV, STV, and Channel 4 individually?
- All e-mail conversation between Ofcom and BBC, Channel 4, ITV and STV with regard to political bias?

Before responding to your question, we would like to provide some background information on Ofcom's complaints procedures and reporting.

Complaints about content standards are handled under *Ofcom's Procedures for investigating breaches of content standards for television and radio*<sup>1</sup>.

Ofcom assesses every complaint it receives and whether there may have been a breach of our rules, including the Broadcasting Code. In cases where we think there may have been a breach, we will launch an investigation. The possible outcomes of an investigation are that we decide an issue is in breach, resolved or not in breach of our rules. Ofcom's Broadcast and On Demand Bulletin, published every fortnight on our website, includes decisions about the complaints we have

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<sup>1</sup> Available at:

<https://www.ofcom.org.uk/tv-radio-and-on-demand/information-for-industry/guidance/procedures>

considered here, with reference to the rules in our codes: <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/latest/bulletins/broadcast-bulletins>.

We log complaints on our complaints database by category of the complaint issue (with reference to the rules in our codes). Complaints related to “political bias” would be logged under the categories “Due accuracy”, “Due impartiality/bias” or “Elections/Referendums”. We have therefore searched these categories however please note that the fact that the phrase “political bias” is used may not necessarily mean that it concerned a complaint about bias on the part of the broadcaster.

Please note that prior to April 2017, complaints relating to programmes on BBC Services funded by the licence fee about the above areas were regulated by the BBC Trust.

*Element 1: Since March 2017, how many complaints in number have been sent to Ofcom featuring the phrase "political bias" with regard to British television news coverage? How many of these complaints were directed at each of BBC, Channel 4, ITV and STV individually?*

We carried out a search on our complaints database and from 1 March 2017 to 27 March 2018 Ofcom received 70 complaints which featured the phrase “political bias”, which related to BBC, ITV, STV and Channel 4 as follows:

BBC, 33

ITV, 6

STV, 4

Channel 4, 10

*Element 2: Between January 2012 and February 2017, how many complaints in number did Ofcom receive featuring the phrase "political bias" with regard to British television news coverage? How many of these complaints were directed at ITV, STV, and Channel 4 individually?*

A search on our complaints database for the period from 1 January 2014 to 28 February 2017 returned 714 complaints which featured the phrase “political bias”, which related to BBC, ITV, STV and Channel 4 as follows:

BBC, 66

ITV, 45

STV, 44

Channel 4, 500

*Element 3: All e-mail conversation between Ofcom and BBC, Channel 4, ITV and STV with regard to political bias?*

Regarding your request for all e-mail conversation between Ofcom and the BBC, Channel 4 ITV, and STV with regard to political bias, Ofcom is unable to disclose this information. We think you are asking for e-mail communications with these broadcasters with regard to complaints about political bias.

Section 44 of the Act allows information to be withheld when its disclosure is prohibited under other legislation. Section 393 of the Communications Act 2003 prevents Ofcom disclosing information about a particular business (e.g. complaints regarding political bias) unless we have the consent of that business or releasing that information helps Ofcom to carry out its duties,. This is so that Ofcom can operate effectively by being able to handle and share confidential correspondence with the businesses it regulates. If Ofcom was to make all this correspondence public, it would undermine the confidence that regulated industries have that they can be frank and candid without the fear that these views will be published. Section 393 of the Communications Act anticipated this and prevents Ofcom releasing information if the information is about a particular business, unless it helps Ofcom to carry out its duties. Where we have made decisions about programmes these are listed in the Bulletins. Other exemptions may also apply to such e-mail conversations.

For further information on section 44 of the Act, please see:

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/36/section/44>

It is likely that other exemptions will apply.

We hope this information is of assistance. If you have any queries then please contact [information.requests@ofcom.org.uk](mailto:information.requests@ofcom.org.uk). Please remember to quote the reference number above in any future communications.

Yours sincerely,

## Information Requests

If you are unhappy with the response or level of service you have received in relation to your request from Ofcom, you may ask for an internal review. If you ask us for an internal review of our decision, it will be treated as a formal complaint and will be subject to an independent review within Ofcom. We will acknowledge the complaint and inform you of the date by which you might expect to be told the outcome.

The following outcomes are possible:

- the original decision is upheld; or
- the original decision is reversed or modified.

### Timing

If you wish to exercise your right to an internal review **you should contact us within two months of the date of this letter**. There is no statutory deadline for undertaking internal reviews and it will depend upon the complexity of the case. However, we aim to conclude all such reviews within 20 working days, and up to 40 working days in exception cases. We will keep you informed of the progress of any such review. If you wish to request an internal review, you should contact:

Steve Gettings  
The Secretary to the Corporation  
Ofcom  
Riverside House  
2a Southwark Bridge Road  
London SE1 9HA

If you are not content with the outcome of the internal review, you have the right to apply directly to the Information Commissioner for a decision. The Information Commissioner can be contacted at:

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