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COVERING THE VOTE

UK coverage of Brexit, Jeremy Corbyn, and the 2017 General Election





The need to examine how news media (print, broadcast, and online) cover political events rests in no small part on journalism's role as a 'fourth estate' or a 'watchdog'. Both terms refer to the role of journalists in keeping government to account, through reporting in a manner that produces a knowledgeable and critical electorate. This paper argues that the current political climate in the UK, Brexit, the ensuing 2017 General Election, and the introduction of controversial political figures make the need for this re-assessment of print, broadcast, and online journalism in the UK ever more pertinent.

Journalism's position as the 'fourth estate' of government in democratic societies is central to a properly functioning democracy where the electorate is able to make informed decisions about political actors and parties. This is especially the case during elections and referenda, both of which have taken place in the United Kingdom over the past two years. However, it is not only the news media's duty to inform the electorate of the candidates' promises or the parties' manifestos, but also to provide explanation and context. In the same vein, it is not simply enough for the news media to provide an inclusive platform for all political actors to voice their promises, but to also provide sufficient and comprehensive analysis of these promises. This would be achieved, for example, through the inclusion of expert commentary that would (in addition to the inclusion of political actors on the opposite end of the political sphere) provide balance and context.

I would argue that it is in fact the lack of context, background, as well as the lack of equal measure given to different political players, which has affected the quality of print, broadcast, and online journalism in UK. These issues have also led to coverage that has been deficient in its ability to provide the electorate with the tools necessary to make a well-measured vote, as evidenced by the studies mentioned in this article. It is essential for educators in the area of journalism and news production, to analyse the reasons that would lead to news media coverage (in all formats) being deficient in its ability to produce a well-informed electorate, in order to equip students with the tools necessary to avoid such issues. The studies mentioned in this paper provide insight into some of these issues through concrete analysis of the very significant events of the past two years. This type of research provides a backdrop from where educators in the field of journalism might draw on very recent examples that have affected, and continue to affect, journalism students in their field of study and inquiry.

The role of journalism, as 'watchdog', is not only restricted to times of elections and referenda. There are of course other cases where journalists would

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perform such a role that are fraught with dangers and threat of retribution, such as those involving whistleblowing. American journalist Glenn Greenwald, (formerly of *The Guardian*) was in 2013 involved in publishing the cache of classified NSA documents leaked by Edward Snowden. The documents ultimately revealed what were considered, at least by the United States government, as state secrets. The publication of the Panama Papers, 11.5 million documents detailing the off-shore accounts of several wealthy politicians leaked (anonymously) to German journalist Bastian Obermayer, is another such example of the press fulfilling its duty as watchdog.

The Need for Context

As mentioned previously, context and background are central to the role of a journalist. Research by the Glasgow University Media Group (2004) has shown that the absence of any clear historical context and background in British television news coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has led to a viewership that is woefully uninformed of the origins of the conflict. The same study also posits that UK coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict suffers from a lack of balance, in the sense that viewers are exposed to a higher percentage of Israeli perspectives (including Israeli government spokespersons) than Palestinian ones (Philo and Berry, 2004), ultimately leading to a biased picture of the events happening on the ground. This brings up another issue that should be considered when evaluating news coverage of elections and referenda, namely the importance of maintaining balance, whereby viewers need to be informed of the positions of the different political players involved.

Research in the area of elections (Hall *et al.*, 1981) separates between the genres of *News* and *Current Affairs* on television news, citing the BBC in particular when elaborating on this separation. This distinction is fundamental to our understandings of so-called 'objective', straight news on the one hand, and analysis on the other, whereby *News* would





involve the former and *Current Affairs* the latter. Both should work towards fulfilling journalism's role as a watchdog, however, *Current Affairs* offerings would obviously be more suited towards the provision of context and analysis, by virtue of their design. In a lecture given at the University of West London in 2016 by former *Newsnight* editor Merion Jones, he detailed the challenges his team faced in airing the Jimmy Saville sexual abuse story in 2011 on the BBC; the very network that had systemically covered up the scandal over the course of several decades. The *Newsnight* episode in question was ultimately shelved by the BBC and its transmission cancelled; a decision which led to the network being very heavily criticised. Jones recounted the responsibility felt by himself and his team to air the story; irrespective of the fact that the majority were aware that they were in danger of losing their jobs. In 2013, Jones won the London Press Scoop award of the year for his role in the investigation of the Jimmy Saville case and is currently the Investigations Editor at the Bureau of Investigative Journalism. This example illustrates the role of journalism as a watchdog, bringing the country's public service broadcaster to account, irrespective of the consequences.

Covering the Brexit Vote

The inclusion of context and explanation is of paramount importance during times of election and referenda, as they occur at the precise moment when the electorate needs to make up its mind (Hall *et al.*, 1981). This is a very sensitive moment in a democratic society and one in which journalists have a very important responsibility to inform and educate the electorate. Journalism thus has an obligation to fulfil which falls within the context of its role as the 'fourth estate'. Extensive research has analysed the UK press and broadcasters' coverage of the 23 June 2016 Referendum (Levy, D.A.L., Aslan, B. and Bironzo, D. 2016; Deacon *et al.*, 2016; Cushion, S. and Lewis, J. 2016). The researchers found that, when it came to the press, while the country's major newspapers (of which 10 were included in the study) were split in terms of their Leave/Remain leanings, in terms of circulation 82% of readers in the UK were exposed to pro-Brexit news. This was due in large part to the substantial readership of *The Sun*, a publication that eventually came out as pro-Leave once it became clear that the vote itself would swing towards Leave. As for the broadcasters (BBC, Channel 4, Channel 5, ITV), they were more balanced in terms of Leave/Remain coverage. The researchers also found that in terms of the two main issues of the Leave/Remain campaigns, namely the economy and immigration, news bulletins were equally balanced (Lewis and Cushion, 2016). However, problems arose with regards to balance of sources. News sources refer to persons who provide information necessary to the story, and most often the sources would give the story authenticity and weight. In this case, sources would refer to the politicians or political spokespeople campaigning for either Leave or Remain. The researchers found that

while Leave/Remain voices were given equal platform, Conservative voices were given more airtime than Labour ones, with Conservative arguments being favoured. Drawing on the above-mentioned findings in an article for *The New Statesman*, Lewis and Cushion argue:

But an imbalance emerges when we look at the party affiliation of campaigners, since 71.2 per cent of political sources were from the Conservative party compared to 18.4 per cent from Labour. This cannot be blamed on Jeremy Corbyn's alleged reluctance to participate in the campaign. Alan Johnson – who led Labour's Remain campaign – and many other senior Labour figures tirelessly toured the country (Lewis and Cushion, 2016)

This comes not only at the expense of Labour as the main opposition party, but at the expense of all political parties in the UK. What it ultimately reveals is that, at a time when the United Kingdom was undergoing one of the most critical votes in its recent history, the electorate was not being adequately informed, neither by press nor by public service broadcasters.

Perhaps more problematic is the lack of context and explanation provided by the broadcasters in particular. Blumer writes of how the broadcasters 'tethered their coverage to the campaigners' ploys' (Blumer, 2016: 11). While each of the broadcasters did indeed report each side of the argument and the challenges made by each of these two sides to their opponents' claims, they failed to take the argument further, by providing both context and explanation. Berry highlights a second issue; the focus on particular politicians and issues; ultimately leading to what he calls a 'Tory Story' (Berry, 2016: 14). This highlights the importance of journalists not taking the statements of political actors at face value; probing and pushing political actors to *say exactly what they mean*, instead of binding their coverage to the arguments of these political players.

The (Character) Assassination of Jeremy Corbyn

The favouring of one party over another is not the only problem apparent in British news media coverage (both press and broadcasting); there is also the issue of the inherent bias within news coverage when it comes to the country's main opposition leader, Jeremy Corbyn. In a comprehensive study by the London School of Economics and Political Science (Cammaerts *et al.*, 2017), the researchers found that Jeremy Corbyn was thoroughly delegitimised from the precise moment he became a viable political candidate in 2015. The *delegitimation* became even more apparent after he was elected Labour leader, and was done in three main ways: through the distortion or lack of voice, through personal attacks, including ridicule and scorn, and through association, mainly with terrorism and allegedly terrorist organisations (Cammaerts *et al.*, 2017:10), including the IRA, Hamas and Hezbollah.

With regard to the above research, establishing the news media's tone towards Jeremy Corbyn was

essential in determining how he was framed (or represented) across the UK press in the sample collected in September, October, and November 2015 (namely in the lead up to the Labour leadership election and once the election was sealed). In analysing the data, researchers refer to the press' role as either a watchdog, or alternatively as an 'attack dog' (Cammaerts *et al.*, 2017:2). While a critical tone would correspond to the watchdog role, an antagonistic one would be an indicator of the 'attack dog' stance. Positive and neutral tones were also studied in order to determine representation. Positive tones would imply a positive portrayal of Corbyn in the news articles, while neutral tones would imply straight and so-called 'objective' coverage and portrayal of him. Publications that were more positive in their representation of Corbyn were *The Guardian*, *The Mirror*, and the *Independent*, while the most antagonistic were *The Express* and *The Sun*. In terms of criticality, The Telegraph ranked relatively highly, however, the publication also had a large percentage of articles with an antagonistic tone (Cammaerts *et al.*, 2017:3).

Cammaerts *et al.*, (2017) explain that the delegitimisation of the Labour leader happened in several ways; for example, by distorting his voice or taking words out of context. Additionally Corbyn was, in many of the publications, not allowed a platform to voice his own views and positions. Of this the researchers state:

Allowing an important and legitimate leader of the main opposition party to develop their own narrative and have their own voice in the public space is paramount in a democracy. Denying such an important political actor a voice or distorting his views and ideas through the exercise of mediated power is highly problematic (Cammaerts *et al.*, 2017: 7)

This highlights the role the national press plays in maintaining a democracy, by representing of all sides of the political sphere, in order to produce a properly informed electorate; a role in which, in the case of Jeremy Corbyn, it has clearly failed. Perhaps even more dangerous than the omission of Corbyn's voice is the delegitimisation through ridicule and scorn, some of which involved his personal life and perhaps more alarmingly his appearance (Cammaerts *et al.*, 2017:7). With regard to ridicule, similarities were drawn between Jeremy Corbyn and Mr. Bean, a British sitcom character, with the tabloid media frequently referring to him as 'Mr. Corbean', and the Labour leader was frequently sneered at for both his dress sense and his looks. *The Daily Telegraph* even sneered at his relationship with Shadow Minister Diane Abbott (Cammaerts *et al.*, 2017: 8). This delegitimisation is not restricted to the press, but also extends to the country's public service broadcaster. In January of this year, the BBC Trust in the annual report, where it evaluates the BBC's coverage across the year, reprimanded the BBC's political editor Laura Kuenssberg for editing an interview with Jeremy Corbyn, in a manner that gave a false impression and negative representation of the Labour leader (Lewis, 2017).



Such coverage in the lead-up to the Labour leadership elections is an obvious cause for alarm, but perhaps even more alarming is the continuation of such narratives, in particular omission of voice, onwards into the 2017 General Election.

News Media and the Race for Number 10

Academic research into the coverage of the 2017 General Election is in its early stages, however some preliminary findings are emerging. Stephen Cushion, in his analysis of the performance of the broadcasters' coverage of the 2017 General Election, found that the way the parties were covered on broadcast news shifted across the weeks the campaign was being run. Cushion (2017) found that, in the first week of the campaign, coverage across the broadcasters was largely pro-Conservative, in particular the BBC's. Brexit negotiations also dominated in this first week. Here we see a correspondence with the narratives outlined in the section above.

However, the second week of coverage began to balance out between the Conservatives and Labour; with Jeremy Corbyn often featured in front of large crowds of, notably, students (Cushion, 2017). This, perhaps not surprisingly, came at the expense of other political parties taking part in the campaign. Coverage of Labour and the Tories made up over 80% of airtime given to all parties. This is clearly problematic in the context of a general election, as the electorate is not being properly informed at what is a very critical political moment, where it is absolutely imperative for both broadcasters and the press to fulfill their duties towards the public.

Returning to the key issues of context and explanation explored at the outset, perhaps the most troubling finding with regards to coverage of the 2017 Election was the 'light policy agenda' in the first two weeks of coverage (Cushion, 2017: <http://bit.ly/2BnQMZj>), with very little expert analysis given in relation to each of the parties' policies or candidates. This (unsurprisingly) improved following the launch of the parties' manifestos. Further research is necessary in order to determine how the broadcasters (and indeed the press) performed in this regard; however, the lack of analysis and context at the outset of the 2017 General Election is indeed problematic and points to a larger issue with regards to expert political analysis in UK news coverage.





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Conclusion

It is evident that the system of political communication in the UK in 2017 is not at its optimum. This is especially worrying at a time of political uncertainty, where the electorate is tasked with making some very important decisions, and where the UK news media need to fulfill their responsibility as a 'fourth estate' and watchdog. The issues range from lack of context and analysis surrounding key issues in elections and referenda, as well as omission of voice for various political players and political parties. The misrepresentation, and indeed character assassination, of Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn is of particular concern. While one cannot deny that publications and news outlets are bound to have their own leanings, political or otherwise, the UK press and broadcasters must recognize the responsibility that they hold towards the public, by informing the electorate and by holding authority into account. In addition, educators in the field of journalism and mass communication must also be aware of how these issues might be presented in current news coverage of Brexit and the most recent elections in order to equip students with the knowledge and tools to produce journalism that is worthy of its title as the 'fourth estate'.

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