

Let's Collaborate with Max on the visual construction of Jeremy Corbyn in the British media

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

Max Guarini, Catherine McDonald

Catherine McDonald 00:01

Hello, and welcome to Let's Collaborate a podcast from the Southwest Doctoral Training Partnership. I'm your host, Catherine McDonald. And joining me for this episode is Max Guarini, who's researching the visual construction of Jeremy Corbyn in the British media. So first of all, then tell me a little bit more about your research.

Max Guarini 00:21

Yeah, so basically, I look at how Jeremy Corbyn was visually constructed, in a negative sense in the British media. So some research is focused on the more positive aspects of the coverage. So, for example, the kind of stuff that we saw on social media in 2017, lots of memes that were published, you know, to sort of in support of Corbin, but I'm looking at the negative stuff across different types of media. So this includes, you know, legacy media, what we think of newspapers, both in print and online, but also how those images travel across the media, from old media to new media, and vice versa. And

Catherine McDonald 01:06

when you talk about the visual construction, are you literally talking about his image how his image was used? Or is it more complex than that?

Max Guarini 01:13

No, it's basically, how basically, our visuals were used, right? So photographs are the main things I look at those were used to sort of create this image of him as dangerous through different kinds of themes. But yeah, that's that's basically it. So it's kind of focused on the visual aspects.

Catherine McDonald 01:32

And what made you want to look into that? A couple of things, really, I

Max Guarini 01:35

suppose one of the reasons was, I can live through the periods in question, right? So I look at the time from 2015 to 2019, which were the years he was labelled either, having lived through that time, I noticed people really engaging in politics, a lot more people suddenly, who I knew were completely, you know, uninterested in politics suddenly became quite active, especially younger people. And I thought it was a real exciting time, right, because it was something different. So whether you agree with his ideas or not, then you know, at least we can, we can all agree on the fact that he did represent something quite unique. And so, you know, to sort of look at how the media responded to that I thought was, was really interesting. The visual aspect is because I suppose I find a lot of people are kind of overloaded these days with information, you know, from different sources. Most of us have smartphones, you know, we're constantly getting different information coming through. So images actually serve as what we call a kind of cognitive shortcut, right? So they kind of cut through all the noise. And they go, Look, here's an image of this guy. So whether you believe the words that we write or not, here's an image, right? So, you know, it's, it can't be false, right? So images have this power? That is quite persuasive, I would say,

Catherine McDonald 03:04

and talk us through the methodology that you've used in this research, how have you actually gone about it?

Max Guarini 03:09

So I use something called discourse analysis. So people think of this course as usually being about language only. But actually, discourse includes any kind of communicative act, right? So any kind of meaningful communication, whether it be through words, images, music, architecture, is all part of discourse. So I basically look at the images and I try to look at the different signs or different signifiers in those images, and how they're trying to persuade me of something. So what kind of work is this picture doing? To convince me of the message?

Catherine McDonald 03:50

And ultimately, what do you hope your research will inform or change? You know, what, what would you like to see achieve?

Max Guarini 03:58

Well, I think first and foremost, I think it's important that we see images as deeply political. Right. So I think it's important that we, we think about how photographs or pictures are used, rather than just as something which reflects the real world, they actually construct the world, right? And so we have to think about how images are basically kind of imbued with power. Why are they chosen? Why are they shown at certain times, as I said, people often think as images is just showing the world but there's lots of choices along the way, from that image being taken to them being selected to them being edited a certain way to them being shown in a certain format, and with certain words next to them, right. So all these choices matter. So I'd like to see more of the focus, let's say on the visual aspect of politics. And I think that's happening across other disciplines, but in British politics, especially. I don't think that's been deeply explored. So that's one aspect. And obviously, you know, the second aspect which follows from this one is how does the visual effects our democracy, right? If the media is able to construct

someone as dangerous? What does that say about the health of our democracy, right? If someone comes along and has radically different ideas, and is then labelled or constructed as dangerous, in the case of Corbin, for example, what does that do for I suppose, in Coburn's case, the future of the left in Britain, right? What does that what does that say to people who perhaps now or even too young to know anything about politics, but in 1020 years time, we'll look back at this time, and kind of be scared of, let's say, promoting left, left politics in the UK because they've seen what happens, right. As I say, you know, regardless of whether you agree with Corbin 's ideas, I think it's important that we have a plurality of ideas that we have different sorts of voices in society. And it's important that those voices get a fair a fair hearing, I would say, right. So I think it has implications, both from sort of a pedagogical point of view, and how we think about educating young people to critically engage with images, but also to think about how that affects our democracy. And

Catherine McDonald 06:34

also, I guess, to expose the kind of or to raise the awareness in us as consumers of the media about the choices that are being made that we then consume, I guess, subconsciously, yeah,

Max Guarini 06:47

absolutely. I think you've hit on an important point that I think because, as I said, before, you know, these images do serve as cognitive shortcuts, right? Even if, for example, even if we don't buy a particular newspaper, we are likely to see them just walking past a newspaper stand in a supermarket, or if someone leaves it behind in a cafe or on a bus on the train. Those front pages still matter, right? People talk about the sorts of the revolutionary change from new media. But there's lots of good research out there, showing that actually legacy media still really matter. They're still powerful news organisations have a wide reach thanks to their online presence as well. So you know, I think that is potential in new media to sort of counteract some of the or let's say, counter the mainstream narratives on certain things. But at the same time, we also have to be aware of the fact that there are still very powerful forces of play, in what we see how we see it, how, let's say our political world is constructed. So yeah, I think I think it's, it's important to reflect on on those points, right.

Catherine McDonald 08:09

It sounds absolutely fascinating. And I wish you all the best of it. Well, before I let you go, though, what advice would you give to someone who's thinking about embarking on a PhD?

Max Guarini 08:20

I'd say, do it, if you get the chance to do it, I was, you know, I've been very fortunate I, I was funded from the southwest doctoral training partnership. So you know, I was I was lucky to be able to actually do the PhD. So you know, if you if you have a passion for something, I would say, follow it. Do it. Be brave in terms of what you what you do, and how you do it and what you say. Yeah, and don't don't be afraid to sort of, to disrupt, you know, to rock the boat and to try and try and change things for the better or to try and bring new insights into things right. And to do that, I think you have to be brave. I'm not saying I am. I try to be

Catherine McDonald 09:03

Max, thank you so much for joining us. And thanks to you for listening to this episode of Let's Collaborate from the Southwest Doctoral Training Partnership. This was produced in collaboration with Research Podcasts and recorded at the SWDTP conference in 2023. Don't forget to subscribe wherever you receive your podcasts.