Labour, Antisemitism and the News
A disinformation paradigm

Dr Justin Schlosberg
Laura Laker
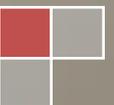
Executive Summary

- **Over 250 articles and news segments from the largest UK news providers (online and television) were subjected to in-depth case study analysis involving both quantitative and qualitative methods**

- **29 examples of false statements or claims were identified, several of them made by anchors or correspondents themselves, six of them surfacing on BBC television news programmes, and eight on TheGuardian.com**

- **A further 66 clear instances of misleading or distorted coverage including misquotations, reliance on single source accounts, omission of essential facts or right of reply, and repeated value-based assumptions made by broadcasters without evidence or qualification. In total, a quarter of the sample contained at least one documented inaccuracy or distortion.**

- **Overwhelming source imbalance, especially on television news where voices critical of Labour's code of conduct were regularly given an unchallenged and exclusive platform, outnumbering those defending Labour by nearly 4 to 1. Nearly half of Guardian reports on the controversy surrounding Labour's code of conduct featured no quoted sources defending the party or leadership.**

The Media Reform Coalition has conducted in-depth research on the controversy surrounding antisemitism in the Labour Party, focusing on media coverage of the crisis during the summer of 2018. Following extensive case study research, we identified myriad inaccuracies and distortions in online and television news including marked skews in sourcing, omission of essential context or right of reply, misquotation, and false assertions made either by journalists themselves or sources whose contentious claims were neither challenged nor countered. Overall, our findings were consistent with a disinformation paradigm.

We use the concept of disinformation to denote systematic reporting failures that broadly privileged a particular political agenda and ideological narrative. This does not mean that these failures were intentional or that journalists and news institutions are inherently biased. We recognize, for instance, that resource pressures combined with acute and complex controversies can foster particular source dependencies or blind spots.

Nor does our research speak in any way to allegations of smear tactics. To interrogate the root causes of disinformation would necessitate a far more wide-ranging study than was undertaken here. We start from the well-founded assumption that concerns about antisemitic hate speech within the Labour Party are genuine. There have been unambiguous examples of racist discourse invoking holocaust denial, generalized references to Jews in stereotyped contexts, and critiques of Zionists or Zionism that explicitly use the terms as proxies for Jews. Some of these cases have involved holders of official positions within the party, including local councilors.

Alongside such cases, there is a contested category of discourse that may be considered offensive or insensitive but not necessarily racist. Indeed, determining what counts as antisemitism lies at the heart of the wider controversy that has been played out in reams of column inches and air time since 2015, and with particular intensity during the spring and summer of 2018. We reserve judgement on this central point of contention but acknowledge legitimate views on both sides, as well as a spectrum in which relatively extreme and moderate positions are easily identifiable.

We recognize that this controversy – on the surface at least – involves prominent voices in a minority community accusing a major political party of harbouring racism directed towards them. What's more, these voices have been vocally supported by many high profile Labour MPs. In such

circumstances we expect journalists to take these concerns seriously, view them as inherently newsworthy, and not necessarily afford equal time and attention to contesting views. It is also important to stress that journalists must be allowed – on occasion – to get the story wrong: the public interest is never served by an overly cautious press.

But we do expect professional journalists to strive for accuracy, to establish essential contextual facts in any given story, and to actively seek out dissenting or contesting opinion including, in this case, within the minority group in question, within other affected minorities, and amongst relevant experts (both legal and academic). Nor do the particular complexities and sensitivities absolve journalists of their responsibility to offer a due right of reply to the accused or to interrogate contentious claims made by sources on all sides.

Overall, we found **95 clear cut examples of misleading or inaccurate reporting** on mainstream television and online news platforms, with a quarter of the total sample containing at least one such example. The problem was especially pronounced on television – which reaches far wider audiences by comparison – where **two thirds of the news segments on television contained at least one reporting error or substantive distortion.**

Underlying these figures was a persistent subversion of conventional news values:

- Several reports focused on a controversial social media post by Jeremy Corbyn omitted any mention that it was made six years ago, with some emphasising a sense of currency and recency that failed to make clear the historical context of the post.

- Journalists covering the launch of Labour's antisemitism report in 2016 routinely misquoted an activist in ways that were entirely removed from his original comment, in spite of a video recording of the event that was readily and immediately accessible.

- Above all, coverage of Labour's revised code of conduct during the summer of 2018 often entirely omitted critical discussion of the 'working definition' of antisemitism put forward by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), and wrongly characterized it as consensual and universally adopted.

In fact, we established through background case research that

- although the IHRA is an international body with representatives from 31 countries, only six of those countries have, to date, formally adopted the definition themselves.

- In spite of a call for local authorities to adopt the definition by the UK's central government in early 2017, less than a third of councils have responded and several of those have chosen not to include any of the controversial examples contained within the working definition.

- Several high-profile bodies have rejected or distanced themselves from the working definition, including the EU's Fundamental Rights Agency (a successor to the body that drafted the original wording on which the definition is based) and academic institutions including the London School of Economics and the School of Oriental and African Studies.

- Mainstream academic and legal opinion has been overwhelmingly critical of the IHRA definition, including formal opinions produced by three senior UK barristers and one former appeals court judge.

Virtually none of this essential context found its way into news reports of the controversy. Instead, the Labour Party was routinely portrayed by both sources and correspondents as beyond the pale of conventional thinking on the IHRA definition.

This matters because although the manifest issue at stake is not outwardly political in nature, the controversy is inextricably linked to a wider ideological conflict that has been playing out within the Labour Party for some years, and within British politics more broadly. To that extent, such

controversies bring into sharp relief the news media's role and responsibilities in nurturing inclusive public debate and contributing to an informed citizenry. It also matters because the misreporting of antisemitism risks normalizing or distracting attention from certain forms of antisemitic discourse. Distortions also risk stirring racial tensions by provoking counter-outrage that may be misdirected at Jews on either the left or right of the political spectrum. It is notable in this respect that in 2016, a Daily Mail columnist who has been outspoken on this issue described one Corbyn supporter as a "useful Jewish idiot"[1]; whilst in 2018, the Prime Minister's warm congratulatory words offered to her Malaysian counterpart[2] – a leader who has openly described himself as an 'antisemite' – received virtually no attention at all in mainstream news, despite antisemitism being such a salient issue on the news agenda at the time.

In sum, although our findings do not engage directly with the controversy – shedding no further light on what *is* antisemitism nor how prevalent it is within the Labour Party - we can say with some certainty that there have been prevalent errors, omissions and skews in the mainstream coverage.

This was no anomaly: almost all of the problems observed in both the framing and sourcing of stories were in favour of a particular recurrent narrative: that the Labour Party has been or is being lost to extremists, racists and the 'hard left'. Some of the most aggressive exponents of this narrative were routinely treated by journalists – paradoxically – as victims of aggression by the party's 'high command'.

During the summer of 2018, this controversy reached fever pitch amid claims that the Labour party had become 'institutionally racist' under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, and that the prospect of a Corbyn-led government posed an 'existential threat' to Jewish life in Britain. It has given rise to vocalized threats of a split within the party, further destabilizing politics and signalling a potentially profound reshaping of the British political map. At a time when the country is entering the final stages of its negotiated withdrawal from the European Union, these findings warrant urgent attention from journalists, editors, policymakers and activists alike.

About the researchers

Dr Justin Schlosberg is Senior Lecturer in Journalism and Media at Birkbeck, University of London. He has published widely in peer reviewed journals, authored two books about the media and provided oral testimony to a number of public inquiries related to his research. He is a former Chair of the Media Reform Coalition and Network Fellow at the Safra Center for Ethics, Harvard University. He is an active member of the Labour Party and the associated group Jewish Voice for Labour.

Laura Laker is a freelance journalist with eight years' experience specializing in transport and environmental issues. This has included a number of editing roles at national print and web titles, including the Guardian newspaper's cycling supplements. She holds an NCTJ pre-entry certificate in newspaper journalism and has appeared on a range of television and radio news platforms including Sky News, BBC Breakfast, LBC and 5Live radio. She is not a member of the Labour Party nor any affiliated or associated groups, and has not voted consistently for Labour in local or national polls.

Methodology

Mindful of the sensitivities and complexities of this controversy, we adopted an especially cautious research design, minimizing scope for interpretive or discretionary judgement on the part of researchers; restricting categories of analysis to observable manifest content (text or speech) and avoiding questions of slant in relation to a given article or news segment as a whole. The framework was tested using a sub-sample that was analysed separately by both researchers. This yielded a 93% agreement across the coding decisions related to inaccurate or misleading coverage. Using Cohen's kappa statistic (which takes account of random chance agreement), this resulted in a score of .91, which is considered near perfect

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[1] See https://twitter.com/dpjhodges/status/634960993764909056?lang=en

[2] See https://twitter.com/10downingstreet/status/994968670609780737?lang=en

agreement and indicates highly reliable findings[3]

In relation to sourcing, our analysis was focused on directly quoted or speaking sources drawn from both within and outside of the Labour Party. This was to ensure reliability and consistency of coding decisions and avoid anomalies that can arise when dealing with anonymous and/or paraphrased sources. Focusing on directly quoted and speaking sources also captures the force of 'voice' given to individuals or groups within the story. Given that the Labour leadership has frequently acknowledged failures to deal with the problem of antisemitism within the party, our analysis was further restricted to specific contexts in which contesting views and voices were clearly identifiable.

Alongside quantitative analysis related to framing and sourcing, qualitative observations were made in regard to the particular language, tone and positioning adopted by journalists vis-à-vis key sources. Drawing on background case research, this enabled us to detect further incidental inaccuracies and distortions that were not captured by the more restrictive quantitative framework.

The sample of analysis was drawn from a cross-section of the largest online news providers in the UK, as well as flagship television news bulletins and programmes. It was derived using a combination of key-word searches on Google.co.uk and the news archives held at the British Library. After refinements to ensure comparability, this yielded a final sample of 258 units of analysis across both television and online.

For more information contact:

Dr Justin Schlosberg
Birkbeck, University of London
Tel +44 (0)20 7631 6185
Email j.schlosberg@bbk.ac.uk

Media Reform Coalition
c/o Goldsmiths, University of London
New Cross
London SE14 6NW

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[3] Richard J. Landis & Gary G. Koch, The Measurement of Observer Agreements for Categorical Data, Biometrics 33:159-174 (1977)