

CORBYN'S FIRST WEEK:

Negative Agenda Setting in the Press

CORB SNUBS THE QUEEN

By TOM NEWTON COLUMN
JEREMY Corbyn was
last night accused of
snubbing the Queen
after he refused to sing
the national anthem.
The incoming Labour
leader has remained silent
about the Battle of Brit-
ain memorial.
Full Story —
Pages 12 and 13
Song ... Queen

LABOUR IN MELTDOWN

Pacifist Corbyn refuses to bow

As Corbyn becomes leader it is...

BYE BYE LABOUR!

RED AND BURIED

A shadow chancellor who hates
capitalism, a vegan given the
farming brief and an education
spokesman who hadn't met him

CORBYN'S SHALLOW CABINET

As Labour plunges into bitter civil war

CORBYN UNION PALS PLEDGE STRIKE CHAOS

Corbyn and comrades reveal plot to hammer middle-class with tax raids



Prime Minister Corbyn ...and the 1,000 days that destroyed Britain

THE SUNDAY TIMES

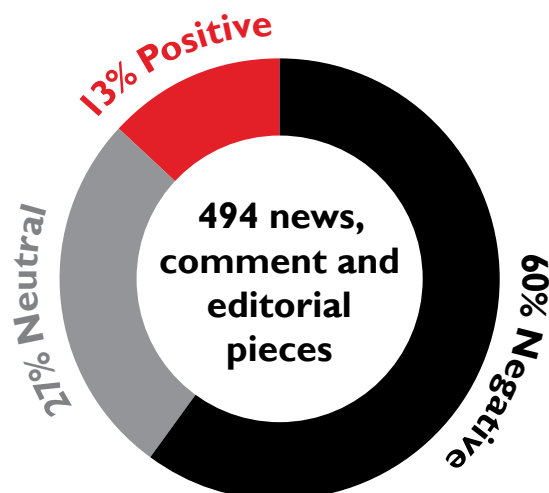
Corbyn sparks Labour civil war

New leader's potty plan for world peace

Introduction & Reports

This new research by the Media Reform Coalition shows how the press set out to systematically undermine Jeremy Corbyn during his first week as Labour Leader with a barrage of overwhelmingly negative coverage.

Our research examined the coverage in 8 national daily newspapers and their Sunday publications from 13-19 September 2015. We found that out of a total of 494 news, comment and editorial pieces, 60% (296 articles) were negative, with only 13% positive stories (65 articles) and 27% taking a neutral stance (133 articles).



News Items

One might expect news items, as opposed to comment and editorial pieces, to take a more balanced approach but in fact the opposite is true.

A mere 6% of stories classed as news (19 out of 292) were positive, versus 61% negative stories and 32% taking a neutral stance. Any notion of simply 'reporting the facts' in straight coverage of breaking events appears to have had a restraining effect on positive stories only, suggesting that the default 'common sense' position is based

on overwhelmingly negative assumptions about the new Labour leader who, it should be remembered, secured some 251,000 votes in the leadership election, in contrast to David Cameron who received just over half this figure in the Conservative Party's leadership election.

This 'default' position is particularly significant given how these stories make up the bulk of the coverage during Corbyn's first week (59% or 292 articles).

NEWS ITEMS	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Total Items
13 Sunday	11	30	19	60
14 Monday	4	33	26	63
15 Tuesday	1	37	15	53
16 Wednesday	2	20	8	30
17 Thursday	1	29	7	37
18 Friday	0	16	12	28
19 Saturday	0	16	5	21
Total	19	181	92	292

Comment Pieces

Among comment pieces, there was slightly more positive coverage (22% or 34 articles out of 155), but negative stories far outweighed these (57% or 88 articles) and their proportion fits the overall trend.

COMMENT PIECES	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Total Pieces
13 Sunday	4	15	4	23
14 Monday	10	15	6	31
15 Tuesday	8	12	5	25
16 Wednesday	4	14	8	26
17 Thursday	3	10	4	17
18 Friday	3	12	2	17
19 Saturday	2	10	4	16
Total	34	88	33	155

Editorial Pieces

The picture was similar for editorial pieces (25% positive stories, or 12 articles out of 47, versus again 57% negative stories, or 27 articles).

EDITORIAL PIECES	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Total Pieces
13 Sunday	3	6	0	9
14 Monday	1	5	2	8
15 Tuesday	1	5	2	8
16 Wednesday	3	5	0	8
17 Thursday	1	1	1	3
18 Friday	1	1	1	3
19 Saturday	2	4	2	8
Total	12	27	8	47

Individual Newspapers

When we turn to individual newspapers, the results are even more striking. In the Sun/Sun on Sunday 32 out of 36 news stories were negative. While in the Daily Mail/Mail on Sunday, 50 out of 52 news stories were negative. With the largest and second largest share of circulation in the UK respectively, these papers' influence should not be underestimated.

As a point of contrast, news stories in the Guardian and the Daily Mirror were on the whole balanced. 21 out of 24 Guardian news stories took a neutral standpoint, while the Daily Mirror featured roughly as many positive news stories about Corbyn (3 articles) as negative ones (4 articles), with the rest being neutral in attitude (6 articles).

Quite amazingly, The Sun, Mail and Express titles (including their respective Sunday publications) were entirely negative in the editorial coverage they gave. All of their combined 17 editorials published during Corbyn's first week were negative.

Comment Pieces

NEWSPAPER	Negative Articles	Total Articles
Telegraph Group	13	15
Times/S Times	19	25
Observer	2	2
Guardian	5	25
Indie titles	6	9
Mail Titles	19	24
Express titles	14	18
Sun titles	10	11
Mirror Titles	0	16
Total	88	155

News Items

NEWSPAPER	Negative Articles	Total Articles
Telegraph Group	35	44
Times/S Times	36	54
Observer	0	4
Guardian	1	24
Indie titles	5	36
Mail Titles	50	52
Express titles	17	19
Sun titles	32	36
Mirror Titles	5	23
Total	181	292

Editorial Pieces

NEWSPAPER	Negative Articles	Total Articles
Telegraph Group	4	4
Times/S Times	5	6
Observer	1	1
Guardian	0	4
Indie titles	0	5
Mail Titles	6	6
Express titles	5	5
Sun titles	6	6
Mirror Titles	0	10
Total	27	47

Conclusions

Newspapers have every right to take a partisan line in their reporting and freedom of the press is a key component of democratic societies. What concerns us, however, are the ownership structures underlying this degree of political intervention. The risk of undue influence on elected politicians is high, and it's hard to see how democracy can flourish when the mass channels of debate are monopolised in the way that they are. When a handful of conglomerates and individual owners have such significant influence over the UK media environment, it becomes virtually impossible for progressive ideas to get a fair hearing.

Just three companies - Rupert Murdoch's News Corp, The Daily Mail & General Trust, and Trinity Mirror - control over 70% of the national newspaper market, a market that may be shrinking but is still crucial in setting the agenda for the rest of the media. Taken together, these factors constitute a profoundly anti-democratic force in UK society.

Among the remedies being proposed by the Media Reform Coalition are clear ownership thresholds, safeguards to ensure journalistic and editorial autonomy, and arms-length funding for community news and independent start-ups.

Definitions

All national daily newspapers and their Sunday publications were counted in the report, namely: The Times/Sunday Times, The Daily Mail/Mail on Sunday, The Daily Telegraph/Sunday Telegraph, the Sun/Sun on Sunday, The Independent/Independent on Sunday, The Guardian/Observer, The Mirror/Sunday Mirror, and the Express/Sunday Express.

In deciding whether a story was positive, negative or neutral, the research took into account the tone of a story as well as its overall narrative, including sources and quotes used.

Stories classed as **POSITIVE** were openly supportive; expressed respect, enthusiasm, or hope; chose to focus on positive events; or were dominated by overt praise.

Stories classed as **NEGATIVE** were openly hostile; expressed animosity or ridicule; chose to focus on negative events; or were dominated by overt criticism.

Stories classed as **NEUTRAL** did not necessarily display an equal balance or objective overview, but rather were neither overtly positive or negative, or sometimes expressed a 'wait-and-see' attitude.

Stories classed as **NEWS** were contained in the news pages rather than comment/editorial or features/business pages, and concerned events, personalities, ideas or policy, not expressed as personal opinion/comment.

Stories classed as **COMMENT** were opinion pieces expressly personalised from the perspective of the writer, involving their own ideas and views (this includes diary pieces).

Stories classed as **EDITORIAL** were leader/editorial columns setting out the newspaper's overview.

Stories excluded from the research were letters from the public and stories that only referred to Corbyn in passing. Stories from supplementary sections of newspapers, i.e. mainly Business or Features pages, are also not included here.

Appendix: Themes

(I) Them and Us - Extremism Vs. Moderation

‘Disconnected’

The majority of the coverage portrays Corbyn, the left and/or Labour as detached from reality, out of touch with ‘real’ people, whether they are middle class or working class. Each newspaper has a different contextual line on this. For example links between the Express and UKIP mean the paper portrays Corbyn as lacking Nigel Farage’s populist style. For the Sun, Corbyn’s victory means Labour is a party of the affluent metropolitan elite, immigrants and anti-austerity teenagers, or else Corbyn doesn’t care about British jobs (17/09/2015). The Daily Telegraph similarly portrays Corbyn as part of a narrow left-wing elite, and suggests this is more important than actual policies (see Editorial, 16/09/2015).

Virtually all of the newspapers except the Mirror titles underplayed Corbyn’s popular support in the country, as well as the rise in Labour membership. The almost exclusive focus on politics in Westminster or the ‘extremist clique’ of close Corbyn allies seems significant, and reinforces an apparent split between the centre and periphery of UK politics.

‘Threat’

A significant proportion of the coverage focuses on the danger posed by the left, or ‘loony left’, and the notion that socialism is anti-democratic. The Daily Telegraph in particular focuses on the threat to national security and questions of patriotism, sometimes in connection to ‘the way things are done’. For example it focuses on rabble-rousers among Corbyn supporters (13/09/2015, see p.6 - ‘Triumphant Socialists shook their placards like fists’). The Daily Mail, The Express and The Sun focus more on extremism or terrorism and Corbyn

as an enemy of the UK. This is typified by Stephen Pollard’s line in the Mail on Sunday implying that Corbyn hates Britain. The Daily Mail picks up on the extremist narrative early on in its coverage, stating that Corbyn poses a threat to family life, values and/or stability. The Sunday Express is the first to mention Corbyn ‘snubbing’ of the Queen and warns that Corbyn would back insurgents to attack UK troops.

Both of the above themes draw on the narrative of ideological zealots in the Corbyn camp, in other words people who obsessively hark back to the past and bear dangerous grudges. By default, the mainstream and/or the Conservative Party represents common sense. This also connects with the language of ‘madness’. See for example Matthew Parris’ comment in the Times regarding a ‘rational’ centre left versus irrational class warriors and delirious Corbyn supporters (19/09/2015). The narrative is driven by an assumption of what is ‘normal’ and hence workable. Alternative views (on austerity for example) are then defined as mad, deranged, naive or idealistic. This theme also connects closely to assumptions about what is legitimate or illegitimate, particularly regarding the idea of defence of the family and the home, as well as Queen and country.

Many stories in the first days of Corbyn’s leadership - particularly in the Mail, the Telegraph and the Express - are driven by ‘Blairites’ and ‘senior Labour Party sources’, who are portrayed as insiders and moderates (for example David Blunkett and Peter Mandelson). This narrative is fuelled by Monday night’s Parliamentary Labour Party meeting (PLP). The message is that Corbyn, or more importantly his allies, are a threat; they are portrayed as bully boys harking back to the 1970s and 80s, similar to Militant during those

years. Corbyn's allies are further portrayed as rude and wanting to start a civil war or overturn the structures of a decent or pragmatic society. This is picked up in stories suggesting Maoist/Marxist undertones to the beliefs and/or methods of Corbyn's allies. At this point, a significant portion of the coverage switches from ridiculing Corbyn to portraying him as a sinister threat. The Conservative Party develops this line throughout the week, as advocated by Michael Gove, William Hague and George Osborne. Interestingly, Cameron stays largely aloof.

Notions of class also enter the narrative in subtle ways, facilitated by debates over the Trades Union Bill. Fear of a mass movement involving civil disturbance and strikes is conveyed in significant sections of the coverage. Much of this coverage is keen to pit the 'mainstream' or silent majority of ordinary working class people against the minority of 'Islington Urbanites', extremists, jihadists, ideological zealots, hippies and naive youngsters. Iain Duncan Smith expresses this viewpoint in the Daily Mail (16/09/2015, 'Who is on the side of working people?').

A significant part of the narrative is about 'who we are'; who is most connected versus who is disconnected. While almost all the coverage acknowledges that there are problems facing the country - i.e. this is a genuine response and people are angry - it dwells on the fear of the unfolding reaction. The threat of civil unrest, crisis, disunity and chaos is used as a prism to discuss the Trades Union Bill in the Daily Telegraph. The diversity of views of union leaders on the Corbyn leadership is not expressed across most newspapers, unlike in television news coverage. For the Daily Telegraph this is the prospect of a world turned upside down (15/9/2015).

Worth noting is the fact that John McDonnell is defined as much more dangerous than Corbyn. The Mirror has the only positive coverage of McDonnell, setting this within a broader context, alongside positive quotes. In the Daily Mail, Tom Utley describes McDonnell as a 'scumbag' and asks what his appointment says about Corbyn and the future of the Labour Party.

(2) What will happen to Labour and the Left?

The Observer and the Guardian are nervous and/or cautious in their tone. They express fear for the future of the left, liberal ideas and the centre ground. The Observer in particular focuses on the future of the Labour Party and Corbyn's ideas (rather than resignations, splits, or civil war within the party), and hence seems to suggest the prospect of a slow-burning crisis for the Left.

The Guardian has the most comment articles, with several writers scrutinising what Corbyn's victory means for the future of the left. This comes across as a slightly aloof analytical stance, holding back on a view of Corbyn. The focus is largely on a shift in public attitudes to politics broadly speaking. At the same time the Guardian is more open-minded in its comment pieces and offers a different perspective from much of the rest of the media's

coverage, particularly in suggesting that nothing is decided and challenging the assumption of what constitutes the 'centre' or 'mainstream'.

The Independent situates its coverage much more 'in the moment', asking what does Corbyn's victory mean for the Labour Party today? This is partly driven by the paper's 'moderate' concerns (see for example John Rentoul's view that the party has been "led to the wilderness by a characterless man"). However The Independent is more positive about Corbyn's impact on the political system and argues that he should be given a chance. The People is almost the only place to include an overview of Corbyn's policies in these early days. The Sunday Mirror has an exclusive interview with Corbyn, including the only really positive, direct quotes to be found across different newspapers.

This is the only place Corbyn is described as 'tough'. The paper also gives reasons for why people like him, saying that young supporters aren't deluded or naive (as suggested elsewhere) but rather that they turn to Corbyn for his humanitarian outlook and desire to do things differently. The Mirror also avoids the language of civil war, splits, disaster and extremism when discussing disagreements in the Labour Party.

(3) Corbyn's Personal Character

The Sunday Mirror is much more personal when talking about Corbyn. Most other newspapers barely touch on Corbyn's personal character or background, apart from caricatures (see below), and are much less likely to talk about his personal characteristics than the threat his victory symbolises. The paper talks about Corbyn's positive qualities and his vision for Britain, his effort to reach out to people, his humanitarianism and hopes for positive change. The Daily Mail's perspective on Corbyn's character emphasises his political obsession as abnormality; it repeats twice that he was at a political meeting as his mother was dying.

The Daily Mirror is also the most positive newspaper regarding Corbyn's personal character. It portrays him as a symbol of future change. But more than a symbol it describes him personally as a nice man (with positive quotes from Michael Gove), who is more in touch with the public mood than the establishment. However, towards the end of the week even the Mirror is more sceptical, suggesting it will withhold judgement on his leadership (although supportive of PMQs, the fillip is unsustainable). Despite this, its treatment in stories is still more supportive, for example using a quote from Simon Weston in full (which turns out to be sympathetic to Corbyn, whereas the same quote was abbreviated to become critical in some other newspapers). On Corbyn's eventual backing of the 'in' campaign regarding Britain's EU membership - described elsewhere in terms of u-turns, splits, and humiliation for the new Labour leader - the Mirror decides that it may be a u-turn but is still a positive step forward.

The Sun has the most personal attacks on Corbyn. Mostly these are used as a means of attacking the Labour Party: in other words, his victory means Labour is a lost cause. After PMQs, the Daily Telegraph becomes harsher in its critique of Corbyn. The coverage appears to become more personal and attempts to counter the notion of Corbyn's authenticity or popular touch.

Descriptions and caricatures of Corbyn include: Corbyn as saviour/messiah (ironically); a recalcitrant, sulky teenager who needs to grow up; a bearded loser, geography teacher or sociology lecturer; an ideological obsessive; an extremist threat allied with violent terrorists; a self-righteous hypocrite who is not what he seems.

The national anthem story acts a platform to parade many of these themes. This is one instance of the Daily Express being passionately hostile towards Corbyn, linking the story to terrorist sympathies and support for extremists. The Daily Mirror offers an alternative perspective on the national anthem story, using quotes to give the full context and separating patriotism from loyalty to the monarchy. It's worth noting that when a Mirror reader survey asked whether Corbyn should have sung the national anthem, 79% said no. For the Daily Telegraph meanwhile, the national anthem demonstrates Corbyn's Leninist disconnection; he is 'an elitist masquerading as a populist.' For Philip Collins it says something important about Corbyn and the left, in terms of how national identity and Socialism are apparently incompatible.

(4) Other themes

Party Divisions: Forming the Shadow Cabinet

Monday is dominated by the depictions of Corbyn desperately or frantically trying to form a Shadow Cabinet. Early stories are driven by anonymous senior Labour sources and moderates (See above). For example, the Daily Telegraph's coverage is heavily sourced from ex-Shadow Ministers. The focus is on the PLP (picked up later in the day after the PLP meeting). This might suggest a structural bias across all coverage that stems from the institutional relationship of the media and politicians focused on Westminster

Economic policy

This is a strong theme, which largely ties in with the narrative about Corbyn's leadership threatening 'chaos', undermining the country's financial stability and squeezing the middle classes. The Daily Telegraph leads on this type of story, and uses a quote from the Institute of Directors about Corbyn's victory undermining a competitive economy. The Mail at one point seems put out, asking: why haven't business leaders been more outspoken? (15/09/2015).

Scotland

Newspapers in Scotland take a slightly different angle in terms of their hostility to Corbyn, mainly portraying him as either a threat to or an ally of the SNP (depending on the political allegiance of the newspaper). In the Scottish Daily Mail, Corbyn is said to boost the SNP's power, as Labour will never win under his leadership. It's also worth noting that Letters (not counted in this report's data) to the Daily Express in England are overwhelming hostile to Corbyn for not singing the national anthem, whereas in Scotland the opposite is the case; there readers letters support Corbyn overwhelmingly.

For comments and enquiries contact:
Alistair Cartwright, alistair@mediareform.org.uk,
07826 541 052.