



A hard time for legacy media and the BBC

The BBC has been in the public spotlight recently with accusations about its competence and political 'bias.'

John Williams asks, what exactly is going on?

Historically, the BBC has been a highly respected central component of the so-called 'legacy media' in Britain. It values its objectivity, independence and balance and, unlike the state media in other parts of the world, it is supported, but not controlled, by government. Its main source of funding is an annual licence fee, paid by all those citizens who watch its programmes and use BBC services. This funding is subject to regular assessment and renewal by the UK government and it is beginning to be questioned by some. Nevertheless, the news output on the BBC World Service is watched all over the globe and the organisation is often said to be among the most trusted and reliable news source of all media services.

What has gone wrong at the BBC?

Well, media organisations this large and powerful are always liable to make the occasional mistake, but recently the BBC has been accused of intentionally parking its 'objectivity' and taking up left-wing or 'woke' positions on a range of issues, including trans rights and the war in Gaza. An internal review seemed to uphold some of these criticisms. Perhaps the BBC, as a public sector organisation, based in multicultural central London, employing graduates interested in politics and likely to have imbibed liberal views, is consequently likely to have an inbuilt liberal bias?

But the biggest recent accusation has been about the alleged doctoring of a speech given by the American president Donald Trump and covered in a BBC Panorama documentary 'Trump: A Second Chance?' The programme took two separate parts of a speech Trump gave on 6 January 2021 (ahead of a dangerous riot at the Capitol in Washington), and spliced them together to make it appear that Trump was actively encouraging violence. Trump threatened to sue – and possible to ruin – the BBC, and its

director general Tim Davie, and CEO of its news division Deborah Turness, both resigned as a result. Some reports also suggest that the secretary of state for culture, media and sport, Lisa Nandy, had, very forcefully, telephoned the chair of the BBC board on a number of similar issues, bringing into question the organisation's independence in its editorial decision-making.

Lost objectivity, or a search for political balance?

Defenders of the BBC have pointed out that some of its recent coverage may have been, in part, a response to media news organisations that have recently emerged to offer an unashamedly right-wing perspective on British and global politics and other matters. These include GB News, Talk TV, and Times Radio. The social media site X, owned by American billionaire and Trump supporter Elon Musk, also offers a daily menu of anti-immigration stories in favour of the new right-wing force in British politics, the Reform Party. Accusations were also made about *right-wing* bias: the large number of appearances of Reform's Nigel Farage on BBC's *Question Time*, for example, or the negative BBC coverage of Labour's Jeremy Corbyn, and the right-leaning political background of some senior BBC staff.

GB News routinely employs current and past right-wing politicians on its output. Early in 2025, the media regulator, Ofcom, was forced to drop impartiality investigations into politicians' TV and radio programmes, following a High Court decision to overturn Ofcom's past rulings against a GB News show hosted by the ex-Tory MP Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg. Ofcom was forced to discontinue the remaining six investigations into possible breaches of rules prohibiting politicians from presenting TV news programmes. Critics argued that Britain was increasingly becoming like the USA in terms of its politically partial 'news' coverage.



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Questions and activities

As a class or in small groups, discuss the following:

- What is the value – if any – of maintaining a publicly funded organisation such as the BBC in this new media landscape?
- Should we just accept that all 'news' output today will inevitably have some kind of political bias?
- Do we need more – or less – regulation of media producers in this increasingly competitive news market?

Use the following links to learn more about this issue:

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