



GB News will offer viewers a new choice – within the rules. Which is precisely why the left fears it.

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There's a fundamental conflation error in much coverage of the soon-to-air GB News. From the *Guardian's* [Marina Hyde](#) to the campaign group "Stop Funding Hate," many on the left think that because Andrew Neil, the project's founder, and Angelos Frangopoulos, its Chief Executive Officer, are vocal about incumbent broadcasters' inadequacies, GB News is somehow "anti-impartiality."

The thesis goes like this: "Andrew Neil says he wants GB News to counter an "increasingly woke and out of touch" news media, which is "too metropolitan, too southern and too middle-class." That sounds like he wants a very partial right-wing channel pushing culture war politics, and acting as a political mouthpiece for the Conservatives. Have you seen what's happened with Fox News in America?"

Now given GB News hasn't aired yet, and repeatedly says it is committed to the UK's impartiality rules, which the US doesn't have, speculating like this seems a bit unhinged. For the record, as a libertarian, I really do object to the [Ofcom rules](#) on free speech grounds, especially given the rampant discretion in [interpreting them](#). But my views aren't the point here: the new channel's critics are confusing different concepts – "impartiality" rules and the inevitability of human "bias."

Ofcom's rules insist on "due accuracy" and "due impartiality." Broadcasters have a responsibility to use facts accurately and to explore different viewpoints on a show, or across episodes of the show, on news matters for news shows or issues of political controversy generally. Presenters can express opinions, especially where viewers expect them, but other viewpoints should be represented, even if only through presenters challenging guests from various perspectives.

"Due impartiality," then, is about making efforts to hear different sides of a story, without a strict requirement for equal airtime or a duty to cover all views. It's what Andrew Neil himself is a master at as a political interviewer.

Yet as Channel 4 News shows us every day, you can meet due impartiality rules while still being "biased" in the loosest sense of the word. To be unbiased means not having any personal prejudice and predilection. Yet relative biases are inevitable: journalists ultimately must make

subjective editorial decisions on what to cover, who to interview, and how to present arguments. All these are shaped by the prior views of journalists.

Past and present BBC employees, including Andrew Marr, Peter Sissons, and Roger Mosey, admit, for example, that given the background and demographics of BBC staff, the organisation is biased towards a left-liberal worldview compared with the UK population. Nobody can watch or listen to BBC shows without concluding they are hostile to free enterprise, anti-Brexit, anti-Israel, and usually anti-questioning of the policy response to climate change. Yet the BBC can exhibit these relative biases without falling foul of Ofcom regulations.

A left-liberal BBC worldview can create “biases by omission,” where certain viewpoints are just not entertained as serious. Hardly ever does a BBC watcher see a libertarian objection to a government function. For years before the referendum too, except for Nigel Farage, you would rarely hear someone who explicitly wanted Britain to leave the EU, despite at least a third of the population backing that policy.

We see “bias by selection” too. How many more major TV items do we see on inequality or climate change, over the importance of economic growth? Or appearances by left-leaning Nobel prize winning economist Paul Krugman rather than, say, Eugene Fama? The evaluative judgments of journalists considering what’s important or appropriate guests reflect their own prejudices.

Then, of course, there’s “bias by presentation.” The way guests are treated can tilt the deck. This might come through interruptions, or via “health warnings” that make viewers question a guest’s credibility. Other times it can come from the presentation of a statistic: remember the BBC’s Norman Smith describing spending cuts as taking us “back to the 1930s”?

Now some biases, no doubt, are in the eyes of a beholder. There are Corbynistas who think that the corporation is biased against the left, after all. SNP types often see it as a unionist propaganda unit, and many republicans think it overly dotes on the Royal Family (which is tougher to argue after this week).

So my point here is not to suggest then that the BBC is uniquely biased against conservatives or that some totally unbiased media organisation is even attainable in reality. It’s to simply point out that believing the public is ill-represented by the current news media’s cultural biases, and so building an institution to ameliorate them, is just not synonymous with trampling on due impartiality rules.

In fact, it’s perfectly within the Ofcom rules to build a news channel that will run different stories or perspectives – and Neil wants to run “good news” stories and shift away from assuming every problem has a government solution. You are allowed to hire, as GB News has, card-carrying conservatives, ex-Labour MPs or people from outside of London with very different assumptions in thinking about what news is important. And, yes, you are free to have colourful presenters with attitude to liven up discussions, provided you still showcase various perspectives.

Why, then, are some on the left so afraid of this pluralism? Maybe they don’t accept biases exist on other news channels (Channel 4 News, really?), and so think any stated attempt to counter them is retrogressive. Perhaps they simply fear a politically strengthened conservatism. For

others, no doubt, there is a concern that the Government's mooted appointment of Paul Dacre to Ofcom is a precursor to watering down impartiality rules as well.

But given that no such policy has been signalled, and we have not yet seen GB News in action, we must judge them at their word. Neil himself thinks, rightly, that a "British Fox" riding roughshod over Ofcom rules just wouldn't be successful. "Overwhelmingly, Brits value impartiality and accuracy and, during recent years, in fact, the proportion of Brits thinking the BBC and ITV provide an impartial service has fallen." GB News is keen to harness that particular audience, yes. But having spoken to numerous staffers, they are determined to avoid political bias, and to be robust in providing respectful disagreement more broadly too.

That's the key point here: Ofcom's rules that say "news, in whatever form, must be reported with due accuracy and presented with due impartiality" still leaves huge scope to decide what to cover, who to interview, and how to present the stories. Those regulations require hosting various perspectives and doing so accurately. But we still live in a world with enough liberty for a new channel to attempt to reach an audience and hire journalists with different priors and interests to employees of the BBC or the *Guardian*. And, you know what? That's a good thing.

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