Making sense of the rise and fall of Jeremy Corbyn: Towards an ambiguity-centred perspective on authentic leadership

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Abstract
When Jeremy Corbyn was first elected as leader of the Labour party in 2015, he was framed in the media as a new type of authentic political leader. Corbyn seemed to represent everything that a typical politician was not: honest, straight talking, principled and someone who always stayed true to his beliefs. In the aftermath of the December 2019 general election and the worst defeat for the Labour party since 1935, this article takes stock of how authenticity featured in the media discourse during Corbyn’s tenure as a party leader. Three competing discourses are identified. The first discourse categorised Corbyn as authentic and framed his authenticity as a leadership strength. The second discourse framed Corbyn as inauthentic. The third discourse framed Corbyn’s authenticity as a leadership problem. The study reveals a deeply ambivalent and contradictory set of discourses of authenticity that circulated in the media and highlights the ideological function performed by these competing discourses, which juxtapose ideas and ideals of personal authenticity against ideas and ideals about what constitutes effective political leadership. The article concludes by advancing an ambiguity-centred approach (Alvesson M and Spicer A (eds) (2010) Metaphors We Lead By: Understanding Leadership in the Real World. London: Routledge) to understanding authentic leadership, where authenticity is understood as a set of ambiguous and competing discursive attributions made within a contested social and political context.

Keywords
Authentic leadership, media discourse, framing, Jeremy Corbyn, political leadership

‘What happened to the authentic man who attracted chants of “Oh, Jeremy Corbyn” at Glastonbury in 2017?’
(Daily Mail, 24th August 2019)

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Introduction

In 2015, together with a team of collaborators, I began the process of analysing the media coverage of Jeremy Corbyn in the main British newspapers during the 2015 Labour party leadership contest. The results of our analysis showed that authenticity was a key element of not only his leadership campaign but also how he was framed in the press (Iszatt-White et al., 2019; Mueller et al., 2019). Alongside the promise of a radical new political agenda, Corbyn was described as a new type of authentic politician: one who would say what he really thought and mean what he said. Corbyn seemed to stand out in contrast to the typical ‘machine-like’ politician, armed with their spin doctors, communication advisers, opinion polls, focus groups and sound bites. Corbyn described his style as ‘honest, straight talking politics’,1 a slogan which was later adopted by the party with the strapline ‘straight talking, honest politics’.

At the beginning of the leadership contest, Corbyn was virtually unknown in British politics. He did not even have enough MPs to support his bid for leader. He only met the threshold of 35 Members of Parliament (MPs) with support lent from his rivals and with less than 2 minutes before the nominations closed on 15 June 2015.2 When he entered the race, the bookies gave him odds of 100/1 of winning.3 On 12 September 2015, Corbyn won the leadership contest with a majority of 59.5%, gaining more votes than his three rivals put together4 and beating Tony Blair’s majority in 1994.5 Corbyn’s victory was unexpected and took most people by surprise. The previously unknown backbench MP had won the leadership contest against all odds with a campaign that lasted less than three months.

Reflecting on the dramatic rise and fall of Corbyn following the heavy defeat for Labour in the 2019 general election, it now seems timely to look back and assess how Corbyn’s purported authenticity featured in the media during his tenure as leader. Was authenticity still viewed as an important aspect of Corbyn’s leadership during his tenure as Labour party leader? If so, how did authenticity feature in the media discourse surrounding his leadership? To address these questions, this article analyses the media coverage of Corbyn’s ‘authenticity’ from the date he was elected party leader in September 2015 to the date he announced he was stepping down as leader after the general election defeat in December 2019. In so doing, I seek to show how leader authenticity can be understood as an ambiguous, contested and ideologically invested process of social construction. Building on earlier social constructionist scholarship, I propose a shift in epistemological perspective away from the idea that authenticity is a trait towards viewing authenticity as a process of social attribution which depends on who is judging authenticity, how these judgements are reached and what ideologies underpin (and arise from) these judgements.

I will begin this article by providing some background on the study of authentic leadership and also discuss the increasing prominence given to authenticity in contemporary politics. I will then move on to analyse the media discourse about Jeremy Corbyn’s authenticity during his tenure as leader. This analysis leads me to identify three competing discourses. The first discourse identified Corbyn as authentic and framed this attribute as a leadership asset. The second discourse framed Corbyn as lacking or falling short of the authenticity he initially claimed. The third discourse framed Corbyn’s authenticity as a leadership problem. I conclude by discussing the ambivalent nature of the discourse of authenticity and political leadership, together with reflections on what the findings of this study means for moving beyond the mainstream understanding of authentic leadership towards an ambiguity-centred social constructionist perspective (Alvesson and Spicer, 2010).

Authentic leadership: Mainstream and critical perspectives

The mainstream literature on authentic leadership is dominated by the positive psychology tradition and starts with the assumption that authenticity is a positive leader trait that can be objectively
measured. According to Luthans and Avolio (2003), authentic leaders are ‘transparent about their intentions and strive to maintain a seamless link between espoused values, behaviours and actions’ (p. 242). From this perspective, everyone has a ‘true self’ that gives them their inner ‘moral compass’. Authentic leaders are understood as those who consistently act according to this ‘true self’ (Caza and Jackson, 2011). The mainstream school has developed psychometric scales that purport to measure the authenticity of a leader, which have been followed by studies that have then sought to map authentic leadership traits against various organisational outcomes (Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Avolio et al., 2004; Neider and Schriesheim, 2011; Walumbwa et al., 2008). Functionalism and managerialism pervade these mainstream approaches (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2013). Authentic leaders are not only presented as morally ‘good’ but they are also presented as more effective leaders who are capable of producing superior organisational outcomes. Authentic leadership is not only proclaimed as the solution to organisational performance and economic growth but it is also heralded as the solution to a range of ethical and environmental challenges (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2013).

Critics of this mainstream perspective have noted the premature search for the impact of authenticity before its construct is rigorously defined and its measures are tested (Cooper et al., 2005). Others go further and take issue with the fundamental epistemological assumptions that the mainstream literature rests on. Goffee and Jones (2005) take issue with the idea that people have a ‘true inner self’, proposing that authenticity is not an innate quality of leaders but rather a quality that people attribute to leaders. They argue that effective leaders have ‘chameleon-like’ qualities and can present different ‘faces’ to different audiences. A similar argument is advanced by Ibarra (2015), who proposes that effective leaders often have to play different roles that demand different ‘selves’ to be performed, meaning a rigidly authentic leader risks sacrificing role performance in their quest for being ‘true to themselves’. Kempster et al. (2018) develop this argument further by pointing to the inauthenticity inherent in the emotional labour that is central to organisational life, where inner emotions cannot be transparently displayed if leaders are to be seen to perform their leadership role effectively. However, given the fact that leadership attributions are also context-dependent (Jackson and Parry, 2011), assessments of political leadership could well differ from corporate leadership. Indeed, it is important to note the trend in political leadership towards the public display of inner emotion as a signal of authenticity, as noted by Yates (2015) and Wahl-Jorgensen (2019).

From a critical perspective, Ford and Harding (2011) also question the idea that people have a ‘true inner self’, pointing to the power relations through which organisations seek to shape people’s sense of who they are that make inauthenticity a core feature of organisational life. Lawler and Ashman (2012) also reject the idea of the ‘true’ inner self found in the mainstream literature because of the individualised and decontextualized understanding of morality it adopts. In particular, they criticise the simplified and naive vision of morality used in the mainstream literature, one in which society holds universally known and unanimously agreed upon distinctions between ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. They also take issue with the simplified understanding of leaders as people who face no ambiguity or ambivalence in making moral decisions. Similarly, Alvesson and Sveningsson (2013) argue that the mainstream literature constitutes an ideological effort to position leadership as a ‘force for good’ in a world that is caught up in competing ideologies where leaders and followers alike are searching for the security of moral guidance, while ignoring the moral problems with the leader-centric and individualistic assumptions that the authentic leader concept brings with it.

It is within this critical and social constructionist tradition of research that this study falls. If we take the arguments made by Bresnen (1995: 495) about the ‘socially constructed and contested nature’ of leadership seriously and assume, like Grint (2000: 9), that ideas about leadership are ‘interpretive and contestable issues’, then we clearly need to move beyond viewing authenticity as
an ‘essence’ or ‘trait’ located in the ‘inner self’ of the leader. Following this critical and social constructionist tradition, I view authenticity as a social judgement made about a leader in discourse (i.e. in talk and/or text) that reflects the variety of more or less ambiguous and ambivalent and more or less ideologically invested discourses of leadership that circulate in society and in organisations (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003; Alvesson and Spicer, 2010). I propose that these discourses are where the meaning of authenticity – including the answers to the question ‘Who is an authentic leader?’; ‘How do we decide they are authentic?’; and ‘What does being authentic mean for their leadership effectiveness?’ – is created, contested and negotiated (Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012). In some situations, the discourse can be clear and consistent, in cases where they reflect widespread agreement about who is authentic and how the value of their authenticity is to be judged. However, as this study will show, these discourses can also be ambiguous and ambivalent in situations where multiple versions of who is authentic and how their authenticity is to be judged coexist and compete with one another.

Authentic leadership in politics

Authenticity is commonly understood in the literature as a set of social judgements about whether something is ‘true’ or ‘real’ rather than a reflection of the objective properties or characteristics of something or someone. Authenticity does not reside in the actor or object, it is ‘a claim that is made by or for someone, thing, or performance and either accepted or rejected by relevant others’ (Peterson, 2005: 1086). According to Carroll (2015: 3), authenticity should be conceptualised as ‘an attribution – nothing more, nothing less’. This conceptualisation leads us to ask questions such as ‘on the basis of which cues were these judgements [of authenticity] made?’ (Van Leeuwen, 2001: 397).

Context matters here. Authenticity can mean different things in different contexts. A piece of art would be judged as authentic if it was authenticated by some authority as not a fake or copy. A Greek restaurant might be judged by customers judge as authentic because it fits their expectations of what a Greek restaurant should look like and because the waiters speak with a Greek accent (Carroll, 2015). In the political sphere, authenticity comes with its own set of cues and attributions. Recently, we have witnessed a number of quite radical shifts in how elections are won. Alongside the usual electoral pledges and manifesto policies, judgements about the personal leadership capabilities of the party leaders have long been known to play a central role in voter decision-making in a trend known as the ‘personalisation of politics’ (Bittner, 2011; Karvonen, 2010; McAllister, 2007). The trend has been traced back to the late 1970s and early 1980s, when charismatic leaders started to eclipse the profile of the parties they lead in the eyes of the electorate (McAllister, 2007).

The types of qualities that voters seek in their political leaders have also been subject to change in recent years. Increasingly, leaders are judged not only according to their personality, charisma, appearance and media presence but also according to their authenticity. Some scholars have argued that authenticity has become one of the most important elements of the electoral battleground in modern times (Seifert, 2014). Wahl-Jorgensen (2019: 71) argued that ‘winning the battle for hearts and minds increasingly means winning the battle for authenticity’ (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019: 71). The 2016 US election was referred to by various media commentators as ‘the authenticity election’ (Carroll, 2015). The 2017 UK general election also saw the media pitching the perceived inauthenticity of Theresa May, who was dubbed the ‘Maybot’ (Crace, 2017), against the perceived authenticity of Jeremy Corbyn.

However, as Sheinheit and Bogard (2016: 972) argue, ‘authenticity is both crucial to a politician’s success and subjected to competing claims’. Academic studies of political leadership have pointed to a range of cues that are used to judge the authenticity of a leader. Some studies have shown that
authenticity is associated with the way that the political leader talks. Authenticity has been judged
to different cues relating to style and manner of speech, including sounding ‘spontaneous and
natural’ (Sheinheit and Bogard, 2016: 973) and through cues such as accent, as in the case of the
apparent authenticity of the ‘g-dropping vernacular’ of Sarah Palin and the ‘straight talk’ image of
John McCain (Seifert, 2014: 1). Moreover, as Seifert (2014) has shown, authenticity has been
associated with looking and sounding like an ‘ordinary’ person in Presidential campaigns as far back
as the 1970s. Speaking in ways that differ from the smooth and polished style of the ‘establishment’
(Seifert, 2014: 13), or being pictured in humble and ‘ordinary’ kitchens talking about food and
hobbies enjoyed by ‘ordinary folk’ (Seifert, 2014: 165), gave the impression of an authentic leader
who was ‘just like you’ (Seifert, 2014: 1).7 As Yates (2015) has also observed, authenticity is also
associated with someone who talks like ‘ordinary’ people and who shares their references to popular
culture, as opposed to being viewed as an aloof or arrogant member of the ‘elite’ or the ‘establish-
ment’. Authenticity is here associated with being anti-Establishment, where an unpolished and
informal way of talking makes the leader appear ‘real’, albeit with a gendered aspect of the
masculine ‘blokey’ (Yates, 2015: 5) persona of leaders such as Nigel Farage.

Closely related to the style of speaking are judgements about the role of Public Relations ad-
visors, speech writers and ‘spin doctors’. Political leaders who appear to repeat sound bites and stick
closely to the script are branded as ‘inauthentic’ and even ‘inhuman’ in the press (see e.g. Crace,
2017 on the ‘Maybot’). Political leaders are branded as inauthentic, simulated or contrived if they are
judged to have pre-prepared answers such as a script or sound bite (Seifert, 2014: 16; Wahl-
Jorgensen, 2019: 69). Authenticity is judged according to whether views are deemed to come ‘from
within’ and are ‘truly held’, rather than arising from whatever a speech writer has written or what the
latest focus groups or opinion polls suggest is expedient for garnering support (Greenberg, 2016). To
appear authentic, the politician must appear to speak and act in an uncensored and spontaneous
fashion, without preparation and without consideration for the popularity or political correctness of
what they say (Enli, 2014: Ch 6).

Scholars have also noted how judgements of authenticity are tied up with assessments of the
person’s trustworthiness and honesty (Enli, 2014: 110; Seifert, 2014: 16). Our previous analysis of
the discourse of Jeremy Corbyn during the 2015 Labour party leadership election showed that
Corbyn’s authenticity was judged using cues about his honesty and consistency over time, atypical-
city compared to other politicians and commitment to his beliefs (Mueller et al., 2019). Political
leaders who are judged as being honest about their views and values are judged to be authentic,
‘regardless of venue or stage’, and hence judged to be more likely to implement their campaign
promises when elected (Sheinheit and Bogard, 2016: 972). Alexander (2010) notes the compelling
authenticity of John McCain’s 2000 campaign rooted in ideals of honesty and transparency (p. 104).
Alexander (2010) also points to Obama’s initial success in making himself appear ‘real and au-
thentic’ (p. xii) and his later trouble when voters lost trust in the authenticity of his views after he
 pivoted from left to centre (p. 97). Consistency is here viewed as a signal of authenticity, in contrast
to those who ‘flip flop’ between political positions depending on audience. Authenticity is also
judged according to the consistency between different ‘stages’, where the contrived and theatrical
‘frontstage’ is contrasted with the real and authentic ‘backstage’ (Alexander, 2010; Seifert, 2014;
Sheinheit and Bogard, 2016).

Finally, scholars have also pointed to the role that displays of emotion have in judgements of
authenticity. Yates (2015: 18) notes that authenticity has become an important component of
contemporary politics as voters have become cynical of being ‘duped’ by smokescreens and spin and
yearn for a sense of authenticity through displays of emotion and the ‘real’ self. Wahl-Jorgensen
(2019) also highlights the role played by staged but apparently ‘authentic’ displays of emotion in
contemporary politics, where leaders are ‘understood as more authentic if they are in touch with their feelings and able to talk about them openly’ (p. 69). Yates (2015) also notes the gender dimension of how politicians are judged in displaying their ‘true’ authentic personality (p. 79) in light of the gendered norms around displays of feeling associated with femininity (see also Parry-Giles, 2014; Yates, 2019). However, as Yates (2015) notes, while audiences might see emotional displays by political leaders as glimpses of their ‘real’, un-doctored selves, the techniques used to create these displays are typically derived from popular celebrity culture. Yates (2015) highlights the trends towards the ‘marketing of politicians as brands’ and the ‘consumption of politics as entertainment’ (Yates, 2015: 6). As a result, political leadership has been transformed into a form of promotional paradox: political parties have to ‘sell’ and ‘promote’ their so-called ‘authentic’ political leader, whilst at the same time trying to pretend there was never any selling or promotion going on.

**Media discourse of Jeremy Corbyn**

As McElroy (1982) has pointed out many years ago, viewing ‘leadership merely as an attribution that people make about other persons – not as a set of traits or behaviours’ means that ‘a person is a leader (good or bad) because others say so’ (McElroy, 1982: 413). The media plays an especially important role in the social construction of leadership in political contexts because assessments of political leaders typically involve a process of ‘indirect attribution’ (McElroy, 1982: 414). Indirect attribution takes place in situations where followers cannot directly interact with the leader and instead rely on indirect sources of information from the descriptions and evaluations of others. From the perspective of attribution theories of leadership (Bresnen, 1995; Calder, 1977; McElroy, 1982; Pfeffer, 1977), the judgements of others that we interact with – both in conversations with others and through the texts we read – really matter. The press is an important site for the study of leadership, then, because it is through the press that ‘writers and readers, who traffic in images of leadership, influence each other to determine how leaders are talked about’ (Chen and Meindl, 1991: 546). Journalists position themselves as ‘self-appointed arbiters’ of the authenticity of the politician (Parry-Giles, 2014). As arbiters, then, any such judgements are inherently value laden, given the fact that those making the judgements do so from their own ideological standpoint. As Umbach and Humphrey’s (2017: 3) argue, ‘authenticity is constantly rearticulated and recoded as it is employed for new ideological purposes’.

For readers unfamiliar with the various ideological stances of British newspapers, the ideological context is an important element in interpreting the newspaper discourses. This study incorporates articles from newspapers across the journalistic genres, including both tabloid newspapers associated with ‘gossip’ and ‘sensationalist’ stories and the more ‘serious’ and ‘credible’ broadsheet newspapers. The sources also cover the entire political spectrum, ranging from typically left-leaning newspapers such as The Guardian and The Mirror to broadly centrist publications such as The Independent and typically right-leaning newspapers such as The Telegraph and The Daily Mail. Television broadcast news sources which also have a web presence, such as the BBC News and Sky News websites, face stricter regulation for producing politically impartial content under the Office of Communications Broadcasting Code (Section Five). This ideological context is key to making sense of the framing of Corbyn’s authenticity in the British news media.

The idea that the media has influenced public opinion of Jeremy Corbyn through their predominantly negative coverage has already been supported by numerous empirical studies. The claim that the media have been consistently biased against Corbyn has been backed up by studies conducted in 2016 and again during the 2019 general election campaign. Academic studies by Loughborough University have shown that the predominantly right-wing media consistently
reported negative coverage of both Corbyn, the Labour party and their policies and manifesto pledges. One study found that three quarters of all media reports failed to accurately report his views. Media coverage of Corbyn has been described by his supporters as the ‘worst any politician has received’. These perceptions of media bias also extend beyond his supporters, with polls conducted by YouGov showing that the majority of the British public believed that the media was deliberately biased against him.

In my previous research with collaborators, we analysed the newspaper coverage of Corbyn’s authenticity during his 2015 leadership campaign. We found that the press had already begun to discuss the purported ‘failings’ and ‘problems’ associated with his authenticity for his party and for the country (Istzatt-White et al., 2019). In this article, I follow up this earlier study and ask how Corbyn’s authenticity was reported during his tenure as leader. As I continued to follow the coverage of Corbyn in the media after he was elected as a party leader, I was surprised to find that the topic of authenticity came up less often than I expected it to, given its prominence as a theme in his leadership campaign. However, authenticity was still discussed in relation to a number of issues, which I will map out in the findings section that follows.


I have reviewed a selection of newspaper discourse about Corbyn’s authenticity across all UK newspapers from 12 September 2015 when he was first elected leader to his announcement on 13 December 2019 that he was stepping down as leader following the disastrous general election result for Labour. As with my previous work with collaborators, at the sampling stage, I deliberately set aside articles that discuss Labour’s policies and have only included articles that discussed Corbyn’s personal ‘authenticity’. However, it is important to note that any separation between media assessments of a leader’s authenticity and their politics risks missing important elements of the authenticity discourse. For example, newspaper articles that discussed the authenticity of Corbyn’s views on Trident or the monarchy cannot be understood without incorporating an understanding of the ideologically driven nature of any such assessment (for instance, expressed in views about the ‘danger’ his political positions posed to the country). Given my assumption that assessments of authenticity are ‘in the eye of the beholder’, any analysis must acknowledge the fundamentally partisan nature of any such assessments.

My review of the newspaper coverage has led me to identify a mixed and deeply ambivalent set of discourses about Corbyn’s authenticity, which I will review in turn.

**Discourse 1: ‘Corbyn’s is authentic and that is his appeal’**

In this first discourse, Corbyn was framed as an authentic leader and the appeal of his authenticity to voters was discussed. After being elected as party leader, some commentators continued to frame Corbyn as ‘authentic’ and made reference to the appeal of his authenticity in the eyes of his loyal supporters and the general public at large. According to The Independent (8 January 2017): ‘Authenticity is Corbyn’s stock in trade. He falters when asked to present ideas he doesn’t believe in, but is best able to communicate when passionate about a cause’. Here, authenticity was judged by the apparently genuine display of passion and emotion in Corbyn’s communication, as noted by Yates (2015: 9).

Sticking to his principles, even if that meant going against his own party, was viewed by other commentators as an indicator of Corbyn’s authenticity. The Independent (14 January 2017) wrote ‘Corbyn’s hostility to everything that the Labour Party previously stood for is also the guarantee of
his authenticity. His reputation is built on saying what he has always said, which is what he thinks, rather than some pasteurised sound bites taken from focus group transcripts’. Deviations from the usual ‘slick’ communication style of other politicians were also viewed as a measure of authenticity. His ‘gnomic utterances and occasional bumbling’ were described as presenting ‘a sort of authenticity in an age of political spin’ (The Herald, 29 September 2016).

The question of authenticity did not feature as prominently during the 2016 leadership challenge by Angela Eagle (who later withdrew from the contest) and Owen Smith. The leadership contest was dominated by discussion over the split in the party between the hard left and the centre left. Some commentators did, however, question the effectiveness of Corbyn’s supposedly ‘strong and steadfast’ commitment to his political beliefs in a leadership role requiring compromise and pragmatism to bring others with him. Without casting doubt on the idea that Corbyn had ‘dedicated his life to causes he believes in’, the Daily Mail (24 August 2019) cast doubt on his effectiveness in making a difference to the causes he believed in by bringing others with him.

During the 2016 leadership challenge, newspapers did comment on Corbyn’s ‘Teflon coating of authenticity’ (Guardian, 17 August 2016) and reference his appeal derived from his ‘values and authenticity’ (Independent, 20 August 2016). ‘The Independent (14 August 2016) claimed that Corbyn’s supporters had ‘wanted a new politics and thought that someone unfashionable enough to want to nationalise everything must be ‘authentic’’. Owen Smith was described as a ‘lobbyist and spin doctor’, portrayed in contrast to Corbyn’s authenticity (Western Mail, 19 July 2019). The Independent (23 August 2016) noted that alongside the popularity of many of Corbyn’s policies, ‘most importantly, his socialism is authentic’. Former Welsh secretary Peter Hain, writing in the Western Mail, spoke of Corbyn’s supporters being ‘enthused by what they feel is an authentic and principled radicalism absent from a mainstream, managerial politics which has infected Labour’ (Western Mail, 14 September 2016). Corbyn was described as having an ‘ability to speak his mind unselfconsciously, to be guided by conviction rather than pollsters and spin doctors’, which was said to give him ‘an air of authenticity’ (Guardian, 17 September 2016).

Despite having lower support amongst Labour MPs, Corbyn won an even more decisive victory against Owen Smith on 21 September 2016 than when first was elected leader in 2015, with 61.8% of the vote. The Daily Mail (24 September 2016) attributed Corbyn’s victory to, among other things, his role in ‘rekindling the authentic, unspun socialism of Attlee and his contemporaries’. Analysing the result, The Independent asked whether Angela Eagle might have fared better than Owen Smith if she had stayed in the race, pitching her working-class authenticity against Corbyn’s radical left authenticity. The paper wrote ‘Corbyn’s appeal is not just his policies – just pause to see if you can remember any of them – but his identity as an authentic and principled socialist’ (Independent, 25 September 2016). In contrast, Smith was branded as inauthentic and criticised for ‘flip-flopping’ (Independent, 31 July 2016) on key issues and having ‘adjusted his positions to suit his purposes’ (Independent, 25 September 2016). His victory was attributed to the fact that ‘a huge part of Corbyn’s appeal is his apparent lack of calculation and spin’ (Independent, 25 September 2016).

During the 2017 general election, unexpected gains by the Labour party were again attributed in part to Corbyn’s appeal as ‘an authentic figure’, standing in contrast to ‘May’s robotic woodenness’ (Western Mail, 16 March 2019). Corbyn’s appeal as a more genuine and ‘human’ leader stood in contrast to what critics called May’s image as an ‘unthinking android Maybot’ (Guardian, 3 June 2017). At this moment in time, in relation to a political opponent characterised as not only ‘in-authentic’ but ‘inhuman’, Corbyn was widely framed as authentic, irrespective of the newspaper’s position on his political policies. In an article run by The Guardian (3 June 2017) just before the election that focused on Corbyn’s ‘morality and authenticity’, Corbyn was described as following the mantra ‘Be yourself, Do not dissemble.’ Interestingly, Corbyn was compared to Trump and
Farage in his commitment to ‘straight talking’ and having the courage to speak in unequivocal ‘moral terms about right and wrong’ (Guardian, 3 June 2017). This comparison with Trump and Farage is especially interesting, given the opposing political positions they occupy. In this discourse, authenticity was connected to sounding like an ‘ordinary’ person who speaks their mind about their moral position in an unfiltered fashion, an indicator of authenticity deemed to apply irrespective of the leader’s political position, given the radically different political ideologies of Corbyn and Trump and Farage.19

In the coverage that followed his unexpected gains in the 2017 general election, Corbyn was described as becoming more ‘media savvy’ and improving the way that he handled the mainstream media, but crucially without sacrificing his authenticity (Guardian, 27 September 2017). Corbyn’s appeal was again attributed to ‘priceless untouchable thing called “authenticity”’ (Independent, 28 September 2017). He was described as having a political world view that ‘was authentic’ and showed ‘he was dedicated to tackling inequality in all its forms’ (Guardian, 7 August 2017). The Scotsman (27 July 2017) claimed that ‘Corbyn’s authenticity trumped credibility’ during the 2017 election, when referencing the widespread scepticism about the affordability of his manifesto pledges given their ‘hefty price tag’. Even The Daily Telegraph (3 June 2017), a right-wing broadsheet, noted that Corbyn was ‘winning the battle for authenticity’.

Acknowledgement of the appeal of his authenticity was also present in the discourse of those traditionally anti-Corbyn right-wing newspapers after Labour’s 2017 election gains. While framing the prospect of Corbyn as Prime Minister as ‘terrifying’, The Daily Mail (18 May 2019) also wrote that ‘Whatever his faults, Mr Corbyn’s supporters believe in what they see as his authenticity’. Similarly, The Daily Telegraph (1 March 2019) noted: ‘You and I might loathe Mr Corbyn’s politics, but it’s hard to say he’s inauthentic or unprincipled’, concluding that ‘people want leaders with something to say, who stick out from the identikit politicians – even if they are hated for doing so’. The Yorkshire Post (21 January 2019) commented that Corbyn’s ‘refusal to compromise – on anything pretty much, including the dress code for Remembrance Sunday in Whitehall – gives him an authenticity lacking in other leading politicians’. Corbyn’s ‘lack of slickness’ as an orator was contrasted with other smooth-talking, media-savvy politicians and was said to have ‘attracted both converts and the curious’ (BBC news, 14 November 2019).

Even Corbyn’s critics still discussed the appeal of his authenticity. Johnny Mercer, a Conservative MP writing in The Evening Standard (28 March 2019), noted the appeal of Corbyn for those ‘younger, aspirational but currently disenfranchised voters’ who are searching for ‘authenticity in politics’. A ‘senior Tory’ was quoted in The Western Mail (4 October 2017) as saying that Corbyn was reaching young people who were crying out for ‘authentic’ politics, attracted by Corbyn’s ‘Corbyn personality and character that cuts through as authentic and real’. Chris Leslie, who had been a Labour MP for over 30 years and left the party in protest at Corbyn’s leadership to join the newly formed Independent Group, acknowledged Corbyn’s authentic appeal: ‘People liked the genuine authenticity of Corbyn, not suited and booted but the charm of the allotments and jam making’. (Nottingham Post, 21 March 2019). Authenticity was judged here through his apparent rejection of the ‘suited and booted’ political establishment and his apparently mundane and ordinary hobbies.

During the build up to the 2019 general election, polls were still placing Corbyn ahead of Johnson on ‘honesty, authenticity and his ability to reach out to ordinary people’ (Sunday Times, 8 September 2019). A journalist commented in The Evening Standard (19 October 2019) that Corbyn’s ‘appeal is his alleged authenticity and stubborn refusal over 40 years to change his views’. Rebelling against his own party when a backbench MP was framed as evidence he was being ‘true to himself’ (Evening Standard, 19 October 2019). Some newspapers claimed that Corbyn’s appeal to electorate
derived from being viewed as more ‘caring and authentic’ than Boris Johnson (The Western Mail, 19 November 2019). The Daily Mail (22 December 2018) made reference to his ‘obvious authenticity’. The Independent (26 February 2019) noted Corbyn’s appeal at the start of the leadership race as an ‘authentic outsider against the system’ and The Daily Telegraph (5 July 2019) mentioned Corbyn’s unique appeal to his ‘young admirers’ as ‘an authentic symbol of defiance against the system’.

Discourse 2: ‘Corbyn is not authentic’

In this second discourse, critical commentators sought to claim that Corbyn’s apparent authenticity was a charade. Here, the distinction was made between being genuinely authentic and giving a false ‘impression’ of being authentic. The Daily Mail (20 December 2018) claimed that contrary to the beliefs of his ‘naive young followers’ that Corbyn ‘is an authentic politician determined to do good in the world’, his claims about ‘decades of defending human rights and equality’ should be rejected as ‘bogus stories’.

Corbyn was also criticised for lacking the necessary authentic appeal in the working-class heartlands which typically vote Labour. In this discourse, authenticity was discursively linked to being from an ‘ordinary’ background rather than a member of the elite. Corbyn’s purportedly privileged and London-centric upbringing was referenced to undermine his claims to be dedicated to furthering the interests of the working class. When challenged for the leadership by Angela Eagle, Corbyn was compared less favourably to Eagle’s with her ‘genuine, authentic working-class background’ (Express, 19 July 2016). Readers were reminded that Corbyn had actually had a ‘middle-class background and a private education’ (Evening Standard, 19 October 2017). Corbyn was described by the press as a ‘public schoolboy’ who was out of touch with the working class he claimed to champion and ‘whose notion of the working class comes from a 1983 copy of Morning Star’ (The Times, 16 March 2019). Corbyn was also compared less favourable in terms of ‘working class authenticity’ to the party’s shadow chancellor, John McDonnell, who was described as with ‘his people’ in his ‘childhood turf’ during a visit to McDonnell’s home town of Liverpool, while Corbyn was described as ‘a long way from the Turkish kebab houses of North Islington’ (Daily Mail, 8 November 2019). A review of the book Dangerous Hero: Corbyn’s Ruthless Plot for Power by Bower (2019) describes how the author also questioned Corbyn’s claim to authenticity, suggesting that he ‘romanticises his own history’ to increase his working-class appeal by claiming to come from a ‘Telford new town’ rather than ‘posh rural Shropshire’ (Guardian, 20 February 2019).

How Corbyn reacted to mediatised events also played an important role in judgements of his authenticity. The previous image of him as someone who rejected spin, propaganda and manipulation was quickly punctured by media coverage of his reaction to what was later dubbed ‘Traingate’: an apparently ‘staged’ photo of Corbyn sitting on the floor of the train due to overcrowding after allegedly having walked past empty seats, at a time he was pitching his policy for nationalising the railways. The Sun (25 August 2016) reported that Corbyn admitted that he lied about the overcrowding, quoting a Tory MP who said ‘We now see he’s not the principled man he pretends to be’. The Telegraph (23 August 2016) quoted commentators who accused Corbyn of ‘hypocrisy and spin’ in fabricating the incident to push his nationalisation policy, an incident they claimed ‘threatens to tarnish Mr Corbyn’s claim to be an “honest and straight-talking” politician’. The Telegraph (23 August 2016) also cited a Labour MP who claimed that the incident make Corbyn ‘seem like a charlatan, pretending to be one thing when he is really quite another’. The Times (24 August 2016) claimed that ‘Traingate’ could ‘burnish Mr Corbyn’s reputation both for humility and authenticity’. The Times (25 August 2016) concluded the following day: ‘He is not even delivering the authentic and honest politics he promised’.
More recently, in the run-up to the 2019 general election, the media again cast Corbyn as in-authentic by branding him a liar. These media judgements also shifted over time based on their assessment of his reactions to world events and his performances in the media. For example, asked on television on ITV whether he watches the Queen’s speech on Christmas Day, Corbyn was described as having ‘dodged’ the question (Daily Star, 5 December 2019) and having been ‘caught out’ by ‘trying to pretend’ (Daily Mail, 5 December 2019) when he stated he watched it in the morning, despite it being broadcast at 3 p.m. In light of the widespread media opposition to Corbyn’s republican views, this issue was transformed into a persistent topic during the 2019 general election campaign. While some newspapers described the incident as a ‘tangle’ (Independent, 4 December 2019) and ‘muddle’ (Mail on Sunday, 8 December 2019) rather than an outright lie, other papers directly accused him of lying (Metro, 5 December 2019). The media claimed that the question sought to bring out Corbyn’s ‘true position’ on the Royal family, given his history as a ‘known republican’ (The Sun, 5 December 2019). His answer was framed as a failed attempt at deception or obfuscation designed to avoid hurting his popularity with voters. The Express (5 December 2019) claimed that Corbyn was being ‘openly mocked as a man who could not be trusted on anything’, citing a Tory commentator who said ‘Corbyn doesn’t even lie convincingly’.

Media commentators described how their judgements of Corbyn’s authenticity had changed over time as they had observed his behaviour as a party leader. The Daily Mail (5 December 2019) contrasted his allegedly slippery, evasive and deceptive answer with the authentic ticket he used during his leadership campaign in 2015: ‘When he was elected Labour leader 4 years ago, Mr Corbyn prided himself on his slogan of “straight-talking honest politics”. But his pledge unravelled in the exchange over the Queen’s Christmas message’. Corbyn’s ‘real inner belief’ in the abolition of the monarchy was discussed, including Corbyn’s backing of moves to replace the Queen with an elected president while serving as a backbench MP (Daily Mail, 5 December 2019). The Express (5 December 2019) claimed that having ‘fibbed’ about watching the Queens speech despite the fact that ‘we all know he is a Republican and dislikes the monarchy intensely’ means ‘he must not be allowed the keys to Downing Street’.

Some commentators adopted a different line of criticism and accused Corbyn of failing to truly hold the moral principles he was associated and being too easily swayed by the opinions of others. Critics attacked his image as someone who was steadfast in following his own ‘inner moral compass’. Corbyn was described as ‘under the control of hard-line radicals’ in the Labour party (The Express, 25 July 2019) and criticised for leaving his party ‘dismayed at the control’ over him exercised by his special advisers (Scotsman, 5 July 2019). The Financial Times (10 July 2019) ran an article entitled ‘Who are Labour’s “Four M’s” influencing Jeremy Corbyn?’ The Scotsman (10 February 2018) criticised Corbyn for being unduly influenced by advisers, for not leading his party with a clear vision and for leaving party members, who were still ‘starry-eyed’ over his ‘authenticity’, in the position of being ‘without leadership or direction’. Corbyn was framed as being too easily swayed by powerful others, unable to know his own mind and ensure others followed his lead. The Scotsman (5 July 2019) asked: ‘If he can’t control his team, how can he seek to run this country?’ Corby was framed as someone who too easily ‘bowed to pressure’ (Mirror, 26 February 2019) and had found himself ‘captured’ and ‘reprogrammed’ (Guardian, 25 July 2019) by powerful groups in his party.

As time went on and Corbyn dealt with world events, including critical reports of issues arising within his own party, the media’s scepticism towards his claim to authenticity built up. The media took a sceptical stance towards two issues in particular: Corbyn’s stance on alleged anti-Semitism in the party and his relationship with terrorist groups. Critics rejected his claim that he categorically rejected anti-Semitism and rejected the violence of terrorist organisations and instead sought to
judge his ‘true position’ from his past actions. According to The Sun (26 April 2018): ‘you should never judge a politician by their words. Always look at their actions’. The Sun (26 April 2018) also dismissed Corbyn’s claim that he would act decisively against anti-Semitism in the party as ‘hot air’. The Daily Mail (12 December 2019) ran a story entitled ‘50 infamous moments that shame him’, detailing alleged interactions with terrorist and anti-Semitic groups and individuals. The Sun ran stories claiming that Corbyn ‘failed to sack’ a Holocaust denier (30 March 2018) and ‘refused four times to apologise to British Jews for his failure to tackle anti-Semitism’ (27 November 2019). On the day before the 2019 general election, The Sun (11 December 2019) kept these stories in voter’s minds by urging them to ‘stop [a] Corbyn catastrophe’, claiming that ‘his anti-Semitism had drawn Jew-hating bigots to his party like flies to a cesspit’ and claiming that he ‘considered Arab terrorists “friends”’.

A major theme in the media discussion of Corbyn’s (in)authenticity concerned his position on Brexit. Corbyn was accused of masking his ‘true’ position on the European Union (EU), given his public criticisms of the EU in the past, and doing a ‘lacklustre’ (Guardian, 7 August 2017) job of putting forward the case for Remain during the 2016 EU referendum. BBC News (21 September 2016) claimed that one of the main triggers for the 2016 leadership challenge was Corbyn’s struggle to remain authentic on the Brexit issue while campaigning for Remain, writing: ‘Labour rebels say they felt Mr Corbyn – the most Euro sceptic Labour leader for 30 years – had not shown enough enthusiasm and leadership during the campaign, despite arguing for a Remain vote’.

The media charged Corbyn with ‘flip-flopping’ on the Brexit issue, changing his position based on where the wind of public opinion was blowing at the time or based on what he thought would appeal to different audiences. Newspapers ran headlines accusing Corbyn of performing a ‘flip-flop’ over Brexit (Mail on Sunday, 4 August 2019; Sun, 10 July 2019, 5 November 2019) and a ‘flip-flop’ over the issue of freedom of movement of people after Brexit (Daily Mail, 20 May 2019). The Sun framed the issue as a basic question of honesty, accusing Corbyn of obscuring his true position with their headline: ‘Jez tell us the truth on Brexit’ (Sun, 5 November 2019). The Mail on Sunday (4 August 2019) also speculated about whether Corbyn could perform ‘U-turn on a U-turn’ by backtracking on his pledge to back Remain in a second referendum. Newspapers discussed the ‘inauthentic’ position Corbyn was placed in when campaigning for Remain while being ‘at his core a Eurosceptic’ (Sunday Times, 25 August 2019). Commentators noted that despite campaigning for Remain, he ‘appeared to welcome the result of the 2016 EU referendum’ (Independent, 26 February 2019). The Independent (28 March 2018) noted the ‘authenticity trap’ Corbyn faced when he campaigned for Remain: ‘For a politician who has built his career on authenticity, Corbyn had already taken a risk by tempering his longstanding Euroscepticism in order to campaign, tepidly, for Remain in the referendum’.

The widespread scepticism towards the authenticity of Corbyn’s espoused position meant that both Leavers and Remainers were reported to distrust him. The Guardian (21 May 2019) reported that ‘none of us believe he’s truly on our side’. The Sun (8 December 2019) ran an article describing Corbyn as a ‘ spineless hypocrite on Brexit’. Nick Cohen, writing in The Guardian (1 June 2019), noted that ‘voters demand that their leaders are authentic, especially voters as angry as Britain’s Remainers’, and therefore, if Corbyn began campaigning for Remain, ‘few would believe him’. The Guardian (17 May 2019) asked, in an ironic tone, whether it was because Corbyn ‘likes stories so much that Labour has two totally contradictory ones to tell people for the European elections?’ A commentary in the Daily Telegraph (28 May 2019) also posed the question in terms of dishonesty by asking whether his supporters would still view him as authentic after ‘being forced into a position [on Brexit] in which he clearly does not believe?’ The Times (8 February 2019) claimed that Labour
MPs did not believe his Remain proclamations and knew ‘deep down that they are trapped in a party led by a man with unconscionable views on foreign policy who is perfectly happy to leave the EU’.

While these commentators saw Corbyn as a Leave supporter putting on an inauthentic pretence as a Remainer, other commentators thought he lacked any clear position at all. The Daily Mail (24 August 2019) claimed that Corbyn did not ‘show leadership’ because he did not actually know what he believed in: ‘He needs to work out what he stands for and abide by it. If he believes in Brexit, he should say so. If he supports Remain, he should say so’. The Sun (15 December 2019) questioned Corbyn’s real position on Brexit, posing the matter as a question of either indecisiveness or dishonesty by asking whether he ‘didn’t seem to know’ or whether ‘he was keeping it from the electorate’. Either way, Corbyn did not come out looking good in this assessment.

Corbyn’s apparently lacklustre and inauthentic support for Remain was also framed as giving political advantage away to other parties. The Liberal Democrats were framed as the only ‘authentic voice of the pro-EU brigade’ (The Express, 25 July 2019). Labour’s prevarication on their Brexit position, as Corbyn sought to manage the competing positions within his party and manage the apparent disconnect between his own views and those of his MPs, was described as giving other parties the advantage of having a ‘more authentic commitment to staying in the EU’ (The Sunday Times, 25 August 2019). Here, inauthenticity was associated not only with a hit to his personal popularity but also a hit to the electoral chances for the whole party.

**Discourse 3: ‘Corbyn is authentic and that is the problem’**

Corbyn’s authenticity was described in 2017 as ‘both his greatest asset and his biggest weakness’ (Independent, 13 January 2017) and again in 2019 as his ‘greatest strength’ but also ‘his most devastating flaw’ (Telegraph, 11 December 2019). There were four elements of the discourse which framed Corbyn’s authenticity as a leadership flaw, namely: claims about his poor communication style and media profile, his inability to unite his party, his inability to have broad enough electoral appeal to win elections and the morality underlying his political positions. I will address each element in turn.

The apparently unscripted and unpolished style of Corbyn’s speeches and media interviews was key feature of the discourse that framed him as authentic (see Discourse 1 above). However, others pointed to the problems this posed for the party as Corbyn sought to manage his media profile and gain mainstream appeal with the electorate. An article in The Independent (13 January 2017) framed his authenticity as an electoral liability and claimed that Corbyn needed to ‘learn to act’ and ‘master the art of message discipline’ if he were to appear competent and professional. The article went on to state: ‘Corbyn will have to work out what he wants to be “the story” and stick to it, not lob out three stories at once and leave the public confused’. (Independent, 13 January 2017).

Some on the political left, including those writing in The Guardian, framed Corbyn’s rigid adherence to his far-left political views as a problem for the party, both for keeping the party together and for leading the party into power. From when he was first elected leader in 2015, warnings were made about the problems posed by his rigid adherence to his principles. Past donors to the party warned of the risk of the party becoming ‘a protest party’ rather than a party fit for government (Telegraph, 14 September 2015). Dan Jarvis, writing in The Telegraph (14 September 2015), warned that a ‘divided Labour Party will be resoundingly rejected by the British people’ and urged Corbyn to ‘reach out across the party, bringing people into the fold’. Corbyn’s attempts to honour his long-standing position against Trident, Britain’s nuclear deterrent, including his ‘determination to push through an anti-Trident policy as the party’s official stance’, was met with criticism from those who saw Corbyn as putting his personal views (which were framed as unpopular with voters) above the
interests of the party (Independent, 18 November 2015). A key aspect of his perceived authenticity as a leader – his determination to act on his moral beliefs – was framed as a leadership flaw. Authenticity derived from following his political principles was re-framed as evidence of him being ‘rigid’ (BBC News 19 November 2019). Even when he did shift his position on issues, he was criticised for moving too slowly, as one former colleague stated: ‘You have to understand that Jeremy does move on issues, but he moves very slowly’ (BBC News 19 November 2019).

Corbyn’s steadfast adherence to his beliefs was also framed in the media as a problem for his leadership of the party. A series of expulsions and resignations of Labour MPs scarred his tenure as leader. Infighting within the party and the split between the hard-left Corbynites and centre-left Blairites was blamed on Corbyn’s inability to compromise and unite a ‘broad church’ within the party. The Daily Telegraph (11 December 2019) wrote that while Corbyn has stayed true to the political opinions he formed in his youth, ‘he finds it virtually impossible to compromise or even entertain the notion that other viewpoints have value’. Newspapers from across the political spectrum reported on Corbyn’s lack of willingness, or lack of ability, to keep the increasingly fractured party together. The deeply held principles that led him to be labelled ‘authentic’ were translated into the image of a ‘dogmatic’ leader who was unwilling to listen to alternative viewpoints and unable to compromise. Before he was elected leader, The Independent (20 August 2015) talked about Corbyn’s ‘leadership style’ as one that demanded ‘loyalty and compliance’ with his own position. Labour MPs, the Independent (20 August 2015) warned, would be expected to fall in line with Corbyn’s political views and ‘do as they are told’.

During the 2016 leadership contest, The Daily Telegraph (13 July 2016) reported fears expressed by Labour MPs over a split in the party between the hard-left and moderates, quoting one Corbyn critic who proclaimed that Corbyn’s success in winning the union vote meant ‘the end of the Labour Party, nothing more or less’. His rival in the 2016 leadership contest, Owen Smith, was quoted saying that Labour would split if Corbyn remained as leader, citing the ‘iron rule in politics’ that ‘divided parties lose elections’ (Western Mail, 26 August 2016). The Independent (19 July 2016) also predicted that if Corbyn retained the party leadership the party could split and therefore guarantee electoral defeat, citing the 172 MPs who voted against him in the no-confidence motion against the 40 who supported him.

During 2017, discussion about the problems associated with Corbyn’s ‘authentic’ far-left political position for uniting the Labour party continued. The Daily Telegraph (10 May 2017) discussed Corbyn’s inability to hold his party together as he faced ‘a devastating split after the election with as many as 100 of the party’s MPs set to walk out and form their own breakaway group’. One commentator blamed Corbyn’s unwillingness to adjust his position to appeal to ‘moderates’: ‘The Labour Party has got to appeal to moderate people who have got moderate views and that is the majority of the people in this country’ (Daily Telegraph, 10 May 2017). Ian Austin, one of the seven MPs to quit the party in protest at Corbyn’s leadership in February 2019, blamed Corbyn for failing to unite the ‘broad church’ within the party and accused him of surrounding himself only with those who shared his ‘narrow’ far-left viewpoint: ‘The Labour Party has always been a broad church. But under Jeremy Corbyn it’s become a narrow sect’ (Sun, 23 February 2019). Deputy Leader Tom Watson’s response to the departures was praised as a welcome contrast to Corbyn’s uncompromising leadership style, saying that Labour could only stop more MPs leaving if they ‘reach out and extend beyond our comfort zone’ (Daily Mirror, 19 February 2019). Holding a clear set of values and sticking to them was framed as ‘blinkered’ and ‘arrogant’ (Yorkshire Post, 21 January 2019).

Corbyn’s adherence to his hard-left beliefs was also framed as damaging for the party’s chances of winning elections. Getting into power, according to some commentators, required the qualities of compromise and flexibility that ‘authentic’ leaders such as Corbyn lacked. Michael White, writing in
the Guardian (24 August 2016) during the 2016 leadership contest, claimed that Corbyn retained the authenticity that gave him an edge in 2015 against Burnham, Cooper and Kendall, but positioned this as a bad thing for the party’s chances of winning power: ‘Jeremy was the one who sounded authentic which he is, for better and (mostly) worse’. Those who prefer Corbyn as a ‘man of principle’, he wrote, ‘don’t much care about actually winning power and doing things’ (Guardian, 24 August 2016).

Corbyn was well known for putting his political views above his party career while serving as a backbench MP. He was reported to have rebelled against the party whip to vote with his own conscience on 428 occasions under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown (GQ magazine, 26 September 2017). However, some commentators saw this history of rebellion as a liability rather than an asset, now he was party leader. The Guardian (2 April 2019) reported criticism of Corbyn for not sacking front bench MPs who voted against the party’s three-line whip on a second EU referendum because of fears he would be open to the charge of hypocrisy. The BBC News website (21 October 2015) asked whether Corbyn had been given a ‘taste of his own medicine’ and asked ‘Can he ever crack the whip with conviction, given his own reputation as Labour’s most disobedient MP?’ Baroness Armstrong, chief party whip from 2001 to 2006, recalled her experience of trying in vain to whip Corbyn to vote with the party, concluding: ‘Politics is about compromise, and he never wanted to be put in a position where he was expected to compromise’. (BBC news, 21 October 2015) In this discourse, what is acceptable for followers was distinguished from what is expected of leaders. According to The Yorkshire Post (21 January 2019), ‘a good constituency MP and a good leader are not the same thing’ and while authenticity was said to be a laudable trait for a constituency MP, it was framed as a liability for a leader, given the ‘collective responsibility for the national interest’ incumbent on the leader of the opposition.

The fourth and final theme in this discourse did not question Corbyn’s authentic commitment to his principles but rather questioned whether these were the ‘right’ principles upon which to govern the country. The Telegraph (17 June 2017) described his political views as ‘dangerously wrong’, writing: ‘There is a premium placed nowadays on what is called ‘authenticity’ and the Labour leader is said to possess it because he has stuck to his principles. Over the years, indeed, Mr Corbyn has been consistent in his views, but he has been consistently wrong’. Critics noted that even if Corbyn was authentic because of his ‘steadfastness of opinion’, it did not matter if ‘what you’ve always believed is wrong’ (Independent, 16 January 2016). Similar criticisms were levied at Corbyn’s position on the nuclear deterrent Trident. Corbyn was described as a ‘danger’ to the country (Sun, 25 November 2019) and a ‘threat to national security’ (Daily Mail, 24 November 2019). The Sun claimed that, if he were to put his anti-Trident policies into practice, the United Kingdom would be ‘at Putin’s mercy’ (Sun, 18 November 2019).

To sum up, then, this third and final discourse also framed Corbyn as authentic but, unlike the first discourse, sought to highlight the flaws and dangers of Corbyn’s authentic leadership. Specifically, critics pointed to the ineffectiveness of his media profile and communication style, his lack of willingness or ability to unite a fragmented party, the problems he posed for the party in making it electable and the ‘dangers’ posed by his (authentically held) political views.

**Discussion**

This review of media discourse has uncovered a deeply ambivalent set of discourses about leader authenticity that surrounded Jeremy Corbyn’s tenure as Labour party leader. How can we make sense of these three competing discourses? One way to make sense of their coexistence is to appreciate how they play out a series of leadership ‘double binds’, which pitch ‘authenticity’ against
other leadership qualities that the media attributed to the characteristics of ‘effective’ political leaders. This discourse of the ‘effective leader’ included references to the ability to manage the media and communicate effectively, the ability to be flexible and adaptable in one’s position, willingness to compromise, the ability to garner widespread appeal and the willingness to change position to one that is deemed – by whoever is doing the judging – as the ‘right’ position. Table 1 summarises the competing media discourses of the ‘authentic’ leader and the ‘effective’ leader uncovered in this study.

How do the findings of this study relate to the mainstream approach to the study of authentic leadership that dominates the leadership literature? The mainstream perspective views authentic leaders as individuals who know their ‘true self’ (Harter, 2002: 382) and maintain a ‘seamless link between espoused values, behaviours and actions’ (Luthans and Avolio, 2003: 242). Authentic leaders are said to listen to their inner ‘true self’. This article adds further evidence to existing critically oriented, social constructionist scholarship that rejects this mainstream perspective on authentic leadership (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2013; Carroll (2015); Ford and Harding, 2011; Guthey and Jackson, 2005; Kempster et al., 2018; Lawler and Ashman, 2012; Nyberg and Sveningsson 2014). The specific contribution of this article lies in showing the social and ideological process through which authenticity is judged in competing ways in mediatised political contexts. The study has shown that evaluations of Corbyn’s authenticity arose from ideologically invested judgements of media commentators about whether, to what extent and in which contexts, authenticity was viewed as a leadership strength or liability.

Importantly, these judgements are made by influential media commentators whose discourse plays a critical role in shaping follower (i.e. voter) opinions. By teasing out these contradictory discourses of leader authenticity circulating in the contemporary political sphere (see Table 1), I have addressed Collinson’s (2014: 36) call for research that identifies the ‘paradoxes and contradictions’ of leadership. Moreover, I have also addressed Collinson’s (2014) call for better understanding of the power-laden nature of leadership by bringing ideology to the centre of the analysis of who judges authenticity, how they make those judgements and with what social, political and ideological effects.

The findings of this study also add further evidence to the criticism of the mainstream approach to studying authentic leadership made by Iszatt-White and Kempster (2019: 356), who argue that the mainstream approach has neither the ‘philosophical underpinnings’ or ‘empirical grounding’ in the world of social practice to grasp the phenomenon. By viewing authenticity as akin to a personality

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authentic political leaders…</th>
<th>Effective political leaders…</th>
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<tr>
<td>… do not use spin and sound bites or be slippery and evasive when being interviewed</td>
<td>… are savvy about managing the media and getting their message across</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… always tell the truth, even if that truth is unpopular</td>
<td>… avoid saying or doing anything that could damage the public image of them or their party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… always stick to their principles</td>
<td>… are flexible, adaptable and able to compromise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… have a deep commitment to following their own inner voice and not being swayed by others</td>
<td>… seek to listen to others and consider their viewpoints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… only express opinions that they truly hold</td>
<td>… are willing and able to do whatever it takes to make themselves are their party electable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… only do what their inner voice tells them is right</td>
<td>… are willing to change their position if others judge them to be wrong</td>
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Table 1. Competing discourses of leader authenticity and leader effectiveness in the media.
trait, the mainstream perspective cannot appreciate the complex and contested process through which authenticity is socially constructed. Furthermore, I build on Kempster et al.’s (2018) critique of the dominant mainstream approach to authentic leadership for sidestepping the question of ‘who gets to decide’ (p. 321) what degree of relational transparency is appropriate or inappropriate for leaders. I have done this by identifying the role of the media in judging the degree of transparency desired or expected of political leaders.

The social constructionist turn in leadership studies runs in parallel with the shift in the understanding of authenticity more generally away from viewing authenticity as an ‘essence’ that resides in an object or person towards viewing authenticity as a socially constructed claim made by (or about) someone or something (Peterson, 2005: 1086). Moreover, as Peterson (2005) points out, this shift also involves recognising that any claim to authenticity can be accepted or rejected by those whose judgement matters. Building on this point, I have shown that while some journalists and commentators accepted Corbyn’s claim to authenticity, others rejected his claim to authenticity as faltering, fabricated or false. Moreover, I have advanced our knowledge of the ambiguous and ambivalent ways in which authentic can be evaluated. I have shown that some journalists and commentators framed Corbyn’s authenticity as a leadership strength and a key source of his political appeal, while others framed his authenticity as a leadership flaw, a liability for the party or as a source of moral concern for society. The study has therefore revealed a dual ambiguity in the media framing of Corbyn: the framing of whether he is an authentic leader and the framing of whether his authenticity should be considered a ‘good’ thing.

This brings us to the question of the role of morality in authentic leadership discourse. Lawler and Ashman (2012) have argued that the dominant psychological perspective on authentic leadership rests on the assumptions that society holds universally known and unanimously agreed upon distinctions between ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. This is problematic because it ignores the fact that leaders often face situations replete with ambiguity, ambivalence and competing definitions of what is ‘right’ (see also Shaw, 2010). This study adds another dimension to their argument in the context of media discourse of political leadership. I have shown how, despite being framed as authentic and characterised as someone who stayed true to his inner moral principles, Corbyn was also criticised for holding the ‘wrong’ views. There are interesting parallels here with the findings of Nyberg and Sveningsson, (2014), where leaders from a corporate context felt that they ‘must restrain their claimed authenticity in order to be perceived as good leaders’ (p. 437). As Painter-Morland and Deslandes (2017) have also shown in a corporate leadership context, the conflicting expectations made of leaders means that maintaining authenticity while also managing the demands of accountability to a broad range of stakeholders presents a challenge. This study advances this argument in the context of political leadership by showing that competing discourses of what was ‘right’ for the political party and what was ‘right’ for the country were used to evaluate Corbyn’s ability to act as an effective and ethical leader.

I propose that the mainstream perspective is poorly placed to make sense of these competing discourses. According to Alvesson and Sveningsson (2013), the mainstream literature positions authentic leadership as an unequivocally ‘good’ thing and fails to reflect on its decontextualized and individualistic foundations. In contrast, the findings of this study lend further weight to Ford and Harding’s (2011) argument that the notion of the ‘true inner self’ should be rejected in favour of studying the power relations which make inauthenticity a common feature of social and organisational life. For instance, Corbyn was praised for sticking to his principles but also criticised for failing to be sufficiently flexible and compromising to unite his party and gain popular appeal amongst the electorate. Alongside the expectation that political leaders should be authentic ran a competing expectation that they also need a degree of inauthenticity to be effective in their
leadership role. Just as individuals struggle to reconcile competing understandings of who they think they are and who they are told they should be (Ford and Harding, 2011) and just as they struggle to make sense of the appropriate degree of congruence they can or should allow between their inner emotions and public behaviour (Kempster et al., 2018), I have shown that competing discourses of what is expected of political leaders circulate, despite the ambiguities and contradictions they create.

To sum up, then, this study has advanced knowledge of how judgements of authenticity are made in a political context in three ways. Firstly, it has shown how judgements about Corbyn’s authenticity were made through multiple cues: assessments of the leader’s style of speaking, assessments of whether the leader was committed to honesty and had rejected spin, sound bites, propaganda and opinion polls, in addition to assessments of whether the leader looks and sounds ‘ordinary’ and not a member of the elite establishment manipulation. Secondly, it has also shown how these judgements evolved over time as the leader was assessed in relation to new events: for instance, the more positive assessments that arose when Corbyn was evaluated in relation to his rival Theresa May and the more critical assessments that arose when Corbyn was criticised for his inauthenticity during the ‘Traingate’ saga or during the uproar over his claim to watch the Queen’s Christmas message. Moreover, this study goes further by revealing not only how the judgements about authenticity were made but also how authenticity was evaluated as a political asset or liability according to the political stance of the commentator. Overall, I have revealed how evaluations of authenticity shaped, and were shaped by, the ideological landscape of the media.

Conclusion

This study of the media discourse of Jeremy Corbyn has shown that three competing discourses of authenticity coexisted during Corbyn’s tenure as Labour leader. In the first discourse, journalists and commentators framed Corbyn as an authentic leader and discussed the appeal his authenticity held for his supporters, especially voters disillusioned with contemporary politics. Even some of Corbyn’s most vocal critics employed this discourse and made reference to his ‘authentic appeal’. In the second discourse, Corbyn’s authenticity was questioned or, in some cases, rejected outright. Here, Corbyn was framed as a typical politician, prone to lying, fudging, flip-flopping, evasion and spin. In the third discourse, Corbyn’s authenticity was not doubted, but it was instead framed as a flaw or a danger. Here, Corbyn was framed as someone with a poor communication style and media profile, someone who was unable to unite his party and win elections and someone who was morally wrong on key issues.

In their 2005 introductory editorial for the journal Leadership, Collinson and Grint (2005: 5) pointed out that there was ‘little consensus on what counts as leadership’ in the academic literature, the business press or in popular discourse. The situation is arguably no different today. People bring a diverse range of assumptions to the question of ‘what makes a good leader?’ (Grint, 2010). If ‘leadership means different things to different people’ (Grint et al., 2017: 4), then so too, as this study has shown, multiple understandings and evaluations of the authenticity of political leaders coexist. Rather than treat this ambiguity as a problem that needs to resolved with more precise definitions and more sophisticated measurements, I have instead sought to show the value of embracing an ‘ambiguity-centred approach’ (Alvesson and Spicer, 2010: 20) to the study of authentic leadership.

How, then, can we explain the causes and consequences of these divergent and competing discourses of authentic political leadership uncovered in the press coverage of Jeremy Corbyn? Uniting the ‘ambiguity-centred approach’ (Alvesson and Spicer, 2010: 20) with a critical perspective means that ideology can enter the analysis (Van Dijk, 2011). The ideological function of the media in promulgating cultural myths and obfuscating power relations is well known, as Chen and Meindl
(1991) also highlighted in relation to images of a business leader in the press. Ideology helps us to explain why, and with what effects, Corbyn was framed in such divergent ways in the press. For critics who were ideologically opposed to the hard-left political position that Corbyn stood for, in addition to those within his own party who adopted a more moderate and centrist position, Corbyn’s authenticity was re-framed as a weakness or a liability by drawing on an alternative discourses of what makes an ‘effective’ leader (see Table 1 above). Of course, it is important to acknowledge here that given the political leaning of many British newspapers, any far-left Labour party leader could have fared just as badly in the media coverage, whether they appeared to be authentic or not.

Importantly, though, the discourse analytic perspective used here cannot straightforwardly label this media discourse as ‘biased’. Such an argument would rely on claiming knowledge of what an objective and ‘unbiased’ representation would look like (Potter, 1996). It is not as straightforward as saying that the discourse of Corbyn’s critics in the right-wing press was ideologically biased and the discourse produced by his far-left supporters was a neutral and objective assessment of his (authentic) leadership. As Van Dijk (2011: 379–380) points out, the ideological study of discourse does not involve an asymmetrical position where positions we happen to agree with are categorised as ‘truth’ and the positions of those we disagree with are dismissed or discredited as ‘ideological’. Rather, the analyst seeks to trace the ideological assumptions underpinning the discourse and trace the ideological consequences of the discourse. In this case, we can see how framing Corbyn’s authenticity as a fabrication or as a leadership flaw served the ideological purposes of those seeking to destabilise his leadership of the party or discredit his electoral chances.

While this study has examined discourses of leadership in a political context, similar processes of mediated attribution and evaluation could also take place in other spheres of life where leaders are publicly judged. In many other contexts, followers do not typically meet leaders in person and instead form judgements about their leadership competencies and styles from how they are evaluated in the press. As Jackson and Parry (2011: 3) point out, whether it is a ‘beleaguered politician, the coach of a sports team on a losing streak, or a business tycoon embroiled in a business scandal, the media can be especially persuasive about what constitutes good and bad leadership and how it needs to be addressed’. The media matter because they promulgate the ‘cultural conceptions and beliefs’ (Chen and Meindl, 1991: 523) and offer up the ‘scripts’ (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003: 379) that people use to judge leadership. Hence, this study builds upon existing knowledge of how the media plays a critical role in the creation and diffusion of ambiguous and ambivalent discourses of leadership.

What avenues for future research emerge from this study? Given the importance of social media to modern election campaigns, studying the framing of political leaders through social media would be one key avenue for future research. The extent to which authenticity is deemed to be an asset or liability for leaders in other spheres of the social world (business, civil society, social movements and so on) is another important avenue for future research. In particular, future research could explore whether authenticity matters more in some contexts than others. For example political and social movement organisations could place more emphasis in leader authenticity than in commercial organisations, given the way followers might expect their leaders to share the same deeply held moral principles as them.

To conclude, this study has uncovered three competing discourses through which Jeremy Corbyn’s authenticity as a leader was framed in the British press. Rather than viewing the more or less ambiguous and more or less ambivalent discourses of leadership that circulate in society and in organisations (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003; Alvesson and Spicer, 2010) as a problem for the field of leadership studies, we can instead approach this as an empirical phenomenon worthy of investigation from a critical perspective. This shift in perspective away from the mainstream
perspective means that future studies can ask: ‘How are authentic leaders framed as authentic in discourses produced by them and about them?’, ‘How is their authenticity framed as a leadership strength or weakness?’ and ‘What ideological effects are generated in the process?’ Answering these kinds of questions requires us to move beyond the essentialist understanding of authenticity as a ‘trait’. It means we need to embrace a critical and social constructionist understanding of authenticity as an ambiguous and contested social attribution made in discourse. Only by doing so, I propose, can we begin to understand how divergent meanings of leader authenticity are constructed and what symbolic, ideological and material effects they have in different spheres of life.

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Notes

7. A more contemporary example is the charge of inauthenticity levied on Ed Miliband (Labour party leader 2010–2015) during what was dubbed ‘kitchengate’, regarding photographs in what he claimed was his small and humble looking kitchen at home and the photographs of him eating a bacon sandwich (the iconic working-class meal) thought to have influenced the 2015 general election. Source: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/generalelection/ed-milibands-trial-by-media-damned-if-he-does-and-damned-if-he-doesnt-10108811.html
8. The categorisation of the newspapers is based on reader’s opinions derived from a YouGov poll: https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2017/03/07/how-left-or-right-wing-are-uks-newspapers
16. The search terms used to search the LexisNexis database were ‘Corbyn’ and ‘authentic’, in addition to searches for specific news items where Corbyn’s authenticity was discussed (e.g. ‘Traingate’, Queen’s Christmas message, etc.).
17. My thanks especially to anonymous Reviewer 1 for their input in developing this point.
18. Interestingly, the potential for a split in the party was predicted by newspapers back in 2015 when they questioned whether Corbyn could compromise sufficiently to unite the ‘broad church’ of political views within the party (Izzatt-White et al., 2019).
19. The carefully crafted image of being ‘ordinary’, ‘elite-bashing’ and ‘anti-establishment’, despite being a member of the elite has also been noted by commentators in the case of Trump, Farage and Johnson, see: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2019/06/03/conviction-politicians-can-survive-personality-obsessed-era/ and https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2019/06/what-boris-johnson-and-nigel-farage-have-learned-trump-playbook
20. Bower (2019) wrote ‘Corbyn’s ‘authenticity’ was fictitious – a confection for political appearances’ (p. xxv)
21. By editing the MP’s comment and removing the phrase ‘seem like’, the Telegraph wrote that Labour MP’s said the incident ‘showed Mr Corbyn was a “charlatan”” (Telegraph, 23 August 2016).

References


**Author biography**

Andrea Whittle is Professor of Management at Newcastle University Business School. Her research is driven by a passion for understanding the role of language in business, management and leadership settings and is informed by theories and methodologies from the fields of discourse analysis, narrative, discursive psychology, ethnography, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis.