

UK: Corbyn's media policies leave corporate domination unchanged, silent on censorship

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Last month, Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn gave the Alternative MacTaggart lecture to the annual Edinburgh International Television Festival addressing the condition of Britain's media. His remarks underscore that, on the most pressing democratic issues of the day—corporate control of the media and growing censorship—Labour will do nothing.

Figures from the “European Broadcasting Union show that the British people simply don't trust the media,” Corbyn reported. The UK has the “least trusted press in Europe, including non-EU countries like North Macedonia and Serbia... most of our citizens think our newspapers churn out fake news day in, day out.”

This extraordinary level of mistrust is rooted in vast disconnect between the official media and the reality of conditions for working people. Many understand that the real source of “fake news” is not “Russian meddling,” as is usually claimed, but the official media itself, which functions as little more than the propaganda department of the government and the financial oligarchy—as was made all too plain by its response to the Grenfell Tower fire.

Corbyn presented statistics and details to back this up. Noting that “just three companies control 71 percent of national newspaper circulation and five companies control 81 percent of local newspaper circulation,” he said this showed how the “unhealthy sway of a few corporations and billionaires shapes and skews the priorities and world-view of a powerful section of the media.”

“Far too few people have a grip on most of the power and it seems like our current system is making that situation worse,” he went on, raising the real and present danger that “a few tech giants and unaccountable billionaires will control huge swathes of our public space and discourse,” with companies like Apple and Google controlling online news services and smart phone software.

The Labour leader knows of what he speaks. For months now he has been the target of a McCarthyite witch-hunt—co-ordinated between the official media, Tories, right-wing Labour MPs and the military-intelligence establishment—slandering him and his supporters as anti-Semites, racists and even neo-Nazis due to his criticisms of Israel, capitalism and militarism.

The aim is not only to prevent the possibility of a Corbyn-led

government, which they fear will embolden workers and youth in their opposition to austerity and war, but to justify a clamp-down against the left—especially socialists.

Amongst the millions who recognise this campaign for the political conspiracy it is, Corbyn's insistence that “we must break the stranglehold of elite power and billionaire domination” will have struck a welcome chord. So too will his claim to be advancing “big, bold, radical” principles to ensure the media serves the interests of “the many, not the few”, as part of a strategy for “socialism in the 21st century.”

None of this was present in the small print of his remarks, however. There was not a single proposal for even minimal inroads against the corporate oligarchy's domination of the media, let alone calls to nationalise the media corporations under the democratic control of the working class—an essential pre-requisite for any socialist society worthy of the name.

All that was on offer was the possibility that grants, tax benefits and alternative ownership models, such as co-operatives, could counteract the malignant stranglehold of the official media and supposedly increase their “accountability”. As if a windfall tax on the media and tech monopolies—even if it were accepted by the likes of Rupert Murdoch, Jeff Bezos, et al—would change anything fundamentally.

Corbyn lauded the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) as a national treasure and beacon for “driving up standards” in the media. The BBC is popularly known as the British Bias Corporation and for good reason. Not only has it played a lead role in the bogus anti-Semitism witch-hunt, through the overwhelming preponderance of its coverage the BBC has reinforced the drum beat for military conflict with Russia and helped portray the imperialist powers proxy war in Syria as a “humanitarian intervention” against the Assad regime.

In the aftermath of the 2003 US/UK led war against Iraq, two separate studies—including one by Professor Justin Lewis, Dr. Rod Brookes and Kirsten Brander of the Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies department of Cardiff University—found that the BBC was the least “anti-war” in its news reports, even when compared with Rupert Murdoch's *Sky*. As the official voice of British imperialism, it is regarded by the ruling elite as a vital instrument of its “soft power” on the world stage, thanks to the broad reach of the BBC World Service and the

international sales of its media productions.

But the only change the Labour leader required of the BBC was that it employ gender and ethnic employment quotas.

Corbyn's only concrete proposal was for the creation of a new sister organisation to BBC, the "British Digital Corporation" (BDC)—that would use new technology and be integrated with state bodies to be set up by a future Labour government, such as its proposed National Investment Bank. The new BDC could involve a state-run social media system to rival Facebook and similar platforms.

This would effectively buttress the role of the BBC as state propagandist and strengthen state control over social media. But this Orwellian vision was packaged as enabling mass participatory democracy, facilitating audience polling on content commissioning and public access to difficult-to-access information such as that contained in public archives and museums.

Most glaring of all in Corbyn's lecture was what he did not say. He was silent on the imposition of internet censorship by the big tech companies such as Google and Facebook, working hand-in-glove with governments and the military-intelligence complex, to suppress left-wing and anti-war viewpoints.

While he made reference to the courageous example of those journalists speaking out in defence of the truth, he made no mention at all of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, the most famous and egregious of the victims of state intimidation and censorship.

For more than six years, Assange has been holed up in a single room in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London for exposing war crimes and other nefarious activities of the US and its allies. He was forced to take refuge there in the face of trumped-up charges of sexual assault, aimed at justifying his extradition to the US where he faces a grand jury indictment and possible death penalty.

Assange's health has severely deteriorated as a result, and he now faces a conspiracy by the US and the British and Ecuadorian governments aimed at ejecting him from the embassy, as a prelude to his arrest.

If Corbyn was in any way serious about the need to speak truth to power against a corrupt and powerful media, he would have used his platform to denounce Assange's treatment, demand his immediate release and to pledge Labour's guarantee for his safe-passage to Australia or a country of his choosing.

But Corbyn, who has made no statement in defence of Assange since he became Labour leader in 2015, said nothing.

His silence on the implications for democratic rights of Assange's treatment and the growth of internet censorship is damning. In every country, state censorship of social media is developing apace because it facilitates the co-ordination of political opposition by workers and youth against the powers-that-be.

The implications were outlined by former BBC news director

James Harding, cited by Corbyn as the inspiration for his BDC proposals, in a speech last March. Complaining that "new media is remaking our politics in ways we didn't expect, nor fully understand," Harding said: "The tech companies face a stark, but obvious choice. Either they are going to set new standards by which they operate or their future will be decided for them. They should delete or demote dangerous information online..."

"Let's not underestimate the power of the state," Harding went on. "If it wants to require companies to behave in the public interest and sustain our system of democracy, it can."

Corbyn's own prescriptions for a supposedly, better, nicer form of state- and corporate-based media are bound up with his political agenda. He ascribes all the ills in society not to capitalism as a system of class exploitation but to mistaken government policies that are damaging an otherwise healthy economic set-up, and which the Labour Party can remedy through sensible measures in government.

But Labour is hostile to even such minimal tinkering with the neo-liberal order, as shown by the fact that the majority of its MPs are openly conspiring against Corbyn and his supporters. Nonetheless, Corbyn continues to maintain that party "unity" is his priority.

Asked about the media campaign against him, Corbyn responded: "Some of the daily papers have been fairly unkind about me in the past few weeks, but that's OK, I sleep well at night." While many of their claims are "grotesquely unfair or deeply inaccurate," he has faith that the Labour Party "media team deals with stories that are frankly not correct." He claimed that the slurs were all part of free debate in a "vibrant democracy."

Corbyn's platitudes are utterly absurd in the face of the grave dangers to democratic rights by the continued domination of the media by the state and corporate elite. Breaking their stranglehold requires the expropriation and nationalisation of the media under the democratic control of working people. And this is possible only through a workers' government committed to socialist policies, which is the antithesis of the policy held out by Corbyn and the pro-capitalist party he heads.



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