Labour, Antisemitism and the News
A disinformation paradigm

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Introduction

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 agenda and 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 there are genuine concerns about antisemitic hate speech within the Labour Party. 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 candidates for elected office or holders of official positions within the party, including local councilors.[1]

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.

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[1] See for instance https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-beds-bucks-herts-36012650 and https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/labour-suspends-member-vicki-kirby-over-antisemitic-tweets-row-a6932146.html

About the researchers

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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 agreement and indicates highly reliable findings.[2]

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.

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

Case study 1: Codegate

Background

On 5th July 2018, the Equalities sub-committee of Labour's ruling NEC proposed revisions to the party's code of conduct in relation to antisemitism. Specifically, the text invoking the definition of antisemitism adopted by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), including illustrative examples, was adapted: One of the examples was excluded whilst three others were integrated separately into the code and amended so as not to be deemed necessarily antisemitic.

This precipitated a range of outspoken and contesting voices attacking and defending the proposed changes to the code as well as the IHRA definition. They included senior rabbis and 'mainstream' representatives of the Jewish community; a progressive alliance of dissenting Jewish groups both within the UK and around the world; representatives of Black and Asian minorities within the UK (BAME); Arab leaders in Israel's Parliament; as well as contesting views on all sides and within all sections of the UK's Labour movement.

The party's official line against inquiries was that these changes were designed to strengthen and expand the code in an effort to enable a swifter and more effective disciplinary process, as previously demanded by mainstream Jewish groups and many Labour MPs. Critics of the changes, however, argued that they were not the product of due consultation (especially with mainstream representatives of the Jewish community), and that they placed the party 'beyond the pale' with reference to the range of public bodies and governments around the world that had adopted the definition in full.

The background research for this case study, including attention to primary sources, enabled us to establish a set of facts related to the essential context of this controversy: the emergence, development and adoption of the IHRA definition, as well as the process leading up to Labour's proposed revisions to its code of conduct put forward on 5th July. These may be summarized as follows:

1. The IHRA is an inter-governmental organization composed of representatives from 31-member countries. It formally adopted the 'working definition' of antisemitism at a plenary meeting in 2016, which was originally drafted and developed by the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC), an agency of the European Union, in the early 2000s.

2. The EUMC itself did not formally adopt the working definition and its successor, the Fundamental Rights Agency, removed the text from its website in 2013.[3] The chief drafter of the text, Kenneth Stern, had publicly opposed adoption of the definition into legal statute on the basis of concerns about its potential to limit free speech.[4]

3. Though the IHRA itself adopted the definition in 2016 "to guide the organization in its work", only six of its member state countries have adopted it to date, and eight countries in total.[5] The UK was one of the first countries to adopt the definition following the IHRA's adoption, as noted in a government press release in December 2016.[6]

4. Following adoption by the UK government, a number of public bodies and institutions followed suit, including the Crown Prosecution Service, and Kings College London.[7] However,

[3] See https://www.jta.org/2013/12/04/news-opinion/world/eu-anti-racism-agency-unable-to-define-anti-semitism-official-says

[4] Stern, K.S. (2017). Written testimony of Kenneth S. Stern. United States House of Representatives Committee on the Judiciary: Hearing on Examining Anti-Semitism on College Campuses. Retrieved from https://judiciary.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Stern-Testimony-11.07.17.pdf

[5] See https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/sites/default/files/inline-files/Fcat%20Sheet%20Working%20Definition%20of%20Antisemitism_1.pdf

[6] https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-leads-the-way-in-tackling-anti-semitism

[7] https://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/students-kings-college-london-adopts-international-definition-of-anti-semitism/

it was not legislated or enshrined in a formal disciplinary code of conduct by any of the institutions adopting it.

5. In early 2017 the UK central government put out a call to local authorities around the country to adopt the working definition. To date, less than a third have heeded the call.[8] Several of those local authorities that have adopted the definition do not appear to have included any of the accompanying examples.[9]

6. Since its original formulation by the EUMC, the definition has been subject to considerable controversy and criticism by prevailing academic and legal opinion,[10] as well as dozens of Jewish organisations around the world.[11] It has been rejected by a number of UK institutions since 2016, especially within the higher education sector.[12]

7. According to an official response from the Labour Party, prior to 5th July the development of its code of conduct took place against the backdrop of "an open and inclusive consultation" in which "a range of Jewish communal organisations, rabbis, academics, lawyers, trade unions, Palestinian groups, local Labour parties and members took part".

8. According to an official party spokesperson, the revised code of conduct was "positively received" by the Jewish Labour Movement (the largest Zionist Jewish group affiliated to the Labour Party) prior to 5th July.[13] The JLM has since denied this but an LBC interview with one of its Chairs, Ivor Caplan, just prior to the unveiling of the new code, seemed to suggest otherwise:

    > I picked up this battle just two or three weeks ago as Chair of the Jewish Labour Movement. There have been extensive discussions [within the Labour Party] about how we deal with antisemitism and get it right and I am already starting to see the small steps that I wanted to see in month one […] we have to change the party to win the trust of the British people and make antisemitism a thing of the past. That's what I'm committed to do. I've been very clear about that with the Jewish Labour Movement and its members. I've been very clear about that with senior figures within the Labour Party and I think we are starting to see the progress that I wanted to see.[14]

Drawing on the points above, we established a set of starting assumptions for the research as follows:

On the definition

a. The IHRA definition is the only 'internationally agreed' definition of antisemitism and the only one to be formally adopted by the UK government and some public bodies.

b. Notwithstanding the above, there has been only limited adoption of the definition both in terms of the number of governments and institutions that have responded to calls for adoption, and the extent to which the definition has been adopted by those that have (with particular reference to the accompanying examples).

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[8] See, for instance, https://new.devon.gov.uk/accesstoinformation/archives/information_request/ihra-international-holocaust-remembrance-alliance-definition-of-anti-semitism

[9] See, for instance, https://www.manchester.gov.uk/meetings/meeting/3002/council and http://modgov.southnorthants.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=117&MId=2393

[10] See, for instance, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/dec/28/britain-definition-antisemitism-british-jews-jewish-people and https://freespeechonisrael.org.uk/ihra-opinion/#sthash.1UEfkapu.YXLXnT79.dpbs

[11] https://jewishvoiceforpeace.org/first-ever-40-jewish-groups-worldwide-oppose-equating-antisemitism-with-criticism-of-israel/

[12] See, for instance, http://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/soas-director-rejects-new-contentious-anti-semitism-definition/ and https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/8802/Business-of-the-Equality-Committee-2017

[13] https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/6701818/fury-as-it-emerges-labour-anti-semites-could-escape-punishment-if-they-tell-party-they-didnt-mean-to-be-offensive/

[14] https://soundcloud.com/user-487229880/ivor-caplin-on-lbc-with-nick-ferrari

c.   The definition is highly contested amongst academic and legal experts as well as Jewish organisations around the world.

On Labour's code of conduct

d.   The Labour Party consulted on the development of its code of conduct in this area leading up to the proposal of the new rules on 5th July, at least with the JLM. How widely it consulted and whether or the extent to which the new rules were "positively received" by the JLM is a point of contention.

Contentious and inaccurate claims

It follows from the above that it may be considered *contentious* (though not inaccurate) to claim or infer that the definition has been widely or broadly adopted either internationally or within the UK. But it is *inaccurate* to claim or infer that it has been universally or unanimously adopted, or that that it is a 'globally' accepted definition, or that it is the product of consensus agreement either amongst experts, governments or the Jewish community. It is also *inaccurate* to claim or infer that all of the institutions who have adopted it – including local authorities – have done so 'in full' (including accompanying examples).

We can also say that it is *contentious* to claim or infer that the Labour Party did not sufficiently consult on the development of its code of conduct. It is *inaccurate* to claim that the Labour Party did not consult at all on the code prior to 5th July. On 19th September, the BBC published a correction relating to a comment made by presented John Humphrys on the Today Programme more than two weeks earlier:

> In this edition of Today it was stated that the IHRA definition of antisemitism had "been accepted by almost every country in the world". In fact, 31 member countries of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) supported the adoption of a non-legally binding Working Definition of Antisemitism to guide the organisation in its work on 26 May 2016.
>
> To date, according to the IHRA, the working definition has been adopted and endorsed by the following governments and bodies: The United Kingdom (12 December 2016), Israel (22 January 2017), Austria (25 April 2017) Scotland (27 April 2017), Romania (25 May 2017), City of London (8 February 2017), Germany (20 September 2017), Bulgaria (18 October 2017), Lithuania (24 January 2018), and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (6 March 2018).[15]

Both contentious and inaccurate claims are routine in the news and not necessarily problematic provided that they are in some way subject to challenge, correction or counter-view either by journalists themselves or contesting sources. However, when left entirely unchallenged or even repeated by journalists without qualification they can amount to serious distortions. And the problem can be cumulative. It seems reasonable to assume that the more frequently an inaccurate or contentious claim surfaces unchallenged in news discourse, the more likely it is to be accepted – by journalists, sources and audiences alike – as established fact.

Of course, contentious claims are the bedrock of opinion pieces and as such, these were not considered in our analysis. However, in keeping with conventional editorial standards we do include opinion pieces when considering inaccurate or false statements of fact. Table 1 lists examples of both false and contentious statements that were entirely unchallenged, countered or unqualified in either reports or opinion pieces within the sample:

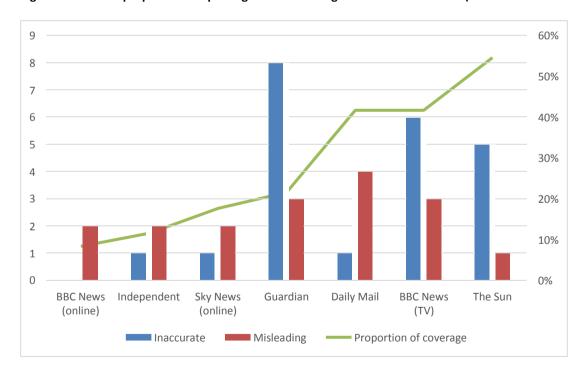[15] https://www.bbc.co.uk/helpandfeedback/corrections_clarifications/

Table 1 Examples of inaccurate and misleading claims relating to the IHRA definition (uncorrected or countered)*

Outlet	Inaccurate	Misleading
Daily Mail	"accepted around the world by organisations like the United Nations"	The IHRA definition has been widely accepted
Sky News	"this universal definition"	a widely backed definition
Independent	"a universally agreed definition"	a widely recognised definition
Guardian	the full definition […] accepted by […] 124 local authorities.	the widely accepted IHRA definition
Mirror	the globally recognised definition	a widely recognised definition
Telegraph	global definition of antisemitism	"broadly accepted internationally"
BBC TV	"accepted by more or less every country in the world"	the widely agreed definition

*inverted commas denotes comments attributable to directly quoted or speaking sources

In total, we found 27 examples of misleading and 28 examples of inaccurate reporting made in regard to the IHRA definition. Half of the latter were found on TheGuardian.com and BBC television news programmes alone. Figure 1 presents the distribution of these reporting failures for those outlets with more than 10 units in the sample. The bars show the number of misleading and inaccurate reporting instances for each outlet. The line graph shows the overall proportion of reporting failures (misleading and inaccurate figures combined) relative to each outlet's volume of coverage.

Figure 1 Total and proportional reporting failures relating to the IHRA definition (uncorrected or countered)

The outlet with the highest proportion of reporting failures was The Sun followed by the Daily Mail and BBC Television News. BBC online registered the lowest proportion of reporting failures followed by the Independent.

In addition to false statements regarding the scope of adoption, we also found two references by journalists to a statement that was incorrectly attributed to the IHRA itself. In fact, the statement – criticising attempts to adapt the definition - had been issued by the UK's delegation to the IHRA.[16]

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[16] https://holocaustremembrance.com/news-archive/statement-experts-uk-delegation-ihra-working-definition-antisemitism

It should be emphasized that it is highly improbable that these instances constitute an exhaustive list of inaccuracies even within the limited sample of analysis. We did not include several examples of journalists or sources commenting on the degree to which Labour had consulted on its revisions prior to 5th July, all of which suggested that the party had either not consulted adequately, or not consulted at all, especially in relation to Jewish community groups. Yet in none of these cases did the journalists in question seek a response from the party. We did not record such assertions as 'false' since it is impossible to establish for certain how far Labour did consult prior to 5th July, and there are certainly legitimate grounds for arguing that the party did not consult *enough.* But this argument very quickly moved from a point of contention in the initial coverage, to received wisdom later on. Consider, for instance, an article that appeared on TheSun.co.uk on 5th July which reported that

> Figures from the Jewish Labour Movement (JLM) met with the party's general secretary Jennie Formby to discuss the new rules earlier this week, and Labour sources said they were "positively received".[17]

We found virtually no other references to this consultation with the JLM in the remainder of our sample. What we did find were several assertions that Labour had not consulted widely enough or at all. Guardian columnist Jonathan Friedland, for example, wrote on 27 July that Labour "drew up its code of conduct itself, without consulting the organized Jewish community at all".[18] And the BBC's Andrew Neill responded with incredulity when Peter Dowd MP pointed out that Jewish groups were in fact consulted:

> Andrew Neil: Who were these Jewish organisations? It wasn't the Board of Deputies was it?
>
> Peter Dowd: Yes they were[19]

As part of our case research we sought a comment from the Board of Jewish Deputies in response to this point but, despite repeated attempts, we did not receive a reply.

Similar patterns were observed qualitatively in the language used by reporters across the sample. Guardian reports routinely used phrasing that emphasized Labour's 'failure to adopt' the IHRA definition in full,[20] whilst the BBC's Laura Kuenssburg described the NEC's subsequent decision to accept the code in full as a reluctant concession "after months of arguing, Labour finally agrees to budge".[21] This kind of framing entirely overlooked legitimate concerns about whether all of the IHRA examples were fit for purpose in a formal disciplinary code of conduct.

Underscoring this framing was a particular and consistent characterization of opposing camps, pitting a 'hard left' cabal that had secured its 'grip' on the party against an invoked mainstream consensus among Labour MPs, the Jewish community and the British public at large. Typical in this respect were repeated references to 'moderates' both within the Parliamentary Labour Party and the NEC,[22] juxtaposed with the party's 'high command' occupied by Corbyn and his team of special advisors.[23]

As with the examples of misleading and inaccurate reporting, this positions the Labour leadership in extremist terms, either rejecting or giving in to that which is universally or 'widely accepted'. It erases the essential context of controversy and disagreement that has surrounded the IHRA definition since it first surfaced. And it conforms to a wider narrative that has painted the party, under Jeremy Corbyn's

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[17] https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/6701818/fury-as-it-emerges-labour-anti-semites-could-escape-punishment-if-they-tell-party-they-didnt-mean-to-be-offensive/

[18] https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jul/27/jewish-anger-labour-listen-antisemitism-opinion

[19] BBC *Daily Politics* 18th July 2018

[20] See, for instance, https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/aug/15/antisemitism-row-corbyn-has-to-change-says-gordon-brown and https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/sep/01/antisemitism-row-risks-chances-of-labour-government

[21] BBC *Six O'Clock News*, 4 September 2018

[22] See, for instance, https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/labours-nec-approves-full-international-anti-semitism-definition_uk_5b8eadade4b0511db3dc9d02

[23] https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6066927/Corbyn-set-make-U-turn-anti-Semitism-definition.html

leadership, as beyond the pale of public opinion on a range of issues. This is in spite of Labour achieving a higher share of the popular vote in the 2017 general election compared to the last election the party won under Tony Blair.[24]

Sourcing

Overall, sources critical of Labour's revised code were considerably more prevalent across the sample though there was some variance between outlets, as shown in Figure 2.
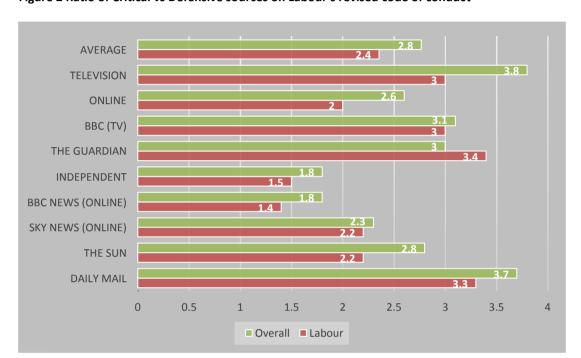
Figure 2 Ratio of Critical vs Defensive sources on Labour's revised code of conduct

Notably the most balanced outlets in terms of sourcing (Independent and BBC Online) also produced the fewest reporting failures proportionate to volume of coverage, whilst those outlets with the least balanced sourcing (Guardian, BBC TV, Daily Mail and the Sun) were also the outlets with the highest proportion of reporting failures (see figure 1). Out of the three outlets that covered this issue most extensively online (Guardian, BBC and Independent) the Guardian sub-sample was considerably more imbalanced in terms of sourcing compared to the BBC and Independent.

Once again there was a marked difference between the BBC's television and online output. Online, sources critical of Labour's revised code outnumbered those defending it by a factor of 1.8 compared to 3.1 on the BBC's television output. But in contrast to the data on misleading and inaccurate reporting, this pattern was not limited to the BBC but consistent across the sample. Overall, critical sources were 2.6 times more likely to be quoted in the online sample but this figure jumps to 3.8 for the overall television sample. Clearly, on television news – which reaches far greater audiences overall – sources defending Labour carried markedly less weight.

It is worth noting that defensive sources were overwhelmingly drawn from Labour's official statements and spokespeople, with less than 16 percent from outside of the party. This is particularly surprising given the wealth of active and vocal sources from outside of the party who were either defending Labour on this issue and/or critiquing the IHRA definition.

In mid-July, an unprecedented joint statement signed by more than 40 Jewish organisations around the world (including seven in the UK) was published critiquing the IHRA definition. This received only two

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[24] https://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/jeremy-corbyn-gets-labour-its-biggest-vote-share-since-tony-blairs-2001-landslide-a3560946.html

mentions within the sample – one in an opinion piece carried by the Independent[25] and the other as a brief citation in the last sentence of a Guardian report. In August, a letter co-signed by 84 groups representing Black and Asian minority groups across Britain defending Labour's revised code produced just one headline in the Independent, whilst a similar letter signed by Arab leaders in Israel's parliament yielded one headline in the Guardian.[26] In contrast, shortly after the joint statement by progressive Jewish groups, a letter published on behalf of 68 rabbis condemning Labour's code revisions and accusing the party of harbouring "severe and widespread antisemitism" was frequently cited throughout the sample and yielded dedicated headlines in the Mail, Mirror and Guardian.

A number of news reports focused on the code controversy also featured no defensive sources at all. The Guardian was a particular outlier in this respect, with critical sources given an entirely unchallenged platform in nearly half of the articles within this sub-sample.
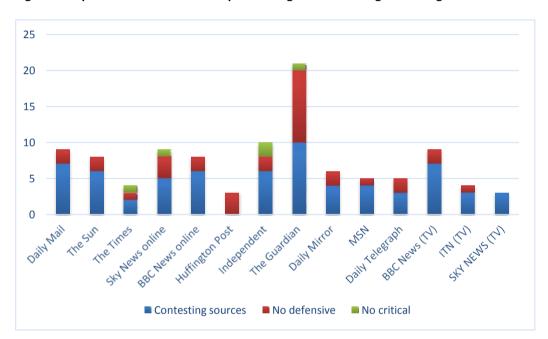
Figure 3 Proportion of code focused reports or segments featuring contesting sources

Figure 3 shows the balance between reports or segments featuring contesting sources (speaking or directly quoted), and those exclusively featuring defensive or critical voices. The most balanced outlets in this respect included Sky News television, The Times and the Independent. But most outlets were far more likely to give an exclusive platform to critical voices. At the extreme end, all three of the code-focused reports on the Huffington Post gave no voice to defensive sources at all.

Perhaps more seriously, we observed that television news anchors and correspondents tended to subject defensive sources to relatively fierce scrutiny and challenge. Indeed, defensive sources that adopted relatively moderate positions were met with notably confrontational questioning whereas critical sources adopting relatively extreme positions were often not challenged at all in live or recorded interviews. Consider for instance the approach taken by Andrew Neil on the BBC's *Daily Politics* show when questioning John Mann, a Labour MP who had long been outspoken in his criticism of his party and the leadership on antisemitism:

> Andrew Neil: The Chief Rabbi in the United Kingdom says that your party is treating Jews with contempt. Margaret Hodge, one of your fellow Labour MPs…has said that Jeremy Corbyn himself is an antisemite and a racist. What do you say to that?
>
> John Mann: It's not just the Chief Rabbi. For the first time ever we've had rabbis across the entire Jewish

[25] https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/antisemitisim-jews-israel-labour-party-bds-jewish-coalition-palestine-a8458601.html

[26] https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/jul/17/labour-agrees-to-fresh-antisemitism-consultation-after-stormy-debate

spectrum – from the liberal rabbis through to the ultra-orthodox rabbis - combining together in one letter. It's never happened before. And it's quite extraordinary to have that unanimity across the Jewish community.[27]

In the same programme, Neil subjected Peter Dowd – a Labour backbencher who has been broadly supportive of Jeremy Corbyn's leadership – to considerably more pointed and aggressive questioning such as "[in respect of the IHRA definition] why wouldn't you just do what everyone else does? What's different about Labour?"

What's most significant here is not just the distinction in tone between the two interviews, but the fact that Margaret Hodge (referenced in Andrew Neil's opening question to John Mann) had adopted a relatively extreme position within the spectrum of views among Labour MPs whilst Peter Dowd was comparatively moderate. He had not, for instance, been as outspokenly defensive of Labour's revised code of conduct as other MPs, including Richard Burden and Chris Williamson.

This is important because we would expect journalists to be especially probing in relation to sources that adopt relatively extreme positions in a political controversy. But in this case, the inverse appeared to be the case and this pattern was broadly observed across the television sample. So, for instance, edited clips from an exclusive Radio 4 interview of Margaret Hodge were replayed on several programmes but without any of the critical questioning by Martha Kearney that *did* take place in the original live interview. And when Sky News broadcast their own recorded interview with Hodge, she was given an entirely unchallenged platform to express her views. Indeed, in spite of Hodge's acknowledgement that she called Corbyn a racist and antisemite, on several occasions anchors and correspondents still qualified the charge as "alleged". References to her outburst were also routinely prefaced with deferential descriptions of her stature as a 'senior' and 'longstanding' MP as well as someone who had lost relatives in the Holocaust. In spite of her relatively extreme views and aggressive verbal attack on Corbyn, Hodge was consistently framed as a victim. In contrast, aggression was ascribed to the party's official response. As another BBC anchor remarked on 23 July: "Hodge has been told she can expect disciplinary action within 12 hours…very promptly".[28]

In sum, both quantitative and qualitative analysis of sourcing revealed marked skews which effectively gave those attacking Labour's revised code and championing the IHRA definition a virtually exclusive and unchallenged platform to air their views. By comparison, their detractors – including a number of Jewish organisations and representatives of other affected minorities – were systematically marginalized from the coverage. Furthermore, Labour MPs adopting even moderate positions defending the code were subjected to far more aggressive questioning from interviewers than those adopting extreme positions attacking it. These problems were intimately linked to the observed inaccuracies and distortions in reporting: the failure to adequately challenge or counter particular narratives resulted in journalists accepting certain maxims and claims uncritically and, in many cases, repeating them without qualification.

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[27] BBC *Daily Politics* 18th July 2018

[28] BBC *Daily Politics* 23rd July 2018

Supplementary case studies

We examined two further case studies selected following background research to illuminate some of the unique features of the reporting overall. Many related stories have centred on controversial statements made by Labour Party figures, some alleged to be antisemitic. Some of these statements were contemporary whilst others were made in the past. We selected two case studies to examine respectively 1) the degree to which the historical context of a statement made in the past was made clear to readers and viewers and 2) the degree to which a contemporary statement was accurately and appropriately quoted. In the latter case, we also interrogated the degree to which someone accused of antisemitism was offered a right of reply.

Muralgate

First, we examined the controversy which marked a peak of coverage intensity in the spring of 2018, with the story dominating headlines for a week and precipitating on-going attention to the issue in a variety of contexts, leading up the code controversy in the summer. The story revolved around a Facebook comment made by Corbyn in 2012 with reference to a controversial graffiti mural that surfaced in London's East End in 2012.

At the time, the mural painting (by Los Angeles street artist MearOne) elicited complaints about its alleged antisemitic undertones. Entitled *Freedom for Humanity*, the mural featured caricatures of six figures which the artist claimed were representatives of the banking dynasties Rothschilds, Rockefellers and Warburgs (two of which were Jewish). The mural also included the 'eye of providence' symbol associated with freemasonry and conspiracy.

In responding to the complaints the local council decided to remove the mural, prompting the artist to protest on his Facebook page. Jeremy Corbyn – a backbench MP at the time – responded by questioning its removal:

> Why? You are in good company. Rockerfeller destroyed Diego Viera's mural because it includes a picture of Lenin

A cursory examination of the contemporary coverage in 2012 suggested a relatively balanced sourcing between voices critical and defensive of the mural.[29] But when the story resurfaced in 2018 in the context of Corbyn's comment, such voices were all but entirely absent from the coverage. Corbyn himself claimed that he was not aware of the controversy surrounding the mural at the time and 'did not look closely enough' before posting his comment.

From the perspective of news values, the story's headline billing in 2018 was predicated on the notion that Corbyn's Facebook post had only just 'come to light'. Although it was covered by the Jewish Chronicle in 2015, it seems reasonable to assume that most politicians and journalists were not aware of it and that the comment had, in any case, taken on renewed salience in light of a story concerning Corbyn's past membership of a pro-Palestine Facebook group in which antisemitic posts by others had been identified.[30]

Under the circumstances, we did not expect journalists to have engaged directly with the central controversy surrounding the mural when it first surfaced, i.e. whether or not it was antisemitic. Several outlets – including BBC online – did nevertheless routinely use qualifications such as "alleged" or "condemned as", even after Corbyn himself agreed that the mural was antisemitic.

What we did expect from reports is that the historical context of the post – along with the basis of its renewed salience (i.e. 'recently came to light') – would be made clear. Without reference to the date or timing of Corbyn's controversial comment, there is an obvious risk that the story could be interpreted as revolving around something that he had said recently, as leader of the opposition, and in the midst of the wider controversy surrounding antisemitism in the party.

[29] See, for instance, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-england-london-19844681/kalen-ockerman-mural-to-be-removed-from-brick-lane

[30] https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/jeremy-corbyn-was-member-of-facebook-group-at-centre-of-anti-semitism-investigation_uk_5aa00289e4b002df2c5fc68d

This then formed the basis of our analytical framework for the case study. A similar sampling frame to the main case study was adopted but restricting the television sample to the main evening bulletins on BBC One, ITV and Sky, and with the addition of BBC's Today Programme on Radio 4. By focusing on news programmes with the widest reach, we capture those audiences who are less likely to have prior knowledge or understanding of the context compared to viewers of the more specialist and in-depth news analysis programmes.

The online sampling frame was restricted to articles that were exclusively or primarily based on the mural controversy. We would not necessarily expect articles that make only a passing mention of the mural incident to explicate the historical context. We did however expect broadcasters – with stronger commitments to due accuracy and impartiality and much wider and more generalized news audiences – to specify the historical context in any mention of the controversy. Finally, both the online and television samples were restricted to a limited timeframe of five days from when the story was first reported. This reflects the more intense but shorter duration of the story compared to the code controversy.

Close to a third of this sample (a total of 10 out of 34 reports) made no explicit reference to the historical context of Corbyn's controversial post. Five of these articles included mention of '2012' either in a directly quoted response from Jeremy Corbyn's office, or with reference to when the mural was painted, but not in the primary framing of Corbyn's post. The remaining five reports included no mention of the post's timing whatsoever. Both reports on the prime-time evening news bulletins (on BBC One and ITV) prefaced mention of the mural with particular phrasing that, if anything, seemed to convey a sense of currency in regards to the timing of the post:

> "In the last few days [Corbyn] apologised for arguing to preserve this image you might find offensive - a mural which depicts known stereotypes of Jews".

> "it's this mural that's once again painted a picture of antisemitism in Labour. Jeremy Corbyn accused of showing his support for it despite the fact it depicts Jewish people getting rich on the backs of others."

This omission is important because the wider antisemitism controversy has spawned a number of stories predicated on events, actions or statements made in the past – especially in connection with the Labour leader – and some have been re-runs of past news stories themselves. Omission of the historical context - along with why it matters *now* – clearly constitutes a significant distortion. Since it does not amount to a 'false' statement of fact, however, it was meta-coded in our analysis as an instance of misleading rather than inaccurate reporting.

The 'media conspiracy'

In the final case study, we examined reports of an incident that took place during the launch of Labour's report into antisemitism in June 2016. This involved an allegedly antisemitic remark made by a party activist targeted at Ruth Smeeth, a Jewish Labour MP who was also in attendance at the launch. The immediate availability of a video recording of the incident offered a useful basis on which to assess the degree to which the activist, Mark Wadsworth, was accurately quoted in reports. Again, this reflects a common theme in much of the related coverage where contentious or controversial statements are paraphrased in reports in ways that can potentially distort their original context or meaning. This event also led to a high-profile hearing in April 2018 – at the height of the coverage intensity - following which Wadsworth was expelled on the grounds of bringing the party disrepute (but not on the grounds of antisemitism).

A broadly similar sampling frame was used to the mural case study but with the addition of the *Evening Standard* online in view of its relatively intense coverage of the incident and its reputation for influencing the wider news agenda. We also used the same sample duration as the muralgate case study (covering five consecutive days beginning with and including the day of the report launch). But on this occasion the sample was widened to cover all and any articles that included a mention of the incident in question.

The launch of Chakrabarti's report took place at the height of the Labour leadership crisis that gripped the party following the EU referendum. Labour MPs were openly talking of a leadership challenge and it was against this backdrop that Wadsworth accused Ruth Smeeth, a Jewish MP who had been critical of Corbyn on a range of issues (and especially antisemitism), of "working in hand in hand" with the Daily Telegraph. Given the immediate focus of the event, this was immediately interpreted by some as a veiled antisemitic attack, drawing on a racial stereotype of Jews controlling the media.

On the face of it, however, Wadsworth's comments seemed to reflect a widely-held concern amongst Labour members that centrist or right-wing MPs were 'plotting' to oust the elected leader of the party, and that this extended to collaboration with some of the Tory-supporting press. As it turned out, these concerns were well-founded as the event was swiftly followed by a wave of shadow cabinet resignations that was at least partly orchestrated with the media, including the BBC.[31]

Of crucial significance here was Wadsworth's reference to an interaction he witnessed between Smeeth and a single reporter from a single newspaper. There was nothing in his original comment that either explicitly or implicitly generalized this interaction into a broader accusation of working with the right-wing press or media at large. Indeed, he was subsequently caught on camera having a private exchange with Jeremy Corbyn stating that he 'outed' Smeeth for "working with the 'Torygraph'".[32] This would seem to support the view that Wadsworth's charge was not one of collaborating or conspiring with the press *in general*.

Yet this is precisely how Wadsworth was indirectly quoted in 13 out of 35 reports. At its most benign, such paraphrasing adopted words such as "colluding with the right-wing press" without any qualification. Some reports went further and omitted the 'right-wing' descriptive limiter, including John Pienaar in his report for the BBC's Six O'Clock News:

> Was this hard left prejudice? A pro-Corbyn activist who'd handed out a statement saying rebel MPs should be sacked as candidates turned on a Jewish MP for what he called collusion with the press.

And at the extreme end of the spectrum Wadsworth was reported in the Sun as accusing Smeeth of being part of a "Jewish media conspiracy"[33] and in a separate article, simply "attacking her for being Jewish".[34]
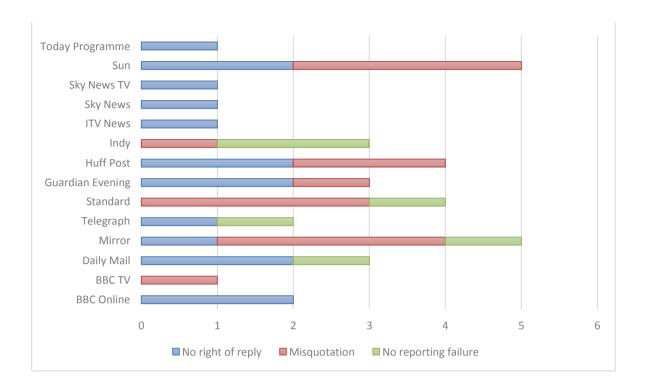
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[31] https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3389675/BBC-fire-orchestrating-resignation-shadow-minister-live-air-producer-s-blog-deleted-revealed-stage-managed.html

[32] https://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/video-corbyn-jokes-with-smeeth-heckler-after-chakrabarti-report/

[33] https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/1374007/jeremy-corbyn-seen-laughing-and-joking-with-the-man-who-made-jewish-labour-mp-cry/

[34] https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/1369069/labour-mp-ruth-smeeth-leaves-anti-semitism-event-in-tears-after-being-attacked-for-being-jewish/

Figure 4 Failures in reporting the Mark Wadsworth's comment at the launch of Labour's antisemitism report, 30 June 2016

It would appear that several journalists had taken cues from Smeeth herself who, in a formal response, had alleged that Wadsworth used traditional antisemitic slurs to attack her "for being part of a 'media conspiracy'". In spite of the seriousness of the allegation, nearly half of the reports in the sample (15 out of 33) either quoted Smeeth directly or referred to her allegations without mentioning Wadsworth's denial. This was a clear subversion of the journalistic principle of offering a right of reply to those who face reputational damage from an allegation of harm.

This was all the more perplexing given that journalists did not have to reply on second hand accounts of what was said at the meeting. Many were in attendance of the launch which was also streamed live and the video footage – including the recorded interaction between Wadsworth and Smeeth – was easily and immediately accessible.

Meta-analysis

Looking at the overall figures in absolute terms, The Guardian and BBC television recorded the two highest number of inaccuracies (8 and 6 respectively), followed closely by TheSun.co.uk (5). Proportionate to the volume of coverage, BBC television still featured the highest rate of inaccurate reporting and this position holds when incidences of misleading coverage. Figure 6 shows the overall reporting failures across the three case studies for outlets with 10 or more units in the total sample.
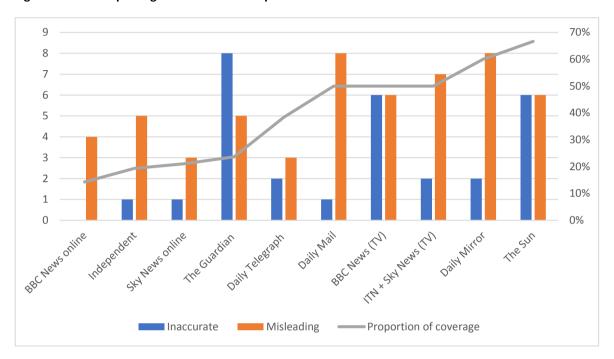
Figure 5 Overall reporting failures across sample and case studies

With regard to inaccuracies, there was a marked contrast between the BBC's television output and those of its main rivals (ITN and Sky). The latter two combined matched the BBC's share of output but recorded only two instances of inaccurate reporting (compared to the BBC's six). When we include instances of misleading coverage, the total figure for the BBC's television output is still 30 percent higher than Sky and ITV combined. Only the red top newspaper titles (Daily Mail and The Sun) recorded a higher proportion of reporting failures overall compared to broadcasters.

Equally striking is the difference between the BBC's television and online news platforms. Of those online outlets with 10 or more articles in the sample, the BBC's online news service ranked the lowest for inaccurate or misleading coverage both in proportionate and absolute terms.

It is not clear why BBC television performed so badly relative to both rival broadcasters and its own online news service. What does seem clear is that several of the BBC's senior television anchors and correspondents accepted contentious claims by sources and often repeated them without qualification during interviews, pieces to camera or live two-ways.

This could be down to the perceived authority of sources who made such assertions on the BBC's own programmes (including exclusive interviews with Dame Margaret Hodge MP and the leaders of mainstream Jewish groups both within and outside of the Labour Party), or the frequency with which the claims were repeated by sources. In any case, the evidence produced here points to a systematic failure to both identify contentious claims, as well as check their veracity.

Overall, across all three case studies over 90 clear cut examples of misleading or inaccurate reporting were documented, with a quarter of the total sample containing at least one such example. The problem was especially pronounced on television where two thirds of the news segments sampled revealed at least one inaccuracy or substantive distortion.

Conclusion

Underlying the evidence presented here was a persistent subversion of conventional news values. Several reports omitted reference to the historical context of a controversial social media post made by Jeremy Corbyn in 2012; journalists covering the launch of Labour's antisemitism report in 2016 routinely misquoted Mark Wadsworth in ways that invoked a notion of media conspiracy that was entirely absent from his original statement, in spite of the fact that a video recording of the event was readily and immediately accessible. Above all, mainstream coverage of the controversy surrounding Labour's revised code of conduct during the summer of 2018 all but entirely eschewed the criticisms of the IHRA definition, and routinely characterized the latter as consensual and unanimous, in spite of substantial available evidence to the contrary.

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"[35]; whilst in 2018, the Prime Minister's warm congratulatory words offered to her Malaysian counterpart – 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.[36]

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 signaling 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.

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

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