

# A New Era for British News?

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(Tayfun Salcı - Anadolu Agency)

Two news channels, GB News and UK News TV, are expected to launch in the United Kingdom in the upcoming months. Their impending introduction to the British media landscape has prompted a slew of controversies. With several founding figures and senior executives hailing from Rupert Murdoch's media empire, predictions on the editorial views and style of the new channels have prompted comparisons with American networks like Fox News. At the same time, broadcast news in the UK is monitored by Ofcom, a regulatory body that requires news to be balanced and accurate. As GB News and UK News TV enter the media landscape, Ofcom is also facing its own challenges, some of which comes from the government itself. This policy outlook will explore the tension between the historical role of broadcast news in the UK and the growing influence of partisan and personality-based media as seen in the United States.



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## Background

Two new news channels, GB News and UK News TV, are expected to launch in the United Kingdom in the upcoming months. Their impending introduction to the British media landscape has prompted a slew of questions and controversies. The British press, in both its broadsheet and tabloid newspaper form, has a long and notorious history of partisanship and sensationalism that has accompanied the ebbs and flows of the country's politics over the last several centuries. In contrast, broadcast news in the UK is a heavily monitored entity that is required to adhere to a set of rules outlined by the Office of Communications, known colloquially as Ofcom. According to Ofcom rules, broadcast news must meet a level of standards and fairness in order to be permitted on air. While the nuances of Ofcom's scope and function have experienced varying levels of scrutiny throughout its existence, the regulator has largely motivated a balanced and trustworthy broadcast news environment.

However, GB News and UK News TV's arrival come at a time in which the media landscape in the UK faces heightened uncertainty and distrust. The two new channels have [advertised](#) their plans to "disrupt the status quo" and cater to Britons who have been "left out and unheard" by traditional media. Leading figures from GB News have also specifically cited inspiration from American media organisations like MSNBC and Fox News. Additionally, UK News TV represents conservative media mogul Rupert Murdoch's latest venture. Murdoch has owned some of the world's best-known media organisations, including Fox News, Sky, *The Times*, and *The Sun*, and has a well-documented political outlook that has raised questions over the nature of this latest project and its compatibility with Ofcom rules.

Moreover, over the course of the last several years, the BBC has become an increasingly divisive topic in British politics. Prime Minister Boris Johnson campaigned on promises to reform and redistribute funds for the public broadcaster, while accusations of left-leaning bias have cultivated an environment of distrust in one of the oldest public media institutions in the world. Thus, GB News and UK News TV's impending entrance into British broadcast media occurs at a time with not only an identified gap in the market but also a larger landscape of uncertainty. This policy outlook will explore this uncertainty within the context of the tension between the historical role of broadcast news in the UK and the growing influence of partisan and personality-based media as seen in the United States.

## Broadcast news standards

Ofcom was created by the [Office of Communications Act 2002](#) as a "super-regulator" for all communications in the United Kingdom. Since the establishment of its mandate, it has continuously expanded in duties. The office has a wide variety of functions, many of which focus on licensing and legal regulations across different communication platforms, but its best-known role is ensuring that televised content [upholds](#) standards, fairness, and privacy. In short, it is Ofcom's role to ensure the accuracy and impartiality of the information presented on television, particularly the news. While initially excluded from the act — but held to the same standards through an internal regulatory board — regulation of the BBC was transferred to Ofcom under the Digital Economy Act of 2017. This transfer of oversight occurred amid criticism, particularly from the Conserva-

tive Party, that the BBC was not being held to the same standards as its fellow broadcasters. The reality of cracking down on violations of ‘standards’ or accuracy more often features breaches of [rules](#) on televised game show competitions or failure to provide publicly accessible information for telecom [contracts](#) than gross misconduct or fake news. The BBC, Sky, Channel Four, and ITV have all been fined in the past for similar incidents; some of these fines have amounted to millions of pounds but have not resulted in long term punishment or permanent closure.

Furthermore, some international news channels have been more severely punished for breaches of impartiality and standards in relation to news coverage or information distribution. In 2019, Russian news network RT was [fined](#) 200,000 pounds over a breach of impartiality in its reporting on both the Syria conflict and the poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal. The Islam Channel Limited was also fined 20,000 pounds in 2020 for broadcasting anti-Semitic messages, in violation of Ofcom’s [hate speech rules](#). The most significant case in recent times, however, occurred when Chinese network CGTN’s licence was revoked due to a [de-terminated](#) lack of editorial independence. The removal of CGTN’s licence for British broadcasting prompted a strong backlash from Chinese authorities, resulting in the banning of the BBC World Service in China. The CGTN case is particularly notable because of the severity of Ofcom’s punishment. Another notable event was Rupert Murdoch’s attempt to bring Fox News, the second-most [popular](#) cable news network in the United States, to the United Kingdom. However, the channel was [pulled](#) from Sky — where it was being broadcast — after three months in 2017 after several anchors were accused of violating Ofcom rules. While Fox cited low audience numbers as its reason for withdrawing from the market, the watchdog had already cited several rule violations and plans to pursue action against the channel. Fox’s brief stint in the UK raises many questions with regards to the future of both GB News and UK News TV. Unlike CGTN, the GB News and UK News TV not only share executives in common with Fox, but, as mentioned, are expected to also share similar editorial perspectives. The extent of the specific comparison between the two will be discussed later in this outlook, but for now, Fox may offer the closest comparison case in analysing precedent in Ofcom’s broadcast policies.

To many Britons, Ofcom represents less of an overarching and nuanced media regulatory body that upholds an intangible standard of journalism, and more of a complaints portal through which the public can directly express unhappiness with what they view on television. Between 2019 and 2020, [Ofcom](#) received 34,545 complaints about 7,289 distinctive issues. While only 130 of those were investigated — 79 of which were later determined to be credible — people continue to use Ofcom as a type of outlet through which the public can air grievances and feel somewhat empowered for what is aired on television. As such, over the years it has become a cultural phenomenon that is reg-

ularly referenced in the tabloids. Complaints filed with Ofcom [overwhelmingly](#) reflect public reactions to reality television, game show competitions, and talk shows. However, there is also a precedent of the public filing complaints of bias or inaccuracy with respect to the news.

Ofcom’s operations are standardised across organisations with the sole exception of the BBC. As mentioned, the BBC was brought under Ofcom authority in 2017. However, complaints about the BBC are still first mitigated by an internal BBC resolution centre prior to being referred to Ofcom. This is known as the [‘BBC First’](#) process. Moreover, if complaints or evidence of rules violations do reach Ofcom, the quango is only [allowed](#) to fine the BBC a maximum of 250,000 pounds per offence, a lesser sum than other channels. While the BBC has indeed been fined by Ofcom over the years, these rules have bolstered existing sentiments among some politicians that the BBC is granted special treatment within the greater media landscape. This argument often coincides with the accusations that the BBC has been permitted to hold a left-leaning bias in its news coverage.

Ofcom has also faced growing criticism, primarily from the Conservative government, over the last several years. In a similar vein to critiques of the BBC itself, Ofcom has been increasingly painted as an antiquated and ineffective organisation that favours the practices of the BBC and allows a liberal bias to persist across British media. Evidence of this criticism is most directly seen through the proposed personnel changes to the body during Boris Johnson’s government. Ofcom is run by a 12-person board comprised of senior figures from most major domestic publications. As per common practice, the chair of the board is appointed by the Prime Minister and becomes the public face of the entity. Prime Minister Johnson is [believed](#) to be preparing to announce his choice for the new head of Ofcom as Paul Dacre. Dacre, the former editor of the tabloid the *Daily Mail*, has been [described](#) as sceptical of the role of bodies like Ofcom that aim to maintain a “well-regulated media”. While Dacre as an individual is not particularly powerful, if appointed he would be at the forefront of the most powerful media regulatory body in the country, a position that sends a powerful message about the government’s intentions for the quango’s future.

It is within this existing political environment that GB News and UK News TV enter the media landscape. As their expected launch dates loom close, domestic and foreign [press](#) across the political spectrum have been quick to make comparisons to Fox news. As mentioned, Fox failed to make a long-lasting and Ofcom-approved impression on the UK public, however, unlike Fox, both new channels will be operated within the UK for a British audience. Thus, the future of the two outlets, especially within the greater uncertainty of the direction of the super-regulator itself, remains uncertain.

## GB News and UK News TV

In the eyes of [some](#), Andrew Neil is one of the most important public figures in British media in the last 25 years. [Known](#) as “the most deadly political interviewer on British TV”, Neil has played crucial roles in several news channels and publications in the United Kingdom. Neil fronted several political and news shows at the BBC for 25 years. He was also the founding chairman of Rupert Murdoch’s Sky News and worked closely with the mogul. Today, Andrew Neil is the chairman and public face of GB News. Under his leadership, GB News has announced that it will [produce](#) “a near 24/7 rolling news service, with original news, opinion and debate programming.” The channel aims to be programme and personality-based, as opposed to the traditional British news models embodied by the BBC. Ofcom has already granted GB News its broadcast licence and announcements of new hires at every level of the organisation — as well as updates on its content, launch date, and design strategy — have been announced frequently and publicly for months across social [media](#). So far, the channel has [emphasised](#) that GB News will reflect a British public that is unhappy with the present media landscape, “wokeness”, and the prioritisation of left-wing and London-based perspectives. The organisation’s advertisement of its respected and diverse team highlights its self-depiction as an employee-driven channel whose views reflect the perspectives of its staff both on and behind the screen.

Andrew Neil himself exhibits a part of that strategy as Neil is a veteran journalist who hails from Glasgow, Scotland (as opposed to the south of England) and has worked with both Murdoch and the BBC alike. Neil outlined a [manifesto](#) of sorts for the upcoming channel in the Sunday Express, in which he described GB News as the next great shakeup in the British broadcast media since Sky News. GB News, he wrote, would be produced to the highest standard of Ofcom rules and succeed in an already crowded market by speaking to Britons who have been left feeling isolated in the current news cycle.

Of course, Ofcom — as well as all the media organisations and a large portion of the public — is waiting to see what kind of impact it will make and whether it will meet the regulator’s terms and conditions. Until the channel launches, it is impossible to predict its success, however, further insight into its founding team members does provide some key insight into its intended editorial direction: Angelos Frangopoulos has joined the operation from Sky News Australia, where he enjoyed a long and positive working relationship with Rupert Murdoch. Unlike the UK version of Sky, the Australian iteration is known to operate with a right-wing perspective and sensationalist tone far closer to the structure of American cable news networks. Frangopoulos has identified that shift himself: “The UK is not the United States and it’s not Australia,” he said in an [interview](#). “This is a very different environment. And quite frankly, I believe a Fox News and a Sky News Australia model would not work here in the same way. GB News will be GB News.



British Prime Minister Boris Johnson leaves 10 Downing Street for a session of Parliamentary tributes to Prince Philip in the House of Commons in London, United Kingdom on April 12, 2021. (David Cliff - Anadolu Agency)

It will be uniquely made for the United Kingdom.” While the new CEO has only offered hints of the future of its relationship with Ofcom, other high-profile figures have shed more light on the subject. John McAndrew, a former figure at the BBC, ITN, Sky News, and NBC, has [joined](#) GB News as the Director of News and Programmes. Sky News veteran Colin Brazier is leaving his post at the news broadcaster after almost 25 years to join GB News. Simon McCoy, a newsreader and journalist, is also departing from the BBC to take a position at the new channel. The list of journalists goes on, making a relatively politically diverse staff from around the UK, all of whom have successfully operated within the Ofcom system. Such inquiry into the staff list causes pause to the immediate comparison between GB News and Fox News that has been floated. As the new CEO suggested himself, GB News aims to introduce a new model for broadcast journalism to the UK press, one that shares the programmes and tones of certain far-right and far-left channels from the US but is run by British journalists with a demonstrated history of both right-of-centre views and participation within with Ofcom’s rules.

While GB News is nearing readiness to launch, Murdoch’s UK News TV appears less developed and fundamentally different in style from its soon-to-be competitor. What information about the channel is available indicates a model closer to a digital tabloid structure that has been brought to broadcast. [David Rhodes](#), a Fox executive, is at the helm of the production and the channel will presently be focused on limited hours of programming and online streaming. UK News TV is also expected to include political and showbiz programmes and be more geared towards an entirely streaming-based audience. As a result, while UK News TV has raised many of the same questions as GB News, its later launch date and expected tabloidesque style suggests a less direct comparison with the broadcast news that dominates TV today.

## Defining fairness in a polarised world

Ofcom’s impartiality rules have been defined by vague language and set in customs by a media landscape of a pre-Brexit political environment. As the British media discourse grows to reflect the irrevocable influence of both the 2016 Brexit referendum and US presidential elections, traditional understandings of fairness have also been impacted by the global reach of American cable news. American influence across the UK’s politics, economy, and culture has been a multifaceted and consistent phenomenon since the end of WWII. However, Donald Trump’s election — as well as the obvious role of the 2016 Brexit referendum — drastically influenced political dichotomies in the United Kingdom, impacting the framework and discourse of the American political sphere on the British market. This shift can be seen not only in changes to traditional understand-

ings of Ofcom’s regulations but also in GB News and UK News TV’s futures.

For example, [LBC](#), or the London Broadcasting Channel, has been in operation since 1973. However, the nationwide expansion of its programming in 2014 prompted its rise to market and political significance. One of the defining features of the now immensely popular radio channel is its radio presences express strong opinions across the political spectrum. LBC offers a modern example of adherence to Ofcom’s partiality rules through the simultaneous inclusion of naturally biased hosts with an overarching diversity of opinions that equates to a ‘balanced’ perspective. Put simply, it is believed LBC has [convinced](#) Ofcom that standards and fairness are guaranteed not in the specific opinions of a single presenter, but rather, in the overall access of diversity of opinions that ultimately balance out, all while remaining factual. So far, LBC — which, as should be mentioned, has adhered to Ofcom’s accuracy and truthfulness requirements — offers a new interpretation of Ofcom’s rules that could prove insightful for GB News and UK News TV. However, GB News presents a new and more direct challenge, as its flagship leadership has highlighted the influence of MSNBC and Fox News on its broadcast model. Additionally, GB News faces different obligations as a news broadcaster instead of a radio programme. Despite Neil Frangopoulos, and other staff’s insistence on valuing Ofcom’s historical role in promoting quality news for the British people, GB News’s revenue is expected to [rely](#) entirely on advertising. The daunting financial challenge of entering a saturated market without assisted funding and with standards of fairness raises the question of how GB News intends to gain a following, sustain a profit, and meet Ofcom’s standards. It would be a mistake to suggest the impossibility of a new network’s successful entrance into British media, especially given the sustained distrust in existing outlets felt by the British public. However, as Andrew Neil [wrote](#) himself, GB News will be a “David among Goliaths, an underdog in a crowded market”.

## This is the BBC

At the centre of any analysis on British media’s future is the BBC. Once largely perceived as a trusted, and sometimes-sole, authority on the news, since 2016, the BBC has experienced growing accusations of bias by Brexiters, Conservative politicians, and a demography of the British public unhappy with its coverage. While this is not the first time the public broadcaster has been accused of bias (on both the right and left of centre), the recent politicisation of the BBC has reached new heights. In fact, Prime Minister Boris Johnson originally campaigned on a platform of reforming the BBC’s structure and budget. Citing talking points that reflect a significant portion of the Conservative MPs’ stance on the institution, Johnson has [questioned](#) if the BBC model is outdated, as it competes with private outlets while being funded by taxes. Moreover, Johnson and

his fellow critics have consistently and loudly challenged the fairness of the BBC's news coverage. Alleging a left, anti-conservative, and London bias, the BBC has been likened to American cable networks like MSNBC, CNN, and Fox News. This allegation of imbalance not only reflects the height of BBC distrust but also showcases the extent to which the American media networks and subsequent journalistic vocabulary have influenced understandings of the modern British press.

This rhetoric has been followed with action: Boris Johnson reportedly [refused](#) to appear to interview on the BBC, including on Andrew Neil's former show, and also tried to discourage senior members of his government from making appearances as well. Johnson has repeatedly questioned the purpose of the BBC's licencing fee and attempted to decriminalise failure to pay the fee — though the corresponding bill for the effort has been tabled in the House of Commons. At the same time, the BBC has been cutting jobs and restructuring its organisation for years. In 2016, the public broadcaster [announced](#) that it would be significantly downsizing staff in order to save around 800 million pounds. More recently, in 2020, BBC News and regional programming [reported](#) 520 and 600 job cuts respectively. In other words, discussion on the role of the BBC today does not only reflect the rhetorical carry over from the United States within a set-in-stone media landscape but rather, also showcases the active pushes for reform from within the UK system, even if influenced by the standards and stardom seen in the US.

Questions over the future of the BBC have also been spurred on by a series of key changes to the broadcaster's leadership. While many of the BBC's senior figures are assigned independently, certain positions are appointed with government oversight. In February of 2021, Boris Johnson appointed Richard Sharp as the new Chairman of the BBC. This announcement sparked intrigue and concern, as Sharp is best [known](#) for his roles at JP Morgan and Goldman Sachs, as well as his position as an advisor to Boris Johnson during his mayoral posting. The assignment of an individual with no media experience and a close connection to Downing Street are the core interlocutor for the BBC and government symbolises the uncertainty and concern faced by proponents of the BBC that the government has plans for future influence over the traditional function of the broadcaster. Moreover, Sharp will serve in the capacity of Chairman through 2027, during which time the licencing of the BBC will have to be re-approved, a semi-regular event that usually includes the politicisation of the public broadcaster's funds within relevant domestic conflict, a reality that will only be heightened by the recent accusations of bias.

Furthermore, the BBC faces challenges beyond Johnson's government. Just as GB News and UK News TV face daunting media markets, the historic public broadcaster

has seen its income fall and viewership turn away from traditional broadcast news and into the arms of online streaming and new media. The BBC's income has [fallen](#) by approximately 30% since 2010; this loss is reportedly due to a freeze in licence fee income and increased funding obligations for programming such as the World Service. In other words, competition for audience has reached new heights, and the market-based challenge the BBC — as well as the other broadcasters — comes at the same time their core purpose and values are being questioned.

Some critics of the BBC and Ofcom often [discuss](#) the two organisations with remarkably similar language. Both institutions, in the eyes of critics, are perceived as left-leaning and fundamentally hindering of the separation from government influence and market competition necessary to create a thriving environment for journalism. While this line of thought is not entirely new, its rising prominence in the highest levels of political debate on the two long-valued institutions indicates, at the very least, a rhetorical influence from across the Atlantic: the notion of the need for an entirely open market— specifically one absent of institutions like regulatory bodies and government-funded broadcasters — for 'free' press development appeared in American domestic politics in the 1980s during the Reagan administration. Decades ago, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) played a more active role in regulating the fairness and accuracy of what was shown on television networks through what was known as the [Fairness Doctrine](#). Similar to Ofcom's mandate, the doctrine aimed to ensure that a portion of the news was strictly dedicated to reporting information for the public interest, and another portion that aired opposing views. However, in 1987 the FCC [announced](#) that it would no longer be adhering to the doctrine as it was deemed no longer necessary to ensure a balanced media landscape. This rationale came from the idea that the press had developed to an extent that the public now had organic access to a diversity of ideas. Crucially, the Reagan administration pushed the narrative that the Doctrine limited freedom of speech and reflected overzealous government oversight on the content of the media. Many have sighted the revoking of the Doctrine and subsequent diminishing role of the FCC as the beginning of unchecked polarisation in the American media, a trajectory that has given rise to Fox News and MSNBC.

It would be a mistake to suggest a direct comparison between the events of Reagan's America and today's United Kingdom. However, the historical precedent, paired with the ever-growing influence of shows like Fox News on global media showcases a potential future path for the British media landscape. Today, the debates around the BBC and Ofcom embody a clash between the historical institutions that have defined broadcasting for years with the rising influence of not only American news channels but American rhetoric with regards to understandings of what it means to have a 'free' press. Interestingly, in many



UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab leaves the BBC headquarters in London, England on November 29, 2020. (Tayfun Salci - Anadolu Agency)

ways, the rise of GB News and UK News TV represents that tension. The two networks now aim to create personality and programme-based media heavily influenced by Fox and MSNBC within the existing standards and regulations of Ofcom and British public broadcasting. What these new channels will look like, and how they will fair among both regulators and the market, will provide key insight into how the modern British media landscape has changed. As a curious public turn to explore new channels, it will also shed light on if these programmes represent the beginning of a new hybridised news model that reflects today's globalised climate, or simply a fruitless endeavour to diminish the dominance of the BBC and traditional broadcasters.

One particular figure does offer some insight into this future: Piers Morgan recently [grabbed](#) global attention when he infamously stormed off the set of Good Morning Britain, a popular morning show, over a debate on Meghan Markle and member of the British royal family, Prince Harry's, interview with Oprah Winfrey. It was later reported that Morgan had quit the show and was on the market for a new job. In many ways, Piers Morgan represents the closest thing to the divisive personalities that often define American news. In fact, Morgan briefly did a stint on CNN but returned to the UK after limited success. Immediately after his dramatic departure, Morgan's name was connected GB News and UK News TV, and rumours circulated about which channel the household name was likely to join. While no official information has connected him to either broadcast, Mor-

gan's presence would suggest specific efforts to adhere closer to the bold and American-influenced model when it comes to presenters and their style.

## Conclusion

As previously discussed, many confirmed members of the GB News team demonstrate less of a stylistic connection to American cable news and more of a track record of launching news in the UK. Chairman Andrew Neil, as well as other senior figures on the team, have played crucial roles in establishing and spearheading Sky News' broadcasts. Amid concerns over a new Fox News, there is an abundant precedent among the GB News staff of working to bring Sky News to the forefront of the modern media landscape well within the bounds of both Ofcom and the market. This track record provides both a moment of political moderation and optimism for the success of the channel, as Sky News once did exactly what Andrew Neil has now outlined as his goal for GB News. Sky News launched in 1989, and much has changed in media since, but as both GB News and UK News TV prepare to tackle the challenging media market at the same time as household institutions like the BBC and Ofcom experience unprecedented levels of opposition, it appears more likely that they will come to represent a new competitor in a tough market rather than a dramatic disruptor that will prompt the irrevocable dismantling of the UK's historic media institutions.