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## Jeremy Corbyn's media strategy is smarter than his critics realise

Major political campaigns in the past created their own media.

By Des Freedman

The issue of media bias now sits at the heart of the Labour leadership election and, beyond that, at the heart of debates about whether radical politics can ever get a fair hearing in the current media landscape.

On the one hand, there is overwhelming evidence of the systematic delegitimisation of Jeremy Corbyn in the mainstream press and the disproportionate attention paid to critics of the Labour leader in our main TV news broadcasts. In response, supporters have launched the #WeAreHisMedia hashtag and argued that Corbyn should take advantage of the growing power of social media (and by association, the waning power of mass media) to sidestep a media establishment that is determined to discredit him.

On the other hand, influential commentators on the left are calling for the Labour leader to develop a "coherent media strategy" that aims at reaching "ordinary" voters (as opposed to activists) via these hostile media platforms.

I want to make four points about the implications of this increasingly polarised debate about the need for a left media strategy.

First, we shouldn't overstate the power of the media to determine political opportunities. Radical politics has long had to contend with hostile media. You think the Chartists had an easy ride from newspapers when pressing for labour rights in the 1840s? You think the suffragettes had universal support in Fleet Street when campaigning for the vote?

Progressive movements have always had to organise in the face of sustained attacks from elite media, whether it was the victory of Syriza in Greece in 2015 or the very narrow defeat for Scottish independence, despite every newspaper bar one backing a No vote in 2014. Battles are won not because of the sophistication of a media strategy but because of the strength of grassroots support for change and the effectiveness of your ability to neutralise your opposition.

Second, however, all major campaigns for social change have had their own media. The Chartists had the *Northern Star*, the Suffragettes had their own self-titled newspaper, the Bolsheviks had *Pravda*, Gandhi founded *Harijan* to help build his anti-colonial struggle while Solidarity in Poland had *Robotnik* and the Algerians had the unofficial *Voice of Fighting Algeria* during their anti-colonial struggle in the 1950s. None of these were commercial enterprises but instruments with which activists communicated with each other, publicised their activities and spread their vision. They were the organising frameworks of emergent mass movements, designed not supplant the news outlets of their enemies but to strengthen their own campaigns. That is the model that I see in relation to the use of social media by Corbyn supporters: of course hashtags and memes alone do not topple governments and win elections but they can help solidify and give confidence to movements whose capacity to use traditional communications system is limited.

This relates to my third point: that while social media are valuable organising tools, they do not constitute the spaces where, by and large, people get their news. Mainstream news outlets remain extremely influential – though not decisive, as I have already suggested – in shaping agendas and in legitimising specific perspectives on, for example, immigration, race, austerity and indeed on political leadership (remember Ed Miliband's bacon sandwich). Legacy news organisations – especially the BBC, ITV, Sky and Channel 4 – remain by far the top news sources for adults in the UK, with BBC One alone used by some 48 per cent of the population. The BBC's reach, in particular, is vastly greater than that of any other source which is precisely why the Media Reform Coalition's research that uncovered routine bias against Corbyn in its main TV bulletins was so important.

For those who are talking about a "paradigm shift" from traditional to new media in the face of a growing distrust of elite sources, it may be true that print circulation is declining rapidly but it is

not true that Murdoch, Dacre and Desmond have lost the ability to influence both the conduct and the coverage of public affairs. Academic research on the agenda-setting influence of right-wing newspapers on broadcast coverage of the 2015 general election together with the domination of those same voices of coverage of the EU referendum points to the continuing ability of established voices – online and offline – to distort conversations about contemporary politics and to systematically undermine progressive arguments.

The implication of this is not that we ought to develop a media strategy (let alone as set of policies) focused on the priorities and routines of the major news outlets. Labour ought not to accommodate to media power but to challenge it. This would involve curbing the influence of the biggest media moguls, addressing the systemic bias towards vested interests inside some of our biggest newsrooms, and supporting the creation of new, independent sources of journalism. Media reform needs to be a central part of any progressive political strategy – as Corbyn himself has alluded to.

The final point is that there is little use in simply calling on Corbyn to take the media more seriously. Of course, he needs a media operation that uses [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#) to communicate with his supporters and that makes available key Labour figures to articulate its policies inside mainstream media. But it's just not that helpful to tell someone like Corbyn, who has been at the brunt of so many media misrepresentations, that, [as Ellie Mae O'Hagan put it recently](#), he has to "focus on using it [the media] to his advantage." This belies the fact news is not a neutral and transparent space but one framed by the agendas and priorities of those at the top – whether they are billionaire proprietors or humble editors internalising the views of those around them.

In this situation, repeated calls for "coherent media strategy" in the middle of a very divisive leadership election are rather mischievous – a proxy for more generalised concerns about Corbyn's leadership. He may indeed have made mistakes but it would be an even bigger mistake to imagine that a polished and professional media strategy – the kind of thing we saw under the leadership of Tony Blair – will be sufficient to assure electoral popularity.

Corbyn's strength depends not on the skills of another Alastair Campbell, but on his ability to nurture a social movement that can truly articulate the concerns and hopes of millions of British people. That would be a hard story to ignore.

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