

Sky News Acts Largely as a Platform for the UK Defence and Foreign Ministries, Research Finds

By [Mark Curtis](#)

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Declassified UK's analysis of the written outputs of three of Sky News' principal foreign affairs journalists has found that the media outlet acts largely to amplify the views of the British Ministry of Defence and Foreign Office, while rarely offering critical, independent analysis.

A study by *Declassified*, covering 203 articles written by Deborah Haynes, Alistair Bunkall and Dominic Waghorn, has found that Sky routinely amplifies the views of the UK government in its military and foreign policies and provides almost no serious attempts to independently scrutinise or criticise them.

The research, which has analysed all articles by the three correspondents that could be found from November 2019 to November 2020, found that the primary focus of Sky's critical reporting has overwhelmingly been countries presented by British officials as enemies of the UK – Russia, China and Iran – as well as the US under Donald Trump.

Two of the reporters, Haynes and Bunkall, offered no serious critical coverage of UK military or foreign policies or the human rights abuses committed by Britain's close allies, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Israel, which all receive substantial UK military and other support. Waghorn's articles offered only very occasional critical coverage.

In Sky's written outputs, British government officials and their claims are routinely quoted favourably, with little or no independent commentary, context, or qualifications provided by the journalists.

Declassified's analysis does not cover the video outputs of these and other Sky journalists, nor all of its journalists reporting on foreign affairs, and therefore offers a partial picture of Sky's foreign news reporting.

However, Haynes is Sky's foreign affairs editor, Alistair Bunkall is its defence and security correspondent and Dominic Waghorn its diplomatic editor.

Deborah Haynes provides the most striking example of reporting favourable to the UK government. Of the 107 of her articles analysed in the research, *Declassified* found 39 with the words Russia, China, Iran or Belarus in the headline. No headlines could be found that

mentioned UK-allied states such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Israel or Bahrain.

Declassified found 670 mentions of the four UK rival states in Haynes' articles and 25 for the four UK-allied states.

Haynes' articles covering UK foreign policies were few in number but routinely tended to reinforce government messaging. Several articles were based on uncritical interviews or press conferences with figures such as the [chief](#) of the defence staff, the head of the domestic security service, [MI5](#), the head of signals intelligence agency [GCHQ](#), the [head](#) of UK Strategic Command, the [head](#) of the Royal Air Force, and the [foreign secretary](#).

Some other articles are based on unidentified "[sources](#)" in the Ministry of Defence (MOD) or [Whitehall](#). These pieces typically allow officials to put forward government positions, especially on alleged increasing threats to the UK posed by Russia, unfiltered by independent scrutiny.



Deborah Haynes (centre) speaks at an event on drone warfare in 2013. (Photo: Chatham House / Creative Commons 2.0)

Dr Justin Schlosberg, a media specialist at Birkbeck, University of London, said:

"This research provides yet another example of how, all too often, journalists at the biggest and most respected news brands tend to treat official sources with enormous deference – especially those from within the security state.

He added:

"This fundamental blind spot has had disastrous consequences in recent years – notably in skewing public attention away from inconvenient conflicts and issues, and allowing the UK government to broadly shape Sky's foreign news agenda."

Informing the public

Haynes' articles often simply convey the view of the MOD to the public without distinguishing whether government messaging is correct or false, in effect adding to Whitehall's public relations machinery.

For example, a [series](#) of [articles written](#) in April 2020, at the beginning of the coronavirus emergency, highlight the armed forces' role in aiding the domestic response to the pandemic, which appear largely to be simply passing on information from the MOD, unfiltered by independent commentary.

Many of Haynes' articles contain approving quotes and articulate positions supportive of the government's military and foreign policies, especially on threats posed by Russia and China.

"Russian cyber spies are trying to steal research into coronavirus vaccines and treatments from Britain, the US and Canada, the three countries claimed on Thursday", Haynes [wrote](#) in July 2020, in an article sourced to GCHQ.

In December 2019, Haynes [wrote](#):

"Efforts by states such as Russia to break international rules, undermine democratic governments and exploit divisions in societies pose a far more insidious danger to the security that Britain and its allies have enjoyed since the end of the Second World War."

Haynes made no similar statements that could be found about any threats posed to international security by the US or the UK.

In one of several articles on China, Haynes [observed](#) in June 2020:

"China is in the ascendancy while an international system of rules and institutions that underpin UK power and influence is under increased strain".

Haynes conveys the view promoted by the establishment that NATO is a purely defensive alliance needing to contain an expansionist Russia. She [wrote](#) in June 2020, for example:

"NATO was established to defend against the former Soviet Union and is now actively pushing back against Russian activities".

Russia has violated international law in several areas, notably in its illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, and is believed to be behind attacks in the UK – such as the murder of former KGB officer Alexander Litvinenko in London in 2006 and the attempted poisoning of former Russian intelligence officer Sergei Skripal in Salisbury, southern England, in 2018.

However, Russia's abuse of international rules is typical of all "great powers", including the US and the UK which are also serial [violators](#) of international law and contributors to human rights abuses, unmentioned in any article by Haynes that could be found.

UK policies concerning its occupation of the Chagos Islands, its role in US drone wars, its

covert military policies, the detention and torture of Julian Assange, its complicity in the torture of terror suspects in the “war on terror”, and mass surveillance techniques practised by GCHQ, are all instances of policies violating domestic or international law.

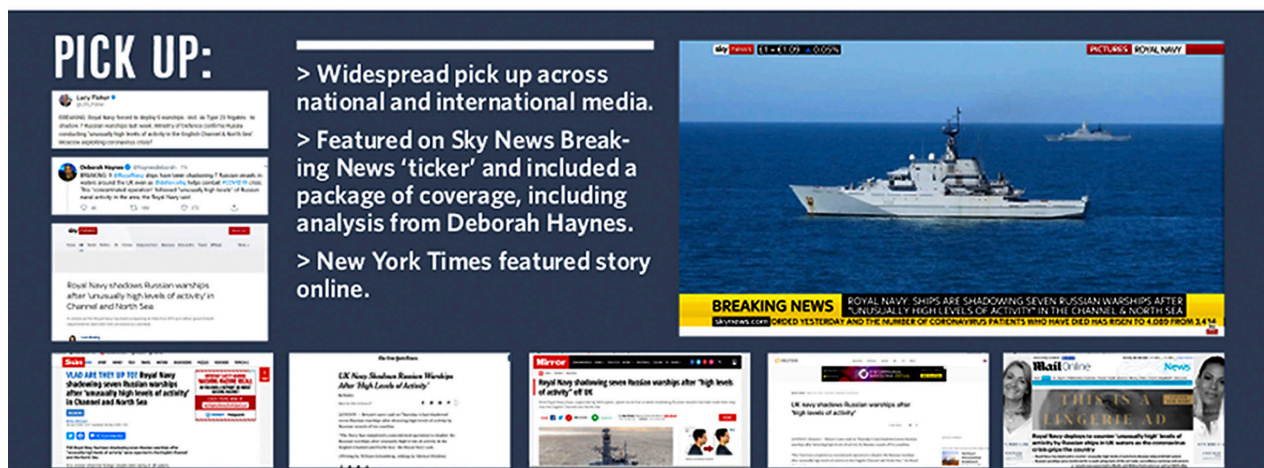
Our research could find no mentions of these policies in the articles reviewed. The focus of British journalists on official enemies rather than the UK itself suggests they are keener to contribute to political objectives than to hold their own authorities to account.

A freedom of information response from the MOD to *Declassified* indicates how much the military values Haynes’ reporting.

When Russian naval ships sailed through the English Channel in March 2020, MOD media officers noted approvingly that a [Royal Navy press release](#) had received: “Repeated broadcast on Sky News, featuring analysis from Deborah Haynes and breaking news ‘ticker’”.

MEDIA SNAPSHOT

ROYAL NAVY SHADOWS SEVEN RUSSIAN WARSHIPS IN THE CHANNEL AND NORTH SEA



An assessment of coverage of the the Russian Navy transits produced by the Royal Navy’s media team in March 2020. (Photo: Ministry of Defence via Declassified UK)

Rivalries

Haynes, who was previously defence editor at *The Times* and has worked at Sky since 2018, is an honorary [member](#) of the Pen & Sword Club, an invitation-only organisation created by Territorial Army press officers.

She is highly supportive of British military policy, her [articles](#) describing Britain’s “nuclear deterrent” as “vital to the UK’s national security”, for example.

In February 2020 she [argued](#):

“Sources in Whitehall... said they are sceptical whether Mr Johnson and his top

adviser, Dominic Cummings, will achieve the overhaul of spending priorities that is needed to achieve generational change to match the changing nature of war and keep up with rivals like Russia and China.”

Haynes’ adoption of the views of the Foreign Office is noticeable in her articles. In a piece on Afghanistan in March 2020, she [claimed](#):

“The international community bowed in with laudable aims of creating a democratic government in Afghanistan and offering its war-weary ... people the chance to enjoy a Western-style democracy and a country no longer reliant on funding from the opium trade.”

The claim paints a rosy view of Anglo-American goals in Afghanistan and ignores how Western countries have consistently allied with repressive regimes in the Middle East and South Asia – from Egypt to Sri Lanka – before, during and after the invasion of Afghanistan.

Haynes also amplifies the establishment notion that the UK is a supporter of human rights in its foreign policy.

In an [article](#) in February 2020 on the subject of British fighters for Islamic State in Syria being required to come back to the UK to face justice, she wrote:

“There will be those who shrug their shoulders at the prospect of such a fate for British citizens accused of involvement in a murderous organisation that terrorised the world. But if Britain starts to compromise its democratic values of human rights and the rule of law because it is just too difficult, then terrorist groups like IS – which seek to undermine those principles – have won.”

Again, Haynes’s generalisation fails to account for how Britain’s Foreign Office routinely allies with repressive regimes, such as Saudi Arabia, to secure oil and arms deals at the expense of human rights or anti-corruption.

Haynes wrote in an [article](#) in June 2020 about Sir Simon McDonald, who was retiring as the permanent secretary to the Foreign Office:

“Sir Simon has enjoyed a hugely successful career during 38 years of diplomatic service”. It is not clear what definition of success was being used.

Haynes added in support of her claim:

“He [McDonald] has been posted around the world, including to Germany, Saudi Arabia, the US and Israel. Sir Simon was ambassador to Berlin from 2010 to 2015 and ambassador to Israel from 2003 to 2006.”

Haynes did not mention that throughout McDonald’s tenure at the top of the Foreign Office, Britain continued to, among other policies, arm and support Saudi Arabia’s war in Yemen, a conflict which turned the country into the world’s worst humanitarian crisis with millions on the brink of famine.

Both Haynes and Alistair Bunkall covered the story emanating from [US intelligence sources](#), which was also widely picked up in other traditional media, that Russia offered “bounties” in Afghanistan to Taliban-linked militias in order to kill British and other NATO forces. However, the veracity of the claim was unclear and was [described](#) as “uncorroborated” by a US intelligence official.

Despite a history of official sources providing false information, however, Sky reporters took at face value the word of the UK security establishment.

“Moscow dismissed the claims as ‘fake news’. But British and European security officials say the US intelligence is ‘credible’”, Haynes [wrote](#).

Bunkall similarly [assured readers](#):

“British security officials have confirmed to Sky News that the reports about the plot are true”.

Safe pair of hands

Declassified's analysis found 64 articles by Sky's defence correspondent Alistair Bunkall in the review period, many of which focused on Russia and coronavirus in the US. His [brief](#) at Sky is to cover “global security issues from conflict to counter-terrorism”.

Similar to Haynes, Bunkall's articles largely provide a platform for the British military and security services, often uncritically carrying the views of officials such as the [chief](#) of the defence staff and reporting [information](#) largely from the MOD.

The security establishment appears to regard Bunkall as a safe recipient for its public relations work. In September 2020, for example, Bunkall was given “[rare access](#)” to the “army's elite Pathfinder unit”, many of whose members also work in the Special Air Service (SAS), which was on a joint exercise in Ukraine to “practise covert insertion techniques”.

Such access tends to be given by officials to journalists who can be relied on to report government policies favourably.

Similarly, in November 2019, Bunkall was granted an [interview](#) with the head of MI6, Sir Alex Younger, billed as “the first time ever that a serving chief of MI6 has given a recorded interview”.

Bunkall did not provide independent commentary on, or examination of, MI6's world role in the piece. Nor does he appear to have asked Younger any questions critical of MI6, such as the agency's [role](#) in working alongside Islamist militias in Libya, one of whose members went on to kill 22 people at the Manchester Arena in 2017, or its role in illegal [renditions](#) of terror suspects and torture.

Younger was instead allowed to expound the view that the UK faced a “high point” of threats from Russia, China, Iran and terrorism.

Sky's biography of Bunkall [states](#):

“He has been given unprecedented access to some of the UK’s most secretive establishments: GCHQ, the Trident nuclear deterrent, the country’s highly secure air command bunker and the UK’s covert drone base in the Middle East”.

In an [article](#) in October 2020 entitled “Over in minutes: Special Boat Services’s ‘textbook’ raid shows why they have a fearsome reputation”, Bunkall described an operation by the navy’s special forces, the Special Boat Squadron (SBS), to board a supposedly hijacked ship off the coast of the Isle of Wight in southern England.

It was “another faultless operation”, Bunkall wrote. “The brave work of the SBS, for so long unfairly in the shadow of their Hereford cousins, the SAS ... are building a fearsome global reputation”.

It was later [reported](#) that no hijacking took place and charges were dropped against the stowaways on board for lack of evidence there was any attempt to take control of the ship.

Despite Bunkell’s praise for Britain’s special forces, in 2019 the United Nations launched an [investigation](#) into claims that the SBS was fighting alongside child soldiers on covert operations in Yemen.

Bunkall’s commentary, like Haynes’, invariably supports and tends to echo concerns of the UK military, especially on the Russian threat. For example, Bunkall [wrote](#) in December 2019, on the 70th anniversary of the founding of NATO, that the organisation “is the longest, largest and most successful military alliance in history”.

He added in a second [article](#) on the subject:

“NATO is rightly proud of its 70-year history – it has achieved great things in that time and remains the diplomatic and military union around which our security is still built.”

No mention was made of, for example, the NATO intervention in Libya in 2011 which nearly destroyed the country and contributed to Libya acting as a [base](#) for international [terrorism](#).

Bunkall added:

“In recent years Russia has ruthlessly exposed western splits and if NATO members continue to drift in different directions then Moscow will fill the cracks.”

Again echoing British security officials, he also wrote:

“The world is a no less dangerous place today than it was during the Cold War but the threats we face are more complex, more nuanced and more diverse.”

The benevolent US

The third journalist analysed, Sky’s diplomatic editor Dominic Waghorn, is [described](#) by Sky

as one its most experienced foreign correspondents, and mostly covered coronavirus and US politics in 32 articles found in the period under review. Several of these articles were strongly critical of President Trump.

At the same time, Waghorn's praise for the US role in the world was often striking. He [wrote](#) in November 2020:

"America built the world we live in, it was the architect of the post-war world order, its institutions, and the rules and agreements that have made our lives safer and more prosperous than they would otherwise have been".

The following month Waghorn was even more effusive in his claim of a benevolent US role in the world, [writing](#):

"America led efforts to build the postwar world order, a system of democratic and international institutions designed to keep the world prosperous and safe."

He made these claims, contrasting them with Trump's presidency, despite well-documented US postwar [policies](#) to foment coups, overthrow democratic governments and support human rights-abusing regimes, violating many international laws.

Unlike his colleagues, however, Waghorn did mention in a handful of articles countries where UK government policies are highly controversial, especially in supporting dictatorships and human rights abuses.

In [November 2019](#), Waghorn mentioned British support for the military regime of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in Egypt which had come to power after it "carried out a series of massacres, using military snipers to kill hundreds of protesters", including Sky cameraman Mick Deane.

Waghorn added correctly: "Despite all this it continues to enjoy the support of the British government, both diplomatically and financially." Such mentions of British support for Sisi have been unusual in the British media.

In a further [article](#) on Egypt in February 2020, however, Waghorn failed to mention UK support for the regime and excused British and Western support for the previous dictatorship under Hosni Mubarak. He wrote:

"Outside powers, including Britain, fell for Mubarak's claim that only he stood in the way of his country collapsing in chaos and propped him up".

He provided no evidence to support this claim as to why Mubarak received British support. The more likely reason is that Egypt offered [favourable terms](#) to British big business interests, such as to oil giant BP.

Waghorn also wrote what was largely a [puff piece](#) on the British-backed dictator of Oman, Sultan Qaboos, on his death in January 2020. He claimed Qaboos "used oil money to turn his desperately poor country into a rich stable oasis" and that his "five decades in power have transformed the living standards and welfare of his subjects".

Waghorn qualified this rosy picture by stating:

“Critics say the stability and prosperity of Oman has come at a cost, the intolerance of dissent that comes with absolute rule.”

But there was no mention of the systematic [repression](#) meted out by the Sultan over those five decades or his ban on political parties, independent media and free speech.

Missing policies

When aspects of UK foreign or military policies are criticised in articles by Haynes or Bunkall, the focus is invariably on relatively minor, less controversial issues. For example, Haynes wrote two [articles](#) about a submarine commander losing his job after throwing a barbecue under coronavirus lockdown and a [piece](#) on whether NATO was too slow in responding to the pandemic.

Haynes lamented in one [article](#) “that Britain has fallen short in its role as a leading, influential, serious democracy on the world stage” – a standard argument used by pro-establishment voices who seek an even greater British role in the world.

Similarly, Bunkall wrote critically on the UK government’s lack of [representation](#) at an international security conference in February 2020.

Haynes did mention in passing in one [article](#): “The Ministry of Defence’s procurement practices have come under heavy and repeated criticism for waste, mismanagement and incompetence for decades.” But her strongest criticism of the British military that could be found was a long [piece](#) in May 2020 about sexism and harassment in the army.

In an [article](#) in September in 2020, Bunkall quoted defence secretary Ben Wallace mentioning Britain’s military presence in Oman and Bahrain, but he did not write about the nature of these regimes or why the British policy might be controversial.

Declassified found scant mention by the three journalists of Britain’s war in Yemen, which has raged for nearly six years. No article by Sky’s foreign affairs editor could be found covering the conflict. One [article](#) written by Bunkall came in July 2020 highlighting opposition to the UK’s decision to resume arms exports to Saudi Arabia.

Declassified also found one [article](#) by Waghorn on the Yemen war, in September 2020, which mentioned that Britain and the US have supplied the Saudis “with weapons and warplanes and insist they have the right to defend themselves”. It added that the air offensive “has led to enormous numbers of civilian casualties”.

Declassified has seen some [reporting](#) by Sky’s Alex Crawford on the impact of UK-backed air strikes in Yemen. It is not clear the extent to which Haynes, Bunkall or Waghorn have covered Yemen in their video reporting.

Opposition and protest

While Haynes has covered sympathetically opposition and protests against the repressive regimes in Belarus and Hong Kong, in line with Whitehall’s positions, no coverage by her could be found of similar crackdowns by UK-supported regimes in Bahrain or Egypt.

Haynes' only [coverage](#) of Bahrain was when she was "given rare access to a patrol with the Bahrain navy" in the Gulf in February 2020. During this visit, a Bahraini naval officer "showed me the ship's weapons", Haynes wrote.

The article contained no mention of the nature of the repressive Bahraini regime and its extensive [links](#) to the British military and intelligence services. Her report was published at a time of mounting concern over Bahrain's human rights record, after a court had upheld the death sentences of two political prisoners in January.

Haynes quotes foreign secretary Dominic Raab in at least 10 of her articles, according to our research, but no serious critical mentions or scrutiny of the government's foreign policy could be found.

Haynes interviewed Raab in an exclusive [interview](#) in the Locarno suite of the Foreign Office in June 2020, basing her article on UK policy towards China. She quoted him as saying, "I think Britain still has an incredible role in the world as a force for good," but did not noticeably ask him about British policy towards any of the Gulf regimes it supports, Egypt, Israel or the war in Yemen, for example.

In an article in December 2019, Haynes [noted](#) in passing that "Western powers, including the United States and Britain, supported the uprising against President Assad in 2011. But they are not key players any more."

Haynes has not apparently mentioned in her reporting in the review period the years-long British covert [operation](#) in Syria to overthrow the Assad regime.

Sky News, previously owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, is now owned by Comcast, a US-based media corporation. Comcast [bought](#) Sky plc in 2018 in a £29.7-billion takeover.

Deborah Haynes, Alistair Bunkall and Dominic Waghorn were approached for comment.

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Mark Curtis is the editor of Declassified UK, an investigative journalism organisation that covers the UK's role in the world. James Broadway contributed to the research.

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