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Journalistic transgressions in the representation of Jeremy Corbyn: From watchdog to attackdog

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Abstract
This research critically assesses the press coverage of Jeremy Corbyn during his leadership bid and subsequent first months as the leader of the United Kingdom's Labour Party. A content analysis ($n = 815$) found that the British press offered a distorted and overly antagonistic view of the long-serving MP. Corbyn is often denied a voice and news organisations tended to prize anti-Corbyn sources over favourable ones. Much of the coverage is decidedly scornful and ridicules the leader of the opposition. This analysis also tests a set of normative conceptions of the media in a democracy. In view of this, our research contends that the British press acted more as an attackdog than a watchdog when it comes to the reporting of Corbyn. We conclude that the transgression from traditional monitorial practices to snarling attacks is unhealthy for democracy, and it furthermore raises serious ethical questions for UK journalism and its role in society.

Keywords
Bias, democracy, normative theory, political reporting, representation

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[T]he press may well claim to be *independent* and to fulfil an important watchdog function. What the claim overlooks, however, is the very large fact that it is the Left at which the watchdogs generally bark with most ferocity, and what they are above all protecting is the status quo.

(Miliband, 1969: 199)

Introduction

In a democracy, we expect journalists to fulfil a set of roles. In the liberal tradition, the media need to be watchdogs, holding power to account and highlighting abuses. We argue, however, that this democratic role can also transgress into blatantly delegitimising and demonising political actors that dare to challenge the status quo. By presenting the results of a comprehensive content analysis (CA), we will show that such transgressions have occurred in the case of the reporting on the leader of the United Kingdom's Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, and we will also conclude that this poses serious questions regarding the democratic role of journalism.

This study analysed a quarter of everything published ($n=812$) about Corbyn in eight national newspapers over a period of 2 months – coinciding with the immediate run-up to and subsequent first 2 months of his leadership of the Labour Party. On the basis of this analysis, we conclude that the British press commonly treated Corbyn, the second most important politician in the UK political system, as a danger and as someone whose voice should be silenced. Before explaining how we arrived at these conclusions, we will briefly address the nexus of media, journalism and democracy, after which some methodological issues will be discussed and the results of our analysis presented.

Democracy, journalism and the media: Competing normative expectations

The various roles that the media and by extension journalists ought to play in a democracy are complex and often fraught. This can, in part, be explained by different democratic models, which each bestow different and at times contradictory normative values upon journalism (Scammell, 2000). *Four Theories of the Press* by Siebert et al. (1956), for instance, identified a set of normative expectations inherent to an authoritarian model, a libertarian model, a social responsibility model and a communist model. The end of the Cold War, globalisation and the hegemony of neoliberalism made the *Four Theories of the Press*, however, obsolete (see also Hallin and Mancini, 2004). The book remains, nevertheless, an important starting point to identify which democratic normative expectations emerged historically vis-à-vis journalism and the media.

More recently, Christians et al. (2009) presented an updated framework to address the normative expectations we have in relation to the news media. While acknowledging the 'great didactic advantage' (Christians et al., 2009: 16) of the typological approach of *Four Theories of the Press*, they contend that the book erroneously conflated three analytical levels (philosophical visions, political systems and press systems), resulting in models which are not only historically outdated but also conceptually unable to describe the plurality of contexts in which media systems develop. Christians and his colleagues

set out to disentangle these levels and propose three interrelated, but analytically independent, entry points for analysis.

At the philosophical and most general level, different visions of what public communication should be are linked to *normative traditions*, that is, broader moral theories. At a political and less general level, these demands are also shaped by multiple *models of democracy* (Held, 2006). Finally, at the most specific level, there are the *roles of the media*, that is, the normative expectations of journalism in specific political systems. We will foremost focus on this third level of analysis. Journalists' roles, Christians et al. (2009) posit, refer 'to their larger purposes and obligations' which, in democratic societies, are 'normally a matter of choice, often reinforced by custom and the force of social ties' (p. 29). They conceptualise four desirable roles, according to main two dimensions: institutional power and media autonomy.

The *monitorial role* conforms to the classic liberal role of the watchdog – also referred to as the fourth estate. It assumes the news media are autonomous and hold strong institutional power. From this perspective (commonly the one adopted by the press itself), journalists are expected to systematically, neutrally and objectively monitor, collect, publicise and discuss relevant events and trends. Professional journalists have a duty to warn their audiences of all sorts of risks and transgressions (isolated or systemic), and help them to construct an informed opinion. This role approaches journalists as legitimated *truth-speakers* to paraphrase Foucault (1987) and requires them to hold the powers that be to account.

Rooted in the civic republicanism tradition, the *facilitative role* sees news media as facilitators of rational deliberation about issues of public interest with the aim of enabling the constitution of a pluralistic civil society (cf. Habermas, 1989). From this perspective, the media should neither concentrate institutional power nor be considered as fully independent from those they report – neutrality would arise not from journalists' professionalism, but from the access of all interested parties to the public debate. This role also aligns with a social responsibility approach, which ascertains that media have a set of societal and ethical responsibilities in the constitution of public life.

The *radical role* echoes a revolutionary understanding of political participation, underpinned by different strands of critical theory. It portrays the journalist as an agentic actor promoting the disruption of political–economic hegemonies through the exposure of injustices' roots – including those reverberated by mainstream media. A radical journalism rejects neutrality and detachment and it paves the way for the construction of a radically different and fairer society. Therefore, while radical news media cannot be fully independent, they will always take the side of the marginalised.

The *collaborative role*, finally, points to an alignment of journalists with the political and economic establishment. Here, journalists are positioned not as watchdogs, but as *guarddogs* of establishment interests and as the protectors of the systemic status quo (see Donohue et al., 1995). This protective position is deemed appropriate in 'new nations, with their intense pressure toward economic and social development under conditions of scarce resources and immature political institutions' or in the face of armed conflicts, when transparency can be unnecessarily harmful to the community (Christians et al., 2009: 127). The collaborative role is linked to three conditions: compliance (due to coercion, apathy or some form of tradition), acquiescence (due to pragmatic or instrumental

reasons) and acceptance (due to practical and normative agreements). Media institutions are thus dependent on powerful actors, but are also expected to exert strong institutional power to maintain stability and cohesion.

These four roles proved to be a useful conceptual framework to assess how the British press treated one of the most unexpected new actors in British politics, namely, Jeremy Corbyn, the new leader of the United Kingdom's Labour Party. Our research probed the relevance of these four normative roles in terms of the reporting on Jeremy Corbyn by the British press. In what follows, we will first address some methodological issues to subsequently present an analysis and discussion of our findings in view of these normative journalistic roles.

Methodological notes

Considerable research highlights the efficacy of CA to study media coverage in a critical manner (Bauer, 2007; Krippendorf, 2013). As our findings and analysis make clear, CA offered a reliable and systematic means to capture the complex nature of the mediated representations of Jeremy Corbyn.

The media texts analysed in this research ($n=812$) were drawn from eight national UK newspapers (see Table 1 for a complete list). Using the online newspaper database Lexis,[1] the search term 'Jeremy Corbyn' identified a total corpus (or population) of 3417 news media stories and commentaries about the British politician between 1 September and 1 November 2015. The corpus drew from all editions of both printed and online coverage; the search included news wire reports as well. The sample corpus represents 24 per cent of the total coverage by the national newspapers about Corbyn's leadership race and first 2 months as leader of the official opposition. Three periods were delimited to cross-tabulate the temporal dimension with the other variables in order to identify shifts over time in the representation of Corbyn:

1. 1 September 2015 to 12 September 15: final weeks of the leadership campaign
2. 13 September 2015 to 5 October 2015: his election as party leader and its aftermath
3. 6 October 2015 to 1 November 2015: his consolidation as party leader

We pulled every fourth media sampled from the total population. This procedure produced a reliable probability sample because our starting point was randomly selected (Krippendorf, 2013).

A scoping analysis of media texts revealed rhetorical patterns surrounding Corbyn, which informed our coding schedule. Furthermore, the training of coders during the piloting phase also led to improvements in the coding frame. Our theory-driven coding process produced a list of 16 variables. The variables tested the general tone towards him, the presence of certain qualifications and attacks, whether and how his views and formulation of public issues were represented and who (if any) actor was associated with him. The coding distinguished between news, editorial/commentary and letters to the editor. These dividing lines allowed for more granular analysis. Moreover, it enabled us to critically assess whether news accounts – with their normative commitment to fairness, balance and objectivity – lived up to those values.

Table 1. Sampling.[a]

	Daily circulation and daily unique browsers (2015)[b]	Ownership	Type of newspaper	Exhaustive population	*n* coded	% coded
Guardian	160,000 8.9 million	Guardian Media Group	Broadsheet – leftwing	983	212	22
Daily Mirror	790,000 4.2 million	Trinity Mirror	Tabloid – leftwing	301	61	20
Independent	66,000 2.9 million	Alexander Lebedev	Broadsheet – centrist	288	85	30
Evening Standard	900,000 480,000	Alexander Lebedev	Mid Market – rightwing	297	57	19
Daily Mail	1.6 million 14.4 million	4th Viscount Rothermere	Mid Market – rightwing	358	95	27
Daily Telegraph	470,000 4.3 million	Barclay Brothers	Broadsheet – rightwing	420	115	27
Daily Express	400,000 NA	Richard Clive Desmond	Mid Market – rightwing	171	35	20
Sun	1.4 million 2 million	Rupert Murdoch	Tabloid – rightwing	599	152	25
Total				3417	812	24

[a]The sampling included the Sunday editions of all these newspapers. The differences in the percentages of the number of articles coded refer to a variable number of doubles and irrelevant articles that were removed from the sample. However, for each newspaper, a sufficiently representative sample was coded. Furthermore, percentages in all the tables and figures represent occurrence of codes across news articles, and because news articles can contain multiple codes, not all rows or columns always add up to 100 per cent.
[b]Figures for 2015 published on 31 March 2016 by ABC: http://www.newsworks.org.uk/write/MediaUploads/1%20Facts%20Figures/Market%20overview/2016/Mar/Newsbrand_Circulation_17_03_16.pptx

Coders were trained to be mindful of applying a systematic interpretation to all the samples (Bauer, 2007; Krippendorf, 2013). Coders – independent of each other – analysed 12 per cent of the same samples. This overlap in coding ($n = 100$) was subsequently used to calculate the intercoder reliability (ICR[2]: $r = $ agree/(agree + disagree)), which was above .80 for all variables. The average of the ICR was very high, namely, .95. This high level of reliability points towards a well-defined coding scheme and successful training sessions during which coders were made familiar with the conceptual framework, the coding frame and how to apply it to the media content (Bauer, 2007; Krippendorf, 2013).

One final note on our focus on the press. While newspapers have arguably lost some of their influence in the last decades, they still play a central role in the construction of public knowledge and public life (Couldry, 2012). As a former BBC editor put it, the public broadcaster is 'completely obsessed by the agenda set by newspapers' (Robert Peston, quoted in Brown and Deans, 2014: n.p.). Furthermore, studying newspapers is also relevant in a UK context due to the concentration of media ownership and the intimate relationship between the owners of newspapers and political elites (Freedman, 2014).

The representation of Jeremy Corbyn in the UK newspapers

In this section, the results of the CA will be presented. First, we assessed the overall tone of the articles. In this regard, we coded for a positive tone towards Corbyn or a more neutral one. In addition to this, we made a distinction between a critical tone that corresponds more to a legitimate watchdog role and an antagonistic tone towards Corbyn, delegitimising him (Christians et al., 2009). Besides the tone of the article, which arguably represents a rather crude way of assessing the reporting of Corbyn, we also analysed specific forms of delegitimisation through lack of voice or distortion, through scorn, ridicule and personal attacks, and through association.

Overall tone

Assessing the overall tone of the article is not always straightforward, especially the subtle difference between a legitimate critical stance and an antagonistic one is both important and at times difficult to discern. Despite this and thanks to detailed training sessions, the ICR for this variable was high and consistent (.96). The antagonistic tone refers to the delegitimisation of Jeremy Corbyn by being scathing, disingenuous, insulting or mocking. A critical tone refers to a monitorial attitude, something we would expect from the media, that is, to be critical but in a fair and balanced manner. Positive coverage, defined as broadly supportive or constructive, was categorised as being in line with the facilitative role. In this normative conception, journalists play a crucial civic role, whereby the 'media do not merely report on civil society's associations and activities but seek to enrich and improve them' (Christians et al., 2009: 158).

Of note, almost three-fifths (57%) of all the newspaper articles about Corbyn were critical or antagonistic.[3] As Table 2 shows, the combination of a critical tone and an antagonistic tone is very dominant in the news reporting across all newspapers, especially in the rightwing ones. Unsurprisingly, our statistical analysis found an association between media organisation and tone.[4] The rightwing newspapers have very little or almost nothing positive to say about Corbyn and the antagonistic tone is also much more pronounced in the rightwing newspapers. The degree of positive exposure in the leftwing and centrist press is a bit higher, but it would be fair to say their support for Jeremy Corbyn is at best lukewarm, and they are also often very hostile (Figure 1).

As Table 2 shows, the degree of negative reporting and antagonism towards Corbyn in editorials and opinion pieces is also very high; 67 per cent of all opinion newspaper pieces were critical or antagonistic of Corbyn. Noteworthy here is that the antagonistic tone in the rightwing broadsheet *The Daily Telegraph* is mostly to be found in opinion pieces rather than in the news reports. This is not the case in other rightwing newspapers, nor in *The Independent*. In *The Guardian*, a negative or critical tone is much more pronounced in their editorials and opinion pieces than in their regular news reporting (44% in the former vs 21% in the latter).

As mentioned above, the overall tone of the article is, admittedly, a rather crude way of 'measuring' the representation of Jeremy Corbyn in the British newspapers. In the subsequent sections, we aim to provide a more nuanced and detailed picture of the antagonistic media representation of Jeremy Corbyn.

Table 2. Newspaper/type and tone.[a]

	Newspaper	Positive (%)	Neutral (%)	Critical (%)	Antagonistic (%)
News	Guardian (n = 145)	15	61	21	3
	Daily Mirror (n = 33)	9	55	33	3
	Independent (n = 68)	7	50	29	13
	Evening Standard (n = 36)	3	25	41.7	31
	Daily Mail (n = 69)	1	44	33	22
	Daily Express (n = 24)	0	13	21	67
	Daily Telegraph (n = 66)	3	18	71	8
	Sun (n = 91)	0	21	39	41
	Total (n = 532)	6	40	35	19
Opinion	Guardian (n = 48)	29	27	44	0
	Daily Mirror (n = 24)	38	38	21	4
	Independent (n = 8)	38	25	38	0
	Evening Standard (n = 15)	7	13	47	33
	Daily Mail (n = 26)	0	8	58	35
	Daily Express (n = 6)	0	17	0	83
	Daily Telegraph (n = 44)	2	9	27	61
	Sun (n = 54)	6	19	22	54
	Total (n = 225)	14	19	33	34

[a]This table excludes features written about Jeremy Corbyn (n = 55). All cross-tabulations are statistically significant at the .05 level. News: $c^2(21, N = 532) = 192.081$, $p = .001$; editorial/opinion: $c^2(21, N = 225) = 101.938$, $p = .001$.

Delegitimisation through lack of voice or distortion

An important way through which Corbyn was deligitimised relates to the extent to which he was given a voice in his own media representation. Corbyn's voice was not only largely ignored in many instances but also his words were often distorted and taken out of context. Let us first focus on the use of sources in the reporting about Corbyn.

As Table 3 shows, Corbyn himself is used as a source in less than half of the articles about him (44%). Articles in *The Guardian* and *The Independent* that use Corbyn as a source are relatively low (around 40%). This can be explained by the high level of opinion pieces about him in these papers. Conversely, *The Daily Mirror, The Daily Mail* and *The Daily Express* seem to use Corbyn as a source above average (respectively, about 87%, 66% and 89% of the articles). In *The Daily Telegraph*, only 20 per cent of the articles had Corbyn as a source.

Members of the Conservative Party are also often used as a source critiquing Corbyn. This is especially the case in the rightwing newspapers *The Daily Mail* (33%) and *The Daily Express* (29%), but also in the leftwing tabloid *The Daily Mirror* (39%); this is arguably part of the monitorial role of the media. Union leaders are relatively absent in the reporting about Corbyn and when they are used as a source, especially in the rightwing newspapers, it is often to discredit him. This is consistent with the negative media representation and the overall lack of union voices historically in public debates in the United Kingdom (Philo et al., 1995).
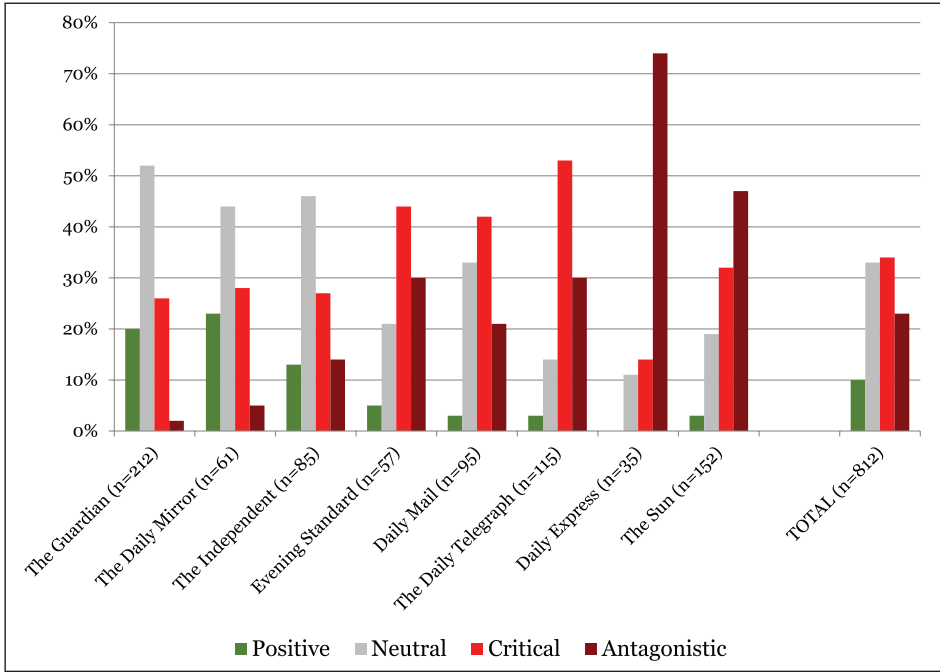
Figure 1. The overall tone of the article towards Jeremy Corbyn.

Table 3. Sources used in the reporting on Jeremy Corbyn.

	Corbyn (%)	Labour Pro-Corbyn (%)	Labour Anti-Corbyn (%)	Conservatives (%)	Lib-Dems (%)	Union leaders (%)
Guardian (n = 212)	42	29	27	18	3	9
Daily Mirror (n = 61)	87	26	38	39	8	2
Independent (n = 85)	37	13	24	12	1	2
Evening Standard (n = 57)	47	11	28	12	2	4
Daily Telegraph (n = 115)	20	7	28	15	0	3
Daily Mail (n = 95)	66	44	41	33	2	1
Daily Express (n = 35)	89	6	34	29	0	3
Sun (n = 152)	25	26	19	15	1	5
Total (n = 812)	44	23	28	20	2	5

Table 4. Reproduction of Corbyn's views.

	Corbyn's views absent (%)	Corbyn's views present, but taken out of context (%)	Corbyn's views present, but challenged (%)	Corbyn's views present without alteration (%)
Guardian (n = 212)	44	18	11	27
Daily Mirror (n = 61)	48	12	25	16
Independent (n = 85)	60	15	8	17
Evening Standard (n = 57)	54	39	5	2
Daily Mail (n = 95)	57	20	23	0
Daily Telegraph (n = 115)	52	29	16	4
Daily Express (n = 35)	51	37	11	0
Sun (n = 152)	55	24	18	3
Total (n = 812)	52	22	15	11

Another observation emerging from Table 3 relates to the differences between Labour sources that are in favour or against Corbyn as their party leader. In many newspapers, the voice of Labour sources that are against Corbyn considerably outweigh those that are supporting him. This is especially the case in *The Independent, The Daily Telegraph* and *The Daily Express* and also in the leftwing tabloid *The Daily Mirror*. This is an expression of the civil war taking place within Labour. Exposing this is arguably also part of the monitorial role of the media and is highly visible in the liberal newspapers. However, at the same time, the great discrepancy between Labour voices in favour of Corbyn and against in *The Daily Telegraph* (7% pro vs 28% anti) or *The Daily Express* (6% pro vs 34% anti) is an indication of an antagonistic agenda.

However, when Corbyn was given a voice, this was often presented in a distorted manner (see Table 4). In more than one-fifth of the media coverage of the Labour leader (22%), his views were taken out of context. In sum, almost three quarters of the news content (74%) offered either no or a highly distorted account of Corbyn's views and ideas. Unsurprisingly, his views are mostly taken out of context in the rightwing newspapers, especially in *The Evening Standard, The Daily Telegraph* and *The Daily Express*. As was to be expected, *The Guardian* did give Corbyn somewhat of a platform as his voice without alteration was present in almost 27 per cent of its coverage. Corbyn did not get any platform at all in the rightwing newspapers and this is very pronounced.

One of many examples of his views being distorted by the rightwing newspapers was the resurfacing of a statement he made in 2013 regarding the 100th year commemoration of the First World War. In its typical jingoistic style, the rightwing newspapers criticised Corbyn for having declared that commemorating the First World War was 'pointless' (*The Daily Express*) and for 'questioning' the commemorations (*The Daily Telegraph*). What Corbyn actually said at the time was

> […] apparently next year the government is proposing to spend shedloads of money commemorating the First World War. I'm not sure what there is to commemorate about the First World War other than the mass slaughter of millions of young men and women, mainly men, on the Western Front and all the other places. (Corbyn, quoted in *The Independent*, 2015)

Table 5. Ridicule, scorn and personal attack by newspapers.

	Ridicule and scorn (%)	Personal attacks (%)
Guardian (n = 212)	5	5
Daily Mirror (n = 61)	15	6
Independent (n = 85)	4	6
Evening Standard (n = 57)	47	26
Daily Mail (n = 95)	54	11
Daily Telegraph (n = 115)	38	16
Daily Express (n = 35)	80	40
Sun (n = 152)	45	17
Total (n = 812)	30	13

There were also other mechanisms at play which are equally, if not more, problematic in terms of delegitimising Corbyn; they included the use of scorn and personal attacks, as well as associating him with communism and terrorism.

Delegitimisation through ridicule, scorn and personal attacks

Almost a quarter (24.6%) of the news coverage of Corbyn ridiculed or scorned the leader of the official opposition and potential prime minister-in-waiting.[5] Overall, 3 in 10 news stories, editorials, commentaries and features mock the leader of the opposition or scoff at his ideas, policies, history, his personal life – and even his looks.

As Table 5 shows, when comparing leftwing newspapers with rightwing ones, the latter are 90 per cent more likely to heap ridicule or scorn on the Labour leader than their liberal counterparts.[6] He is often portrayed as a clown-like figure, mocked as the 'Jezster' or derisively dismissed as the comic political equivalent of the TV character Mr Bean with tabloids repeatedly referring to him as 'Mr Corbean'.

The so-called 'bearded socialist' also often gets sneered at for his looks and the way he dresses (a bit more than 7% of the articles refer to this). Of the articles that contain a personal attack (n = 102), 69 per cent refer to his look, his clothing or his lifestyle and a further 13 per cent relate to Corbyn's love life. Several commentaries moralised about Corbyn's personal and romantic life. *The Daily Telegraph* sarcastically ridiculed the Labour leader's former relationship with shadow minister Diane Abbott, folding in a political critique too:

'Lovers of what?' Bolshevism? Marx & Spencer? A warm vest to keep out the chill winds of the political wilderness? (Woods, 2015)

Plenty of the newspapers' coverage also suggested that Corbyn's sartorial and life-style choices make him seem weird, unconventional – and above all unelectable. A week after his election as leader of the opposition, Allison Pearson in *The Daily Telegraph* artfully weaved all of the sneering criticisms into a one-sentence depiction:

a rather dreary bearded fellow who takes pictures of manhole covers as a hobby, doesn't drink alcohol or eat meat, and wears shorts teamed with long dark socks exposing an expanse of pale, hairy English shin. (Pearson, 2015)
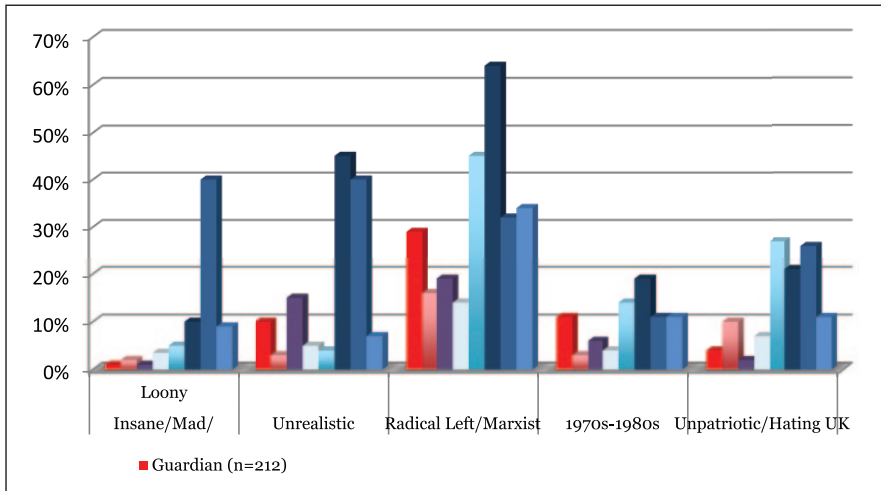
Figure 2. References in the article.

Our analysis found that the presence of ridicule and scorn increased over time from 25 per cent of the coverage before his election as party leader (12 September) to 33 per cent of the articles analysed in the last 2 weeks of October 2015. Also, personal attacks increased (slightly) after Corbyn was elected as party leader. Whereas 10 per cent of the articles contained a personal attack before he was elected, this rose to 14 per cent of the articles in the period directly after he was elected. Personalisation of politics is not a new phenomenon (see Langer, 2007), but the vengefulness and sneering tone with which Corbyn's character was assassinated early on in his tenure is arguably damaging for democracy.

Delegitimisation through association

Subtle and less subtle forms of association, which at times exhibited characteristics of post-truth politics (Keyes, 2004), constituted the final means through which Corbyn was delegitimised. Across our corpus, we found evidence of the British press systematically discrediting Corbyn by describing him as a terrorist friend and a dangerous, even sinister, individual, and his ideas as 'leftfield' or 'crazy', while providing no evidence to support such antagonistic criticism. These acerbic critiques were not confined to commentaries and editorials – but were also consistently found in regular news coverage. The latter, however, should normatively be fair and balanced (Christians et al., 2009; Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014; Ward, 2004).

As Figure 2 shows, many journalists and commentators described the Labour leader's ideas as 'loony', 'unrealistic' or 'outdated'. Rightwing newspapers, such as *The Daily Telegraph*, and tabloids like *The Daily Express* and *The Sun* emphasised the supposed 'radicalism' and 'insane' nature of his political proposals. Besides denoting Corbyn's ideas as potty, they are also positioned as quite evidently unrealistic and highly unlikely

Table 6. Association with IRA, Iran, Hamas, Hezbollah and/or terrorism.

Guardian (n = 212)	3%
Daily Mirror (n = 61)	7%
Independent (n = 85)	2%
Evening Standard (n = 57)	2%
Daily Mail (n = 95)	10%
Daily Telegraph (n = 115)	14%
Daily Express (n = 35)	20%
Sun (n = 152)	19%
Total (n = 812)	9%

to deliver an election victory for Labour, something the leftwing and liberal newspapers also picked up on.

Just days after his election as Labour leader, an editorial in *The Evening Standard*, controlled by the same Russian billionaire owner as *The Independent*, argued that Labour is doomed because Corbyn's leadership places 'the opposition dangerously far from the centre'. The editorial went on to declare that Corbyn is 'unelectable and therefore a disaster' (Leith, 2015). Along the same lines, *The Sun* headlined 'Red and Buried' (*The Sun*, 2015), while *The Daily Express* declared Corbyn 'unelectable' and holding 'barmy hard-Left views' (*The Daily Express*, 2015). If anything, the 2017 elections, which saw the Tories lose their majority and Jeremy Corbyn doing unexpectedly well, certainly contradicted this common view of unelectability perpetuated by the right- as well as leftwing media.

Before his election as party leader, an astonishing 42 per cent of the coverage framed Corbyn as a dangerous communist, whether it was by calling him part of the 'hard or radical-left', a 'Marxist', a 'Leninist' or a 'Trots'. For example, on the eve of his election, *The Sun* called him 'a gormless Marxist' (Liddle, 2015). Supporters of Corbyn are also very often described by the media as *Corbynistas*, in reference to the Nicaraguan Sandinistas. This is in line with a long legacy in the United Kingdom of discrediting the left by associating their ideas and leaders with 'evil' Marxism and communism (see Curran et al., 2005).

Jeremy Corbyn is also often presented as unpatriotic and as hating Britain; this was (again) especially the case in the rightwing newspapers; for example, 27 per cent of the articles about Corbyn in *The Daily Mail* carried this frame. Intrinsically linked to this was a very strong and highly problematic association of Corbyn with supporting terrorism and statements suggesting that he is a friend of the enemies of the United Kingdom. *The Sun*, for example, described Corbyn as someone 'who delights in describing as *friends* every possible enemy of this country' (Liddle, 2015).

In particular, Corbyn was portrayed as a staunch supporter of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran or terrorism in general (see Table 6). *The Daily Express* (2015) condemned Corbyn for having 'suspicious ties to terror groups', whereas *The Sun* called him a supporter of the IRA and 'any heavily bearded jihadi mentals [*sic*] who long for the destruction of the West' (Liddle, 2015). This delegitimising trope also returned very strongly in the final days of the 2017 election campaign (Centre for Research in Communication and Culture (CRCC), 2017).

Table 7. Denoting Corbyn as a danger or as being dangerous and by whom.

	Corbyn denoted as dangerous or a danger (%)	By journalist (%)	By Non-Labour politician (%)	By Labour politician (%)
Guardian (n = 212)	17	2	5	6
Daily Mirror (n = 61)	20	3	8	7
Independent (n = 85)	7	1	4	1
Evening Standard (n = 57)	4	2	2	0
Daily Mail (n = 95)	18	8	5	4
Daily Telegraph (n = 115)	50	22	4	18
Daily Express (n = 35)	63	49	6	9
Sun (n = 152)	16	9	2	1
Total *(n = 812)*	22	9	4	6

Linked to this association with terrorism is the depiction of Corbyn as a danger or his ideas as dangerous. Even the British Prime Minister at the time could not resist feeding this frame. Just after Corbyn was elected as party leader, David Cameron tweeted, 'The Labour Party is now a threat to our national security, our economic security and your family's security' (@David_Cameron, 13 September 2015).

As Table 7 clearly demonstrates, however, the danger frame was (and arguable still is) also being pushed by Labour politicians and by journalists. The denotation of Corbyn as dangerous by politicians of the Labour Party is yet another indication of the civil war being waged within the Labour Party, something which could be observed throughout the corpus. The media also made persistent references to possible and potential coup attempts against Corbyn.

An attackdog press?

In this section, we return to Christians et al.'s (2009) framework in order to discuss to which extent the results of the CA above concur with or indeed challenge the four normative roles they identified.

The *monitorial role* is closely related to the pluralistic depiction of the press needing to fulfil a watchdog role. However, the issue with the coverage of Corbyn is not that he was criticised – which is something we expect the media to do – but rather that the journalistic representations of Corbyn went well beyond this watchdog role and amounted more to what we could characterise as an *attackdog* journalism. Much of the reporting on Corbyn was characterised by a sensationalist post-truth journalism conflating prejudiced opinion with news reporting. From a normative perspective, news reporting should, however, be factual, fair and balanced. Normative expectations of journalism, such as '[a]ccuracy, verification, and completeness' (Ward, 2004: 299), were disregarded in favour of an ideological crusade against Corbyn and what he stands for.

Second, there is also plenty of evidence from our analysis that the British press actively refused to fulfil a *facilitative role*. By ignoring counter-narratives and through the absence and distortion of Corbyn's voice, the highly negative depictions of him were

naturalised with a view of positioning him as an illegitimate political actor. As Couldry (2010) asserts, '[v]aluing voice […] involves particular attention to the conditions under which voice as a process is effective, and how broader forms of organisation may subtly undermine or devalue voice' (p. 2). While mediated power should be mobilised to increase the 'legitimacy of modern democracies' (Couldry, 2010: 1), in cases like this, we can acutely observe its ability and explicit intent to delegitimise and devalue.

Third, the Corbyn coverage is far removed from the *radical role* of the press, in which the media function as a tool to advance social change. While our research is not necessarily focusing on the merits of Corbyn's ideology and agenda, it is evident that his discourse explicitly embodies the *promise* of social change and democratic renewal. Whether this promise is desirable or not is beyond our inquiry, but it is clear that the UK press refused to debate this in fair terms. By ridiculing, silencing and distorting his views, they were arguably also ridiculing, silencing and distorting the *very possibility* of change. This becomes even more troublesome from a democratic standpoint, if we consider that the unexpected ascension of Corbyn is precisely the result of an increasing dissatisfaction with and frustration towards the media and political elites and a manifestation of a growing demand for, precisely, social and democratic change (Watkins, 2016).

Finally, the outspoken bias against Corbyn and what he stands for was also indicative of a strong *collaborative role* from the part of the British press, aligning themselves with the dominant interests in UK society. This form of journalism comports with Hallin's (1986) understanding of how the news media restrict themselves to spheres of consensus. Despite Corbyn's position as leader of the official opposition, he was squarely positioned within the sphere of deviance.

Although there is an undeniable sense of collaboration (or at least of overlapping interests) between the UK press and the establishment, we do not believe that this role aptly describes our data. Christians et al. (2009) still envisaged the collaborative role to have a normative value – that is, such collaboration should somehow be positive for democracy and democratic life and have a concrete moral rationale. However, the British press represented Corbyn *as if* he was an immediate danger to the very existence of British society, and thereby – in our view – they acted in contempt of democracy itself.

Overall, the British press aggressively criticised Corbyn with very little factual basis, they silenced or distorted his voice and in doing so they overtly sided with the dominant interests in UK society. We argue that this amounted to an antagonistic *attackdog* role – rather than a guarddog or a collaborative role. We are, however, not suggesting that an attackdog press is an entirely new phenomenon. A typical and recurring example of this is the protest paradigm or the persistent negative media attention that anti-systemic protest movements, contentious actions and strikes receive (Cammaerts, 2013; Halloran et al., 1970; McLeod and Hertog, 1999; Philo et al., 1995).

However, the case of Jeremy Corbyn seems peculiar in that he is a mainstream opposition politician operating within institutional democratic politics in a mature representative democratic system. Our data do not afford comparative analysis, but the literature on how the British press represented other party leaders in the past suggests that while other leftwing politicians have also been attacked (see Brandenburg, 2006; Curran et al., 2005; Gaber, 2014), the viciousness of the attacks against Corbyn has no precedents in the last decades.

One possible explanation for this is that the reaction of the press was proportional to the perception of Corbyn's sudden rise as the harbinger of a deeper and deemed to be dangerous anti-establishment movement which in turn triggered the protest paradigm. This would account for the high level of demonisation we observed as well as the privileging of Corbyn's political enemies both within and outside of his party as main sources. The target here was arguably not only Corbyn personally but also those who want another kind of politics – it was also *their* political agency that was delegitimised. Furthermore, the press could and did fall back on longstanding anti-union and anti-leftwing tropes in British society.

However, Corbyn's case arguably also points to deeper dynamics which are less related to the Labour politician and more to the British press' persistent ethical shortcomings, and the lack of reflexivity regarding these serious shortcomings. Confronted with the evidence of Corbyn's blatantly unfair deconstruction, one commentator considered normative expectations of fairness and balance contrary to the British journalistic traditions (see Greenslade, 2016). It is one thing to acknowledge the historical rightwing bias of the United Kingdom's news media (a well-documented phenomenon – see Curran et al., 2005; McNair, 2009). Yet to defend such partisanship as some form of benign or even positive national tradition is quite another.

It suggests a radical insularity from the part of British journalism for the ethical, political and social responsibilities of journalists in a democracy. Indeed, the United Kingdom's Independent Press Standards Organization (IPSO), created in 2014 after the News International phone hacking scandal (Davies, 2014), stipulates that while newspapers are 'free to editorialise and campaign', they are, at the same time, obliged to 'make a clear distinction between comment, conjecture and fact'.[7] As we have shown throughout our analysis, these guidelines were not adhered to in the case of Corbyn. In fact, in December 2015, IPSO ordered *The Sun* to issue a front-page apology for alleging that the Labour leader became a member of Her Majesty's Most Honourable Privy Council to benefit financially (McSmith, 2015).

For the most part, the British press acted as an attackdog – a conclusion corroborated by Schlosberg (2016) in terms of television news. Furthermore, while our and Schlosberg's analysis dealt with the first few months of his leadership, things have clearly not improved over time. During the 2017 election campaign, for instance, the coverage of Labour and Corbyn was also overwhelmingly negative and the attacks were still very personalised (see CRCC, 2017).

Conclusion

We originally set out to provide a nuanced perspective accounting for the monitorial role of the media and acknowledging the legitimate role of the newspapers to critique and to question the Labour Party and its leadership. To some extent, this did come out of the analysis; there is evidence to show that the newspapers did fulfil a monitorial role and even to some extent a facilitative role. However, what emerged much stronger is an overall picture of the press wielding their 'power to undermine' (Silverstone, 1999: 143).

The 'outsideness' of Corbyn, which seduced many disenfranchised citizens to support him, was transformed by the British media into a form of dangerous 'otherness'. As such,

Corbyn was commonly depicted as an *inimical political other*, a deviant enemy of the British people and of the British state. Even proponents of a radical pluralism, such as Mouffe (1999), argue that such political antagonisms 'can tear up the very basis of civility', which is why she advocates that political actors in a democracy should construct political others as agonistic and thus legitimate adversaries rather than as enemies (pp. 461–462). From this perspective, by positioning the leader of the largest opposition party in the United Kingdom as a deviant enemy, rather than a legitimate political actor, the British media has acted in an undemocratic manner.

Many justify this state of affairs by pointing to the British specificity in terms of journalistic mores and consider the ownership structure of the media landscape as a given with which political actors need to deal and work with. However, attackdog journalism with its emphasis on polarisation, personal attacks and a focus on the *game* rather than the substance of politics, contributes to the dysfunction and cynicism that pervades the public imagination about politics, government and the media (see Capella and Jamieson, 1997; Louw, 2007). For sure, democracies need their media to challenge power and offer robust debate, but when this transgresses into attackdog journalism aimed at delegitimising a legitimate democratic actor, then it is not democracy that is served.

Notes

1. There are problems associated with the Lexis database. As Weaver and Bimber (2008) concluded, the archive of news media often excludes newspaper stories and is 'blind to wire stories' (p. 515).
2. Scott's Pi, nominal Krippendorff's alpha and Cohen's Kappa for all the variables.
3. All percentages reported in this article were rounded off.
4. $c^2(21, N = 812) = 272.701, p = .001$; Fisher's exact test.
5. $c^2(3, N = 812) = 31.937, p = .001$; Fisher's exact test.
6. $p = .001$; Fisher's exact test.
7. See https://www.ipso.co.uk/IPSO/cop.html

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