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On shaky ground: the BBC in a post-consensus age

Sobre arenas movedizas: la BBC en la era del post-consenso

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Abstract

This article reflects on the BBC's role in (re)shaping a hegemonic agenda consensus and offers a radical appraisal of its public service performance at a time of unprecedented political upheaval in the UK. It draws on a recent case study to suggest that the BBC's overarching lean towards an elite and ideological worldview is increasingly exposed, and can no longer be defended with recourse to notions of due impartiality.

Resumen

Este artículo propone una reflexión acerca del rol de la BBC a propósito de la reconfiguración de la agenda de consenso hegemónico, al tiempo que ofrece una evaluación radical de la actuación de su servicio público en un tiempo de convulsión política sin precedentes en Reino Unido. Se parte de un reciente caso de estudio para sugerir que la supremacía de la BBC en torno a una élite y a una visión ideológica del mundo, está cada vez más cuestionada, de modo que ya no puede ser defendida en relación a nociones de debida imparcialidad.

Keywords

BBC, PSB journalism, ideological bias, diversity Jeremy Corbyn, content analysis

Palabras clave:

BBC, periodismo de Medios Públicos, sesgo ideológico, diversidad, Jeremy Corbyn, análisis de contenidos.

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1. Introduction

The BBC is by any measure a market leader in news and current affairs, both within the UK and on the global news stage. In terms of reach and consumption, it has a dominant presence within the UK on all three of the major news platforms (television, radio and online). More importantly perhaps – from the perspective of agenda impact – it is by far the most trusted news source. BBC television news in particular is ranked higher than all of its closest competitors in this respect (Ofcom, 2016), with 61 percent of audiences considering it both an accurate and trustworthy news source (compared to, for instance, 45 percent who trust CNN).

Market fundamentalists critique the BBC's dominant position as a threat to competition and plurality – especially vis-à-vis the commercial press (eg Elstein, 2015). But they fail to account for the degree to which the BBC's output reflects and reinforces an elite and ideological consensus promoted in large part by the commercial newspapers themselves. For instance, a study by Cardiff University on coverage of the 2015 UK general election found that over half of the election policy items on BBC television news were published previously by national newspapers (Cushion et al., 2016). A study on the coverage of the 2017 general election showed that the BBC's explicit attention to newspaper coverage was not only skewed in line with the predominantly Conservative-leaning national press, but that this imbalance was amplified by sources invited to comment on newspaper stories (Renton & Schlosberg, 2017).

There is a vast literature of empirical research involving BBC coverage which has unveiled clear instances of ideological bias in issue representation and construction (Glasgow University Media and Beharrell, 1976; Schlesinger, Murdock et al. 1983; Miller 1994). As far back as the General Strike in 1926, the BBC's interpretation and application of public service news values has tended to structurally and systematically privilege elite sources (Mills, 2016).

Mike Berry's influential study on coverage of the bank bailout in 2008 offers cogent insights in to how imbalances in sourcing can ideologically slant coverage at key moments in policy deliberation and heightened public debate (Berry, 2015). The bailout package proposed by the UK government was generally

preferred by banking executives and other financial elites and in the weeks leading up to the decision, these were the most prominent sources featured on the BBC's flagship *Today Programme*. The bailout package promised a huge injection of public funds into the most endangered banks in return for preference shares (rather than voting shares) and without any guarantees about lending to the wider economy or controversial remuneration structures for bank employees. The cost to the taxpayer was to be a generation of austerity. But at least one alternative to the government's bailout plan was nationalisation; an option endorsed by Joseph Stiglitz (among others), a nobel prize-winning economist and one of the world's leading commentators on the financial crisis. But proponents of this alternative were not featured at all on the *Today Programme* during the weeks leading up to and immediately after the bail out. Whilst some degree of debate was admitted, this fell far short of nationalisation being considered at any point as a credible option. During a crucial moment of policymaking in the immediate aftermath of the global financial collapse, the BBC appeared to be complicit in closing down debate in favour of financial elites.

At the same time, there have been a number of cases in recent decades which suggest the BBC remains deeply wedded to a contested definition of issues and world problems advanced by the state. For instance, although the BBC was widely perceived as falling foul of the government during the aftermath of the Iraq War in 2003 (resulting in an unprecedented capitulation symbolised by the resignation of its two most senior figures), it's news coverage was in all senses 'embedded' with official sources during the combat phase of that war (Lewis, 2006). The BBC also failed to report adequately on leaks within the 'Cablegate' tranche of documents released in 2010, which posed critical questions of UK's conduct of foreign policy and diplomacy (Schlosberg, 2013). These included communiqués that suggested Britain's long-running and controversial Iraq War Inquiry had been systematically undermined by government officials from the outset; that legal loopholes had been cynically exploited by British and American governments in order to maintain a stockpile of US cluster bomb munitions on British territory; or that British military personnel were involved in the training of a Bangladeshi paramilitary group in Bangladesh dubbed a 'death squad' by one human rights group (Human Rights Watch, 2011). Such stories attracted no more than a brief mention on any of the BBC's television news output. When its most senior

foreign correspondent was asked by a news anchor to reflect on the impact of the leaks, he remarked simply that:

An awful lot of it is really not much more than refined tittle-tattle and the only thing that I've really raised my eye brows at is the suggestion - and you've got to put a question mark over it - that a Chinese diplomat said to a South Korean diplomat 'we don't really care if Korea is united under South Korean control' [...] If true, that is potentially important.¹

In the remainder of the article, this dependency on elite definitions is examined through the lens of a recent case study representing a critical juncture in what Bennett et al. (1985) called a news paradigm. The BBC's coverage of the crisis within the Labour party in 2016 revealed a disproportionate platform given to critical accounts of Jeremy Corbyn's leadership on flagship BBC news programmes and at a crucial moment of political instability. It raises critical questions both in respect of enduring concerns about the BBC's independence, as well its evolving interpretation and application of due impartiality, especially in the midst of high profile and intense political controversies and instability.

2. Research aims and context

The professional news media in general has been –in multiple senses– on the front lines of controversy surrounding Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party. In November 2015, the Media Reform Coalition produced research which showed that newspapers overwhelmingly sought to attack Corbyn's leadership credentials from the moment he was elected (Cartwright, 2015). In June 2016, the London School of Economics published research based on a more extensive analysis of newspaper coverage that reached similar conclusions (Cammaerts et al., 2016). Many of the most salient stories and issues observed in those studies reached fever pitch during the

¹ BBC Newsnight, 3 December 2010

political fallout following the EU referendum, and Labour's existential crisis that ensued.

In 2016, the Media Reform Coalition conducted a further study of coverage over a crucial 10-day period following the first wave of shadow cabinet resignations and finishing on the day the Iraq War Inquiry was published. This builds on previous research in two important ways. First, it provides crucial insights into how the news media responded when the debate about Corbyn's leadership reached a crescendo in national news and when the majority of MPs went on the record in calling for him to resign. Second, unlike the aforementioned studies, this research focuses on television and online news. It is not surprising that predominantly conservative national newspapers would adopt a negative editorial view of Corbyn and the anti-austerity and anti-war agenda he represents. It is also inevitable that this ideological standpoint will not be contained within the columns and opinion pages but have a defining influence on the press agenda as a whole. Even left-leaning titles have taken an ambiguous and, on balance, critical view of the Labour Party's new direction. But unlike newspapers, television news providers are subject to relatively strict rules on impartiality and balance. From the outset, Jeremy Corbyn's leadership presented a disruptive challenge to routine interpretations of journalistic balance in this sense. In particular, it marked a break from a long-established mainstream political consensus around issues ranging from welfare to war.

Television news also has a uniquely wide reach across the more fragmented and partisan readership of the press. It remains not only by far the most widely consumed news medium but also, importantly, the most trusted (Ofcom, 2016). Flagship and prime time bulletins by public service broadcasters are especially important in this context, and play an overarching role in reflecting and reinforcing the mainstream news agenda. This in turn may have a potentially powerful influence in shaping the contours of public opinion and debate.

The internet is often said to offer another important counterweight to the agenda power of newspaper owners and editors. Previous research suggests that even the online editions of newspapers tend to be more sensitive to a social media-led agenda compared to their print counterparts (Barnhurst, 2014). Online news is also relatively free of the time and space constraints of traditional platforms, enabling them to cover a much more diverse range

of issues and perspectives on any given topic. This provides an important benchmark against which we can examine the particular angles that achieve salience on the television news agenda.

Above all, this research was concerned with the integrity and vitality of the fourth estate. Functioning democracies depend on journalists to scrutinise those in positions of power, and to examine the contesting agendas and narratives that underlie political controversies. The study therefore presents an opportunity to test the independent performance of broadcast and online news during an acute political crisis.

It is important to recognize the right and duty of journalists to report on concerns raised both within and outside of Westminster about Jeremy Corbyn's leadership and, by extension, the future direction of the Labour Party. This produced a debate which, in its simplest form, revolved around the question of whether or not Jeremy Corbyn should resign. Each side of this debate was populated by a range of active sources –people seeking to talk to the media and influence the agenda on a daily and even hourly basis– be they MPs, party members or activists, trade unions, etc. Each side also mobilised a range of issues and arguments in support of their cause. Critics of Corbyn, for instance, routinely sought to highlight what they considered to be his leadership failings, his unelectability and detachment from the broad swathe of public opinion. Supporters on the other hand tended to emphasise his grassroots and populist mandate from party members and supporters, the wider popularity of his anti-war and anti-austerity views, and what they considered to be his leadership qualities.

For the purposes of this research, we considered arguments on either side of this debate as legitimate and newsworthy. We also recognized that the wave of shadow cabinet resignations would inevitably give critics of Corbyn a definitional advantage and that their views may naturally be given primary attention in news coverage (both in terms of the relative quantity of text inches and airtime allocated to each set of views and related issues, and in terms of the order in which they were presented). This in and of itself cannot be assumed to reflect inherent ideological bias in the coverage.

We also adopted an especially cautious approach in coding news texts according to the types of sources and issues covered. We analysed a total of 465 articles and reports drawn from eight online news sites, as well as 40 television news bulletins on BBC One and ITV.

Finally, our sample covered a range of professional news institutions including two public broadcasters; four national newspapers spanning the broadsheet-tabloid and left-right political spectrum; and three online-only news sites (including one former print newspaper). This reflects the full-breadth of what is generally considered ‘mainstream’ news – outlets that provide consistent generalised news coverage that reaches critical mass audiences

3. Methodology

This research was based primarily on a quantitative analysis of online and television news texts which were published or aired between 27th June and 6th July 2016 inclusive.

For the online sample, eight news websites were selected as follows:

- BBC.co.uk/news
- DailyMail.co.uk
- HuffingtonPost.co.uk
- IBTimes.co.uk
- Mirror.co.uk
- Independent.co.uk
- TheGuardian.com
- Telegraph.co.uk

These included the four largest UK news sites by audience reach (BBC, *Daily Mail*, *Huffington Post* and *Guardian*); and all of the four largest newspapers by audience reach across platforms. It also reflected a mix of newspapers and online-only sites, and spanned the political as well as ‘quality’ market spectrum.

For the sampling procedure, two different online search facilities were used and cross-referenced (Media Cloud and Google), using ‘Corbyn’ OR ‘Labour’ as key terms within the title. Although no sampling source is fool proof when it comes to online news, this cross-referencing combined with the relatively large volume of coverage was considered sufficient to iron out any anomalies caused by gaps in the sample.

The results were then manually filtered to include only articles that were text-based (more than 200 words) and focused on either a) the Labour Leadership crisis, b) the publication of Shami Chakrabarti's report on anti-semitism within Labour, and c) Jeremy Corbyn's response to the publication of the Iraq War Inquiry's report. Though ostensibly addressing separate topics, all three of these stories were intimately related to the debate over Corbyn's leadership.

This yielded a sample for analysis of 465 articles that were then carefully coded for primary format (comment/opinion or news item), primary issue and primary source. For the primary format category, 'news item' was taken to denote all text-based articles that were not clearly identifiable as comment or opinion. This included analysis, features and sketch articles that are not typically associated with day-to-day reporting but nevertheless are, on the surface at least, devoid of a subjective viewpoint.

For the issue and source categories, a 'grounded theory' approach was followed where the categories were continually revised and expanded over the course of the analysis. This produced a relatively exhaustive list of 15 codes for the issue category and eight for the source category, reflecting the full breadth of coverage angles, frames and voices. Examples of issue code headings included 'Calls for Corbyn to go' and 'Critique of Labour coup', whilst examples of primary source code headings included 'PLP/leading party figures (critics)' and 'Corbyn/aides/PLP (supporters)'. Reliability of the coding was then tested by giving a trained second coder a 20 percent sub-sample to analyse. This yielded a strong agreement rate of 94 percent.

Whilst sources were relatively easy to categorise as supportive or critical of the Labour leadership (or neither), categorising issues in this way was more difficult. Some of the issues were clearly aligned with one side or the other (such as critique of or praise for Corbyn's leadership record or qualities). For others, determination was based on the degree to which the issues were routinely highlighted by critical or supportive sources. So, for instance, whilst allegations of anti-semitism within the Labour party are not explicitly or necessarily a critique of the Labour leadership, they tended to be advanced by those who were otherwise critical, and often linked the allegations to an assumed failure of leadership, or a critique of its supporters.

The researchers took particular care to avoid making judgements about a primary issue or source focus in online news items unless it was explicitly

apparent (38 percent of articles were recorded as 'other or unclear' for the issue category and 29 percent for the source category). This approach was also followed when determining whether particular issues favoured opposing perspectives on the leadership debate. So, for instance, articles that were coded as reporting the 'facts' of shadow cabinet resignations or the vote of no confidence in Jeremy Corbyn by Labour MPs were considered neutral in this respect, whilst those focused on arguments or statements (such as calls for Corbyn to resign or pleas for party unity behind the elected leader) were coded as critical or supportive of the leadership.

Not surprisingly, there was general congruence between the two categories, i.e. most articles that were considered to focus on an issue favourable to Corbyn also tended to focus on a source or group of sources that supported him, and vice versa. But there were a significant number of exceptions to this which underlined the need for both coding categories. For instance, articles on Corbyn's appearance before a Parliamentary Select Committee hearing on anti-Semitism tended to focus on Corbyn himself as the primary source, but on an issue that was generally advanced by his critics (the problem of anti-semitism within the Labour Party).

For the television sample, the broadcast news archives at the British Library were used to access the early and late evening news bulletins on BBC One and ITV throughout the 10-day period. The sample was then compiled using the same criteria as the online sample, i.e. stories that focused on any of the Labour leadership crisis, anti-semitism report or Corbyn's response to the Chilcot report. These stories or story 'packages' were then coded first for prominence (lead headline, other headline or other news). But when it came to issues and sources, a different analytical framework was adopted in order to account for the nuances of the medium and sample. Given that an individual news report on the main evening bulletins tends to provide a summary of the day's events and news related to a given topic or story, making judgements about 'primary' issue or source is inherently more difficult compared to print and online articles. Instead, and in an effort to minimise subjective interpretation on the part of researchers, the full range of issues was identified within each report, along with the total airtime and number of unchallenged critical and supportive voices that were featured.

This quantitative analysis was restricted to scripted news reports as these present a relatively defined unit of analysis. It was also restricted to the early evening bulletins on both channels to avoid double counting material that was repeated on the later editions. However, a further qualitative analysis included reports on both early and late editions as well as headline sequences, anchor introductions and live ‘two-ways’ between anchors and correspondents. This produced a considerably richer and fuller picture of the coverage and also served to substantiate findings from the quantitative analysis.

4. Sources and Issues

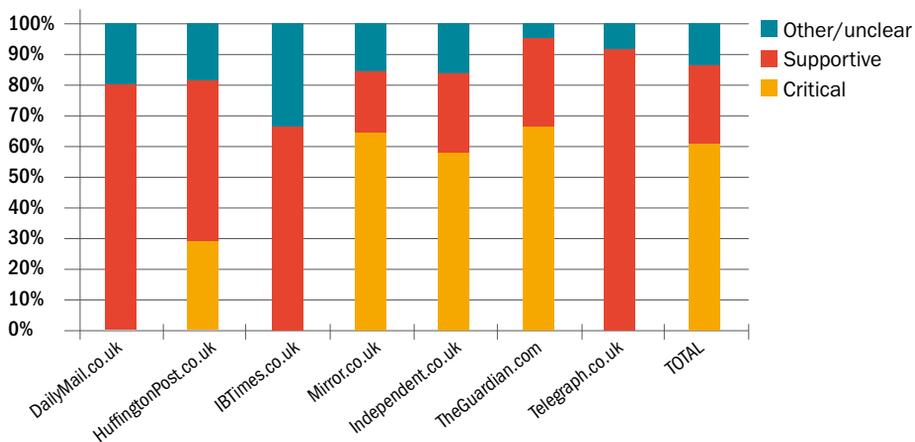
4.1. An inequality of voice

Supportive sources predominantly consisted of Jeremy Corbyn himself, the Labour MPs that remained loyal to his leadership, spokespeople from Momentum (the grassroots activist group campaigning on his behalf), and Trade Unions. Critical sources were largely made up of rebel MPs, as well as former party leaders and Prime Ministers. Labour councillors, constituency officials and individual party members spoke both for and against the leadership. When analysing online articles, a judgement was made as to whether or not the story was framed exclusively or predominantly around a particular type of source, or group of sources, either named or un-named. The headline was used as an indicator but not exclusive determinant of this. So, for instance, a story that was headlined *Angela Eagle vows to challenge Jeremy Corbyn if he fails to step down* indicated the potential for a primary source (Angela Eagle). In most cases, the article attached to such a headline was predominantly framed around Angela Eagle’s pronouncements, or un-named sources close to her. But in some cases, the article would give equal attention to responses from Jeremy Corbyn, his aides or other MPs critical of Eagle. Where there was comparable attention given to contesting sources within a given article, no primary source was recorded, even if the story was triggered or cued by a particular figure or group.

For comment and opinion pieces, identifying ‘voice’ was more straightforward since the majority tended to be either explicitly critical or supportive of the leadership. Figure 1 shows the proportions across the sample. This provides the clearest illustration of the relative distribution of ‘voice’ in the coverage and

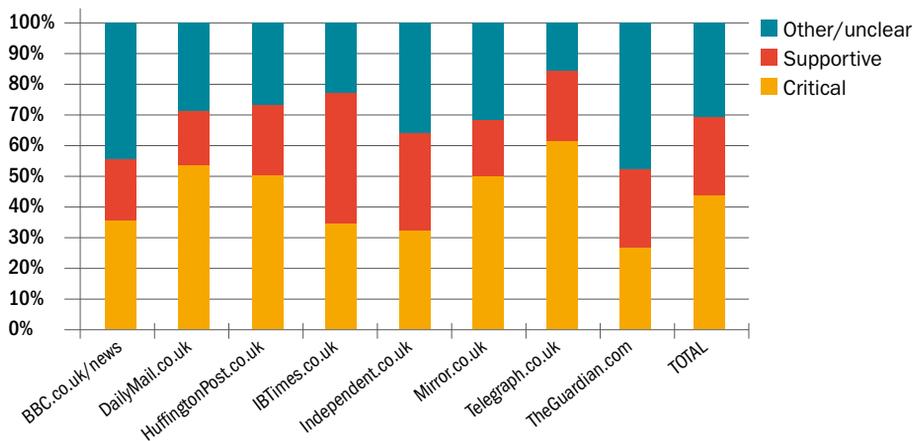
reveals the dominance of those critical of Corbyn in all but one outlet (the BBC is excluded here as it does not produce explicit opinion or comment articles).

FIGURE 1. Distribution of 'voice' in comment and opinion pieces



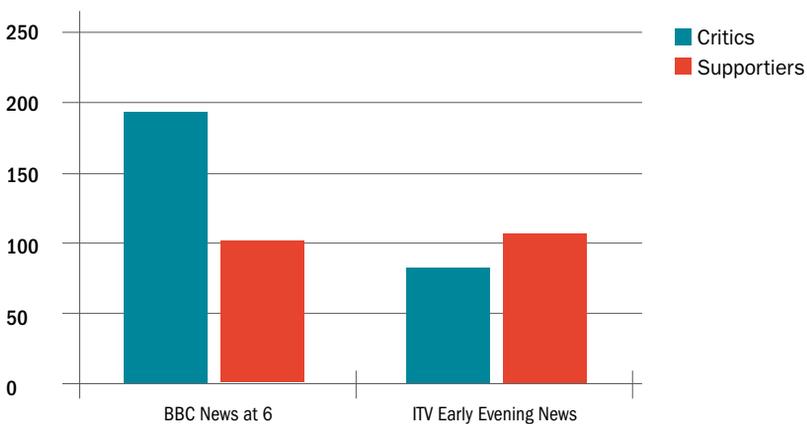
When it came to news reports, a much less pronounced imbalance was found with five out of eight outlets exhibiting greater preference for primary sources critical of the leadership (with a more than 10 percent difference).

FIGURE 2. Primary sources in news items



Whilst the BBC was more balanced in this measure compared to the *Telegraph*, *Daily Mail* and *Mirror* newspapers, it was notably less balanced compared to the *Independent* and *IB Times*. But the BBC's source treatment was particularly problematic in the main evening TV bulletins. Although the number of sources expressing views on each side of the debate was only moderately weighted in favour of Corbyn critics (13 versus 9), there was considerable discrepancy in the proportion of airtime offered to each side, as shown in figure 3.

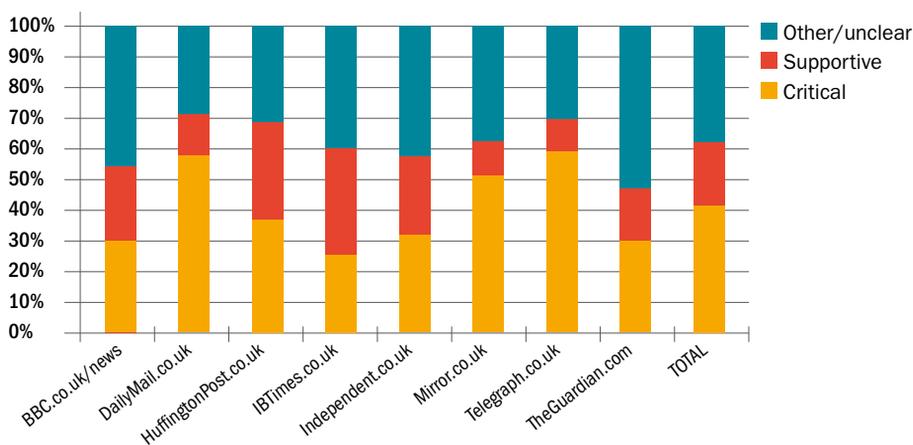
FIGURE 3. Critical and supportive voices on the BBC and ITV (unchallenged airtime in seconds)



4.2. Issues that matter

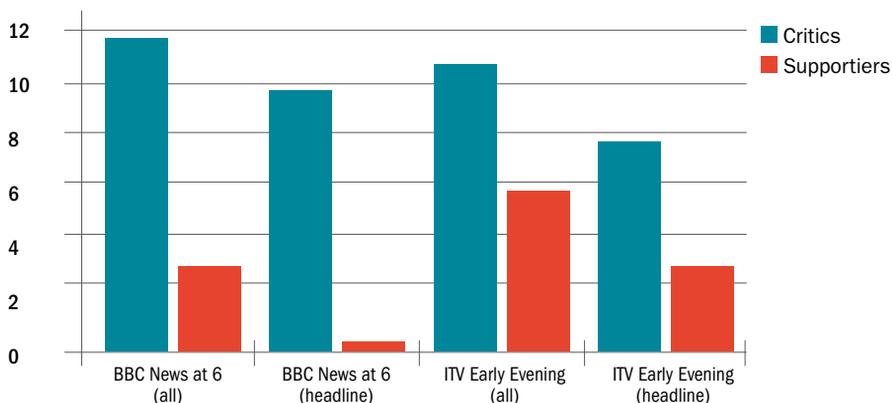
When it came to the primary issue focus of online articles, there was a significant discrepancy between the performance of newspapers on the one hand, and the BBC and online-only outlets on the other. The former exhibited a clear bias in favour of issues that tended to be pushed by critics of Corbyn whilst the latter were relatively balanced in their coverage on this measure. Figure 4 shows the proportion of primary issue articles that favoured critics and supporters of the leadership across the sample.

FIGURE 4. Proportion of primary issue categories in online news (comment and news items combined)



Unfortunately, the relatively inclusive approach adopted by BBC Online in this context did not transcend to the TV bulletins. Here both the BBC and ITV gave considerably more attention to issues favourable to critics but once again, the imbalance was notably more pronounced on the BBC. Figure 5 shows the total number of issue-frames present in news reports that favoured critical versus supportive views of the party leadership. It also shows that the imbalance in favour of critical perspectives was much greater on both channels when we consider only headline stories.

FIGURE 5. Issue-frames favouring critical or supportive views in TV news



5. A Tale of Two Reports

As expected, the bulk of articles and reports in both online and television samples were focused directly on the Labour leadership crisis. But a significant minority also included reporting on the unveiling of two much anticipated and controversial inquiry reports. The first marked the culmination of Labour's inquiry into allegations of anti-semitism within the party, which was conducted by respected human rights lawyer and civil rights campaigner Shami Chakrabarti. The second was the long-awaited Chilcot Inquiry into the Iraq War.

The latter was clearly a major news topic in its own right and we did not expect Jeremy Corbyn's response to the Chilcot report to be an especially prevalent theme within the wider coverage. But it was one which intersected with the on-going leadership crisis and we did consider it newsworthy to the extent that Corbyn had been a longstanding voice of the anti-war movement and an outspoken critic of Tony Blair. Indeed, his opposition to the Iraq War is often cited as a key platform on which he was elected leader of the party. The publication of the Chilcot Report also uniquely aligned Corbyn's views with the general swathe of newspaper opinion within the sample.

But whilst there were 18 articles within the online sample that were focused on Corbyn's response to Chilcot's report (either prospectively or retrospectively), more than half of these were carried by just two titles: the *Independent* and *IB Times*. Indeed, the proportion of these articles within the *IB Times* sample was more than five times that of the *Guardian* and *Daily Mail* and more than ten times that of the *Mirror*, all of which harboured a longstanding opposition to the war in line with Corbyn's views. The BBC website carried one article focused on Corbyn's response but, strikingly, made no mention of it in either of its main evening bulletins on the day the report was published.

A much greater spotlight was cast over Corbyn's response to the anti-semitism report. But this was predominantly framed in negative terms as a result of fresh allegations of anti-semitism raised in respect of Corbyn's statement that "our Jewish friends are no more responsible for the actions of Israel than our Muslim friends are for the various self-styled Islamic states or organizations" which was purported to draw a parallel between the Israeli State and terrorist organisations (a charge which he strenuously denied). In addition, Labour MP Ruth Smeeth accused Corbyn of a failure of leadership in

not reprimanding an activist who alleged she was working in partnership with the *Telegraph*.

But there was another story which, to its credit, was given equal coverage in the BBC online sample. This highlighted the main finding of Chakrabarti's report that "Labour is not overrun with anti-semitism" and its decision not to recommend a permanent ban of any suspended MPs. Apart from the BBC, there were just two other articles within the entire sample that adopted this as a primary issue focus: one carried by the *Mirror* and the other by the *Independent*. Whilst BBC television reports made frequent reference to the fresh allegations of anti-semitism that surfaced during and after the report's launch, no mention was made of the report's actual content.

6. Spotlight on the BBC

The BBC often responds legitimately to accusations of television bias with reference to the diversity of its news output across channels. This is legitimate because it is consistent with both its own guidelines and Ofcom's Broadcasting Code, which applies to all UK broadcasters, and allows for impartiality to be achieved across a series of editorially-linked programmes rather than within a single bulletin. But the guidance in both cases is nevertheless vague on this point, and the BBC Trust has in the past emphasised the need for 'mainstream' news programmes to demonstrate impartiality within, as well as across, its output (BBC Trust, 2007). In its comprehensive review of the breadth of opinion in BBC output carried out in 2013, the Trust also made clear that whilst it is fitting for wider programming to explore the 'wagon wheel' of diverse views on any given topic, news programmes are rightly inclined to focus on the most prominent binary or opposing views.

In-depth and analysis news programmes such as BBC 2's *Newsnight* and the *Andrew Marr Show* have a reputation for playing an agenda-leading role and this was evident to some extent in our sample. For instance, Len McCluskey (general secretary of the Unite union) appeared on the *Andrew Marr show* mid-way through our sample period and his outspoken support for Corbyn and critique of rebel MPs on that day triggered much of the relatively pro-Corbyn coverage within the sample.

But whilst such programmes may be relatively influential on the wider news agenda, the main evening bulletins on BBC One reach a considerably larger audience, most of whom cannot reasonably be expected to watch its more in-depth news output on other channels and at other times. As such, we might expect impartiality rules to dictate a particular sensitivity towards fairly reflecting opposing views *within* mainstream bulletins. But that does not appear to have been the case here.

More problematic was the way in which BBC reporters used particular language and imagery when discussing the crisis that systematically undermined the legitimacy of arguments in support of the Labour leadership. This was evident in a qualitative analysis that looked at both the early and late evening bulletins, as well as ‘in studio’ elements including anchor introductions, headline sequences and live ‘two-ways’ between anchors and correspondents.

One of the most striking patterns that emerged was the repeated use of language that invoked militarism and violence. This is not surprising given that the prospect of Labour facing a ‘civil war’ was inherently newsworthy. But BBC correspondents tended to ascribe militancy and aggression exclusively to Jeremy Corbyn and his supporters rather than Labour rebels, in spite of the fact that the leadership was, throughout this period, largely on the defensive in responding to attacks and accusations by rebel MPs. The picture conveyed was one of Corbyn and his supporters adopting hard line stance in ‘refusing to back down’ and risking the future of the Labour Party in doing so. The following extracts were typical of the language used in and around reports in this context, especially during the first four days of the sample period when the attempted ‘coup’ was in full force and occupied headline status

“[Jeremy Corbyn] is at war with his own MPs and it’s a war he means to win”

“His army of followers as hostile to most Labour MPs as he is, spear carriers in a civil war he’s now determined to fight and win at all costs”

“making the rebels’ worst nightmare come true”

Related to this was an explicit emphasis on the apparent unreasonableness and stubbornness of Jeremy Corbyn, described in one report on both the early

and late evening edition as “anti-capitalist and no compromise”. But this was in conflict with several aspects of Corbyn’s leadership record such as his appointment of a relatively inclusive shadow cabinet prior to the resignations, and his decision in November 2015 to allow MPs a free vote on whether or not to go to war in Syria.

Nevertheless, Corbyn’s position in the Labour leadership crisis was repeatedly described in terms that invoked bewilderment over his defiance. The BBC’s chief political editor Laura Kuenssberg remarked in a live two-way on BBC News at Six:

Now the danger of course in all of this is while they’re engaged, locked in this complete battle with him refusing to back down that so much damage is done to the Labour party that it could take them years to recover from this if they actually recover from this at all. But Mr Corbyn’s team is still sure they have the overwhelming support of Labour party members across the country who backed him so enthusiastically in the heady days of last summer. But as this slow moving car crash continues I have to say relying on the Labour party members support for good is a hell of a gamble for Mr Corbyn’s team to take.²

What is particularly noteworthy about this extract is that it appears, on the surface, to exhibit balance by referring more or less equally to the two main ‘issues’ advanced by each side of the debate. The rebels –whose subsequent campaign was named ‘Saving Labour’– have persistently sought to emphasise what they see as the disastrous consequences for the party that would result from the Labour leader remaining in post. In contrast, Corbyn’s supporters have generally contested these claims arguing that, far from being a destructive force, Corbyn’s grassroots support could and should serve to unite and reinvigorate the party. But in the statement above, which was typical of the language used across the BBC television sample, the perspective of rebel MPs was unattributed and reported as ‘fact’, whilst the view of “Mr Corbyn’s team” is both attributed and questioned at the end of the statement.

² BBC News at Six, 29th June

On more than one occasion, reporters made reference to un-named sources within the rebel camp specifically in regard to supposed ‘evidence’ of Corbyn losing support among either Trade Unions or party members. In a weekend edition, reporter Chris Mason declared that “I’ve been sent this dossier by a recently resigned shadow cabinet minister attempting to highlight how support for their leader is beginning to slip away amongst Labour’s grassroots.”³ But there was no mention of any evidence underpinning this dossier, nor any attempt to alert viewers of its possible or likely one-sided perspective. Given that the use of single un-named sources in high profile political controversies has been the subject of a number of editorial crises within the BBC over recent years, we might have expected reporters to be more cautious in reporting on such claims.⁴

As well as attributing hostility and intransigence to Jeremy Corbyn and his team, journalists also tended to describe Corbyn’s grassroots supporters in this way, often using pejorative terms such as “far left backing” and “hard core support”. At other points, this kind of language was used in a questioning rather than assertive way, such as when reporter John Pienaar introduced a party activist speaking at the launch of Labour’s anti-semitism report with the leading question “was this far left prejudice?”

Of course, in doing so the reporter was not explicitly endorsing the accusations of anti-Semitism levelled at the activist, who suggested that a Labour MP was working “hand in hand” with the *Telegraph* newspaper. But the juxtaposition of the words ‘prejudice’ with the phrase ‘far left’ reinforced the notion that anti-semitism was somehow *associated* with Labour’s shift to the left under Jeremy Corbyn, a point that critics of the Labour leadership have been pushing since he was elected. What’s more, although this question clearly conveyed the views of those who accused the activist of being anti-semitic, it was not followed by any reference to contesting views, including the activist’s own response to the accusations.

In contrast to the notions of hostility and intransigence, there was also repeated use of language and imagery that associated Corbyn with weakness

3 BBC National News, 3rd July

4 In the aftermath of the Hutton Inquiry in 2003, the BBC revised its editorial guidelines to emphasise the need for extra caution when dealing with single un-named sources, especially in high profile political controversies. See http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/insidethebbc/howwework/reports/pdf/neil_report.html

and failure. Descriptive words and phrases such as “awkward”, “laughing stock” and “no authority” were used repeatedly without qualification.

Particularly noteworthy in this respect was the closing statement of a report on the BBC News at Six which concluded that “This is a fight only one side can win. The others being carted off to irrelevance. The place for political losers”. This was set against a shot of a moving garbage truck emblazoned with the word ‘CORBYN’.

7. Conclusion

What we found overall was a marked and persistent imbalance in favour of sources critical of Jeremy Corbyn, the issues that they sought to highlight, and the arguments they advanced. This was the case across both the online and television sample. Online news stories overall were almost twice as likely to be written by, or focus on sources critical of Corbyn compared to those that were supportive. The BBC evening news bulletins gave nearly twice as much unchallenged airtime to sources critical of Corbyn compared to those that supported him (an imbalance that was not matched by ITV which gave considerably more equal attention to opposing voices).

All four newspapers within the online sample favoured sources opposed to Corbyn’s leadership along with associated issues. This was to be expected given that even the Labour-supporting *Guardian* and *Mirror* newspapers had both declared an official editorial position calling for Corbyn to resign. The most balanced outlets overall were those that do not or no longer operate on legacy platforms: the *Independent*, *International Business Times (IB Times)* and *Huffington Post*. Of these, both the *Independent* and *Huffington Post* exhibited a slight tendency to favour sources critical of the Labour leadership and the issues they tended to highlight, whilst the *IB Times* was the only outlet in the sample to give relatively greater prominence to Corbyn’s supporters and associated issues. It was also the smallest outlet in the sample in terms of both audience reach and volume of coverage. These three outlets are further distinguished by their relatively non-partisan editorial stance. Two of them also accounted for over half of all the coverage across the sample focused on Corbyn’s response to the Chicot report.

The more balanced reporting found in these outlets was not matched by the BBC, especially on its main evening TV bulletins. In view of the dominant reach of television news, as well as relatively high levels of audience trust attached to it, this sample was also subjected to a qualitative analysis in order to identify more nuanced themes and patterns in the language and imagery used. What was particularly striking here was the degree to which the Labour leadership and its supporters were persistently talked about in terms that emphasised hostility, intransigence and extreme positions. Given that pro-Corbyn sources were, in most cases, responding to attacks and critiques by members of the Parliamentary Labour Party, this suggested an underlying editorial slant that is out of step with at least the spirit of the Broadcasting Code and the BBC's own guidelines on news impartiality and balance.

It's important to acknowledge that, in the case of the BBC, the sample did not reflect the breadth of its news coverage which spans many different programmes on both television and radio, as well as its 24 hour news channel. Indeed, both the Andrew Marr Show and BBC Two's Newsnight were key vehicles that, at times, leveraged issues and sources favourable to Corbyn across the wider media. But our sample *does* include two of the BBC's most watched daily news bulletins that provide a summary of the main news on any given day. Demonstrating impartiality and balance *within* these programmes, especially amidst such intense political controversy and conflict, would seem to be in keeping with, if not central to, the BBC's public service mission.

Importantly, the research also shows that bias in the coverage was not inevitable or unavoidable. Whilst the apparent avoidance of the media by the Labour leadership was a prominent theme throughout, this did not prevent journalists from reporting both sides of the debate, as demonstrated by the minority of outlets in the sample that exhibited relative balance. Whilst those close to Corbyn may not have been as active in 'briefing' the media proactively as Labour rebels, they provided a constant voice in support of him. Coupled with this, Corbyn himself made almost daily public statements and responses to the crisis throughout the period.

Overall, our findings strongly suggest that in a period of intense conflict and instability within Britain's largest political party, mainstream news – and especially the BBC – gave disproportionate prominence and attention to voices critical of the Labour leadership, and systematically marginalised or maligned

opposing views. In many cases, including the BBC, this extended far beyond the definitional advantage of Corbyn critics that we might expect given that the crisis was triggered by the shadow cabinet resignations.

This raises serious concerns regarding the diversity of political news coverage to which the majority of citizens are exposed and the BBC is especially important in this context, given that its online news services reach over half the population on a weekly basis, and two thirds rely on its television news programmes. Amidst the social fracturing and polarisation of democratic life post- Brexit, this study demonstrates the need for a more plural and inclusive PSM on prime time and flagship programmes.

8. References

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