

CHAPTER 5

Inter-communal assassinations and the British press

Since the early 1970s, British media coverage of Northern Ireland has focused almost exclusively on violence and its aftermath. However, given that over 2,500 people have been killed and many thousands more injured as a consequence of the continuing crisis in the North, that this particular dimension of the Irish conflict should have attracted so much media attention is perhaps hardly surprising, and, to the extent to which this coverage contributes to our understanding of violent conflict, even desirable. Yet, as we have seen in Chapter Two, rather than aiding our understanding of the conflict in the Six Counties, much of this coverage has been criticised as being superficial in nature, and exceptionally limited in focus. While the violence of the IRA and other republican groups has tended to dominate the headlines and the editorial columns, violence emanating from other sources, most notably from the state, has largely been ignored or underplayed; so much so, some commentators have argued, that the casual observer of British media coverage could be forgiven for concluding that violence in the North was the sole prerogative of republican groups.⁽¹⁾

The scenario of violence implicit in the British media's coverage of Northern Ireland noted in several studies, in which the IRA is presented as its principal source and the security forces and the Protestant community its principal victims, is, when viewed in the light of statistical evidence, highly misleading. As we have seen in Chapter Two, away from the publicity that has so often been given to the IRA and its activities, statistics on violence in the North reveal that the security forces and loyalist paramilitary groups have between them accounted for nearly 1,000 of the 2,304 deaths recorded up to July, 1983.⁽²⁾

Nowhere, perhaps, is the scenario of violence suggested by the British media in its coverage of the Northern Ireland conflict more misleading than when it comes to the subject of violence against civilians. Violence against civilians in general, and large-scale indiscriminate violence such as the bombing of public places in particular, has, without doubt, been one of the most sensitive and controversial issues raised by the conflict. Given the negative public evaluation of violence against non-combatants, it has also, and not surprisingly perhaps, been an issue which has featured prominently in the propaganda war that has attended the conflict for much of its present phase. As we shall see when we return to this subject in more detail in Chapter Six, in their efforts to secure the conventional objectives of propaganda in wartime, the security forces in particular have sought to exploit the issue of violence against civilians to discredit their opponents, and in particular the IRA.⁽³⁾

The IRA and other republican groups have undoubtedly been responsible for a large proportion of the 1,297 civilian deaths recorded up to July, 1983, but they have scarcely been the only nor the most important component.⁽⁴⁾ Since the early 1970s, with varying degrees of intensity, loyalist paramilitary groups have engaged in a particularly brutal campaign of civilian assassinations which has claimed the lives of many hundreds of Catholic civilians.⁽⁵⁾ In 1972 alone, the year which marked the commencement of the campaign, this particular form of political violence claimed as many as 200 victims, the vast majority of these being Catholics killed by loyalists.⁽⁶⁾

Directed against the most vulnerable members of both communities, and claiming as many as two-thirds of all the civilian fatalities recorded since 1969, the assassination of civilians represents one of the most important forms of political violence in Northern Ireland, and

one which has done much to polarise the relationship between Catholics and Protestants in the North.

This chapter focuses on the coverage accorded to civilian assassinations by the British press during a five week period in 1972. It assesses the prominence and amount of coverage given to this particular form of political violence as a news issue, and evaluates the range of explanations advanced by journalists as to the underlying social and political factors that give rise to it. The arguments it presents are based on the findings of a content analysis (the background to which being examined in Chapter Six) of British press reports over a five week period commencing on the 1st July, 1972.

Civilian assassinations and the British popular press

During the five week period examined here, the number of victims claimed by the assassination campaign being waged by the paramilitary groups, loyalist as well as nationalist, far outweighed those killed by bombings or other major incidents of violence. Indeed, during an IRA truce from the 25th June to the 10th July, no deaths were recorded due to bombings. In what was to prove to be 1972's highest monthly total for such killings, July witnessed 36 assassinations, many of them involving the torture of their victims.⁽⁷⁾ July was also to be the one month during the 1972 campaign in which the number of Protestants killed (17) almost matched the number of Catholics (19). In a society as small as Northern Ireland this was, by any measurement, violence of considerable proportions. Yet, as Table 1 shows, in terms of both the quantity and the prominence of the coverage it attracted, this daily catalogue of civilian killings was accorded relatively little attention in the pages of the popular press.

Table 1

Coverage devoted to assassinations: the popular press				
News format	Daily Express	Daily Mail	Daily Mirror	Sun
Primary news report	2	4	5	4
Round-up report	6	3	2	6
Follow-up report	0	1	2	1
Editorial	0	0	0	0
Total reports	8	8	9	11

Taken together, the four papers included in the sample carried between them a total of 36 reports dealing with civilian assassinations and their aftermath. Spaced out over the sampled period, this gave the Daily Express and the Daily Mail a weekly average of 1.6 reports and the Daily Mirror and the Sun a weekly average of 1.8 and 2.2 reports respectively.

From Table 1 it can also be seen that a given assassination stood a less than average chance of being selected for separate and prominent treatment in the Daily Express and the Sun which both carried a higher number of round-up reports as a proportion of total coverage. Nevertheless, even when we take all four papers together, civilian assassinations provided the main news angle of a story on only 15 occasions.

The round-up report, which provided the vehicle for 17 of the 36 assassination-related reports carried by the popular press, is, by its very nature, an exceptionally limited news format. Limited in space,

and often dealing with several discrete incidents or developments at the same time, such reports rarely provided the reader with more than the bare essentials of the assassination - the age, sex and religion of the victim, and the manner in which they met their death. For example, on the 31st July, the Sun's main Irish story of the day ('Ulster poised for no-go war') concentrated on the rumour that the army was set to invade Ulster's no-go areas, and assessed the likely opposition it would meet. The report was concluded with a round-up account of the previous day's violence in which it was reported how: "A Catholic youth of 19 was shot dead at the door of his house in Blackwood Street, Belfast". In some instances, however, the information provided by round-up reports was even more limited with neither the victim's age or religion being reported. For example, on the 28th July, the Daily Mirror devoted its main Irish story of the day ('"Hit the IRA". Troops pour in') to an announcement by the Ministry of Defence that a further 4,000 troops were to be flown to the North in a major new offensive against the IRA, bringing the total number of troops to 21,000. The paper concluded by reporting: "But yesterday, the terror campaign went on in Belfast. The bodies of two men were found in a blazing car. The hooded body of a man who had been shot through the head was found wrapped in a sack". Despite the fact that assassinations are often inexplicable unless the religion of the victim is given, over the sampled period it was not uncommon for the popular press to omit this detail in their reporting of incidents. The Daily Express failed to identify the religion of victims on four occasions, the Daily Mail, Daily Mirror and the Sun on three occasions each.

The editorial decision to present an assassination as part of a round-up report, rather than a news story in its own right, may well, initially at least, have been informed by purely practical considerations. British journalists in the North work to tight

deadlines and if an assassination were to occur close to a deadline and some distance from the journalist's base, then the amount of information they may be able to provide for their news desk could well be limited, in which case the journalist may well be content simply to record the incident, returning to it in more detail as time allowed. However, had this been the case, then one might have expected to have found a more detailed report in a subsequent edition. Over the sampled period, though, it was relatively unusual for an assassination first reported as part of a round-up report to be followed up with subsequent and more detailed coverage. Generally speaking, having been reported on this one occasion, they were quickly dropped with neither the police investigation into the incident, the reaction of family and friends, or the victim's funeral attracting subsequent coverage. As Table 1 shows, over the sampled period, the Daily Express carried no follow-up reports of previously reported assassinations, the Daily Mirror only two, and the Daily Mail and Sun only one each.

In the light of this, it seems more likely than that the high proportion of assassinations reported in round-up reports reflected the relative newsworthiness of the killings themselves. In a year in which acts of violence claiming multiple victims had already become commonplace, if not routine, it would appear that the killing of individual civilians, tragic as it might be, no longer had the news value it once did for the popular press.⁽⁸⁾ This was further evidenced by the spasmodic coverage given to civilian assassinations in general. For, while the majority of such killings received only minimal coverage, others were to be ignored altogether. The Daily Mail, for example, reported no assassinations during the periods 6th - 10th July and 15th - 20th July, the Daily Mirror none in the period 15th - 23rd July, even though there had been no easing of the campaign during these periods.

Generally speaking then, despite the number of victims it claimed, the campaign of inter-communal assassinations was accorded relatively little significance as a news issue in the pages of the popular press. When civilian assassinations did surface as news they were generally accorded a low priority with little if any attempt being made to go beyond the bare essentials of the incident, nor to locate it within a broader and perhaps more meaningful context. Indeed, in the majority of cases, the terse statements provided by round-up reports represented the only information provided by the popular press from which a meaningful understanding of a highly significant form of political violence might be derived. Deprived of context, devoid of plausible explanations, and tagged on to the end of other reports, such killings were unlikely to have had much of an impact on a readership already becoming accustomed to, if not already bored with, the continuing violence in the North. Indeed, if anything, the more likely consequence of this style of reporting would be for the victim of an assassination to become just another statistic in the mind of the reader; the casualty of a violence without apparent reason, motive or explanation. Whether the response of these particular newspapers would have been different had violence and death of a comparable kind been taking place on the streets of London, a city with a population several times greater than that of Northern Ireland, is of course another matter.

Nevertheless, while the tendency on the part of the popular press to underplay or ignore civilian assassinations was pronounced, it was far from complete. As Table 1 shows, in some instances civilian assassinations were considered to be of sufficient news value to merit separate treatment as a news story. Under what special circumstances then, if any, was an assassination likely to be accorded more substantial coverage? What features of these particular killings merited their being lifted from the potential obscurity of a round-up

report and given separate treatment? And, perhaps more importantly, to what extent did these reports provide readers with a more meaningful insight into the assassination campaign, the social and political factors which underpinned it, and its significance in relation to the wider conflict? Having examined the amount and prominence of the coverage given to civilian assassinations by the popular press, it is to these questions that I would now like to turn.

Primary reports, follow-up reports and editorials

As Table 1 shows, excluding round-up stories, the four papers carried between them a total of 15 primary-news reports dealing directly with assassinations and 4 follow-up reports dealing with aspects of a previously reported killing. Before moving to the detail of these reports, it should be noted that the actual number of assassinations given separate treatment by the popular press was much more limited than the frequency counts suggest. Indeed, despite the number of assassinations during the period studied (36 in the month of July alone), over 50 per cent of the primary-news coverage given to the killings was devoted to just two incidents: the killing of Michael and Peter Orr on the 5th July, and the assassination of David McClenaghan on the 12th July. Not only did these two incidents account for 8 of the 15 primary-news reports, they also provided the focus for 2 of the 4 follow-up reports.

A detailed analysis of these reports revealed a number of features common to the reporting of assassinations in all four papers which suggested a broad agreement within popular journalism both as to the types of incident considered newsworthy, and the particular aspects of these incidents worthy of special emphasis.

Human interest

One element of continuity in the coverage given to assassinations by the popular press was that, in the main, it was the "human interest" aspects of these killings which provided popular journalists with the prominent news angles around which their reports were structured. The analysis indicated that the likelihood of an assassination surfacing as a news item in its own right in the popular press was improved if it had at least one of the following characteristics: it involved women or children; it involved more than one member of the same family; it was the possible consequence of a relationship with a member of the opposite religion; it was a particularly brutal act; or if the victim, or intended victim, had shown considerable bravery. As the following selection of headlines used in the reporting of assassinations clearly illustrates, most often it was an individual attribute of the victim or the incident which provided the most prominent news angle:

"Executed for the love of a girl"

(Daily Express, 6:7:72)

"Brothers shot dead in Belfast vendetta"

(Sun, 6:7:72)

"Yesterday they buried one more statistic. He was just 21"

(Daily Mail, 14:7:72)

"The tortured execution of a quiet hero"

(Daily Mirror, 15:7:72)

"Old man and baby are latest to die"

(Sun, 20:7:72)

"IRA shoot a victim's wife"

(Sun, 21:7:72)

The tendency on the part of the popular press to report violent incidents in terms of their "human interest", concentrating on the experience of individuals rather than the communities and groups to

which they belong, and dramatising the single event rather than looking at the background, was graphically illustrated by the incident that was to be given the most prominent coverage during the sampled period.

This involved the assassination of David McClenaghan, a 15-year old Roman Catholic said to have a mental age of four. Generally speaking, the McClenaghan incident also provided a clear example of how the news imperatives of popular journalism, and in particular the search for the "human angle", helped determine both the priority given to incidents of violence and the amount and type of coverage they received.

In the early hours of the 12th July, four members of the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) broke into the McClenaghan home (the only Catholic house in an otherwise Protestant street) where the victim lived with his mother and her Protestant lodger. The lodger, after being beaten about the head, managed to escape from the house. During the course of what was to be a particularly brutal attack, David was shot three times and died immediately; his mother, despite being shot, raped and savagely beaten, managed to survive the attack. Earlier on the same day, the assassination campaign had also claimed four other victims. In Belfast, a 19-year old Protestant had been shot dead and the hooded, bound and shot body of a man had been discovered on the Springfield Road. And in Portadown, a publican and a customer had been shot dead. However, while the killing of David McClenaghan was to make front page news in all the papers with the exception of the Sun, where it featured prominently on page two, these other incidents were either ignored or reported only as a sub-story to the McClenaghan incident.

During a period in which the killing of civilians was almost a daily occurrence, and thus of diminishing news value, what helped mark the McClenaghan killing off from these other incidents as being particularly newsworthy, as the headlines given to the story clearly show, was a combination of his age and the fact that he had been asleep

at the time of the attack:

"Atrocity. Sleeping boy shot dead in new Ulster horror"
(Daily Express, 13:7:72)

"Boy, 15, killed in Ulster's most callous murder"
(Daily Mail, 13:7:72)

"Gunmen kill sleeping boy"
(Daily Mirror, 13:7:72)

"Gunmen kill boy aged 15 on day of fear"
(Sun, 13:7:72)

Following a pattern that was to be repeated throughout the period studied, in presenting the McClenaghan incident as a news story, it was to be the personal characteristics of the victims (David's age and mental condition, and the fact that his mother was a widow) and the tragic and horrific details of the attack (the fact that the boy had been asleep and the brutal attack on his mother) which provided popular journalists with the dominant themes for their reports. However, while much attention was given to the horrific details of the incident and to statements issued by the army and police condemning the killing as one of the worst atrocities since the start of the troubles, very little attention was paid to who or what lay behind it. None of the papers attributed responsibility for the killing and instead left their readers to draw their own conclusions as to who was responsible on the basis of the identified religion of the victim alone. Indeed, with the exception of the Daily Mirror, which reported in its front page follow-up ("The night they shot my son", 14:7:72) that the men were wearing the uniforms of the UDA (a point ignored by the rest of the papers), the background to the incident was largely ignored.

"Senseless", "motiveless" and "mysterious" violence

A further element of continuity in the coverage given to

assassinations, and one closely related to the above, was to be found in the absence of any clear explanatory or interpretative framework within which the killings could be located, or the reasons behind them adequately assessed. Despite the number of assassinations prior to and during the five week period examined here, the popular press generally refrained from exploring, on its readers' behalf, the social and political factors that might lie behind them. Indeed, on several occasions, the papers professed themselves perplexed as to the reasons behind the killings and simply reported them as "mysterious". For example, on the first day of the sampled period, the 1st July, which coincided with the first weekend of the IRA's truce, the assassination campaign claimed a further three victims - one of these being a 19-year old Englishman, Paul Jobling. Ignoring altogether the question of who or what may have been behind the incidents, the Daily Express informed its readers that "security chiefs were last night investigating a crop of mystery killings during the first weekend of the IRA truce".⁽⁹⁾ The Daily Mail, following a similar line, described the attack on Jobling as the "biggest mystery" of the weekend's killings.⁽¹⁰⁾ Similarly, reporting on the assassination of Michael and Peter Orr, the Sun informed its readers that the "killings bring the total of mystery deaths in Ulster to 11 in the nine days of the so-called ceasefire".⁽¹¹⁾

Generally speaking, the tendency on the part of all four papers was to deny any rational political objective behind the killings and, usually by way of an army or police statement, simply to report them as "motiveless", "pointless" and "senseless". This is not to suggest, of course, that the popular press offered its readers no explanation for the killings. However, insofar as motives were given, they tended only to reinforce the dominant image emerging from the reports that the two communities were engaged in an irrational and wanton blood feud. The Sun, for example, spoke of a "macabre wave of tit-for-tat killings".⁽¹²⁾

and "bloody vengeance killings";⁽¹³⁾ the Daily Mail of "reprisal executions";⁽¹⁴⁾ the Daily Express of how "rival gangs were playing a tit-for-tat murder game picking off victims at random";⁽¹⁵⁾ the Daily Mirror of the "truce that meant death for the victims of vengeance."⁽¹⁶⁾ Even on the one occasion when the assassination campaign itself, rather than simply its latest victim, surfaced as a news issue in its own right, the Daily Mirror was reluctant to see it as anything other than an irrational cycle of violence and counter-violence. Reporting on the establishment of a special police squad to investigate the killings, the paper, under the headline "Find the Killers", offered its readers the following assessment of the campaign and the factors that lay behind it:

A corps of 100 top policemen has been formed to track down the mindless murderers of Belfast ... the corps will hunt the killers who have dealt out a largely ignominious death to nearly fifty men in less than two months. The policemen's quarry are the assassins who strike without warning and without motive to wipe out imaginary enemies on the other side of Ulster's religious divide. Police know that pointless sectarian scores have been settled at the end of a gun in the ditches and alleyways in and around Belfast. They also know that in most cases the victims have been ruthlessly chosen targets of opportunity killed simply because of their religion.⁽¹⁷⁾

What was also largely absent from the reporting was any attempt to place individual killings within a broader context in order to assess which, if any, of the two communities was suffering most from the campaign. Indeed, in their presentation of stories, the papers were generally reluctant to make capital out of whether the victims were Catholic or Protestant - and, as we have seen, on some occasions the religion of the victim was omitted altogether. Instead, the tendency on the part of all four papers was to ignore the broader pattern to the killings and to simply report assassinations as discrete acts of violence, the only connection between them being that they were all equally "senseless", "pointless" and "motiveless". The two exceptions

to this general rule were a report in the Daily Mirror which provided a religious breakdown of the killings in the first 13 days of the IRA's ceasefire⁽¹⁸⁾ and a report in the Sun which noted that 5 Catholics and 5 Protestants had been killed since the IRA called its truce.⁽¹⁹⁾

To describe an incident of violence in Northern Ireland as "motiveless" or "pointless" can only be true in a very specific and limited sense. Admittedly, many of the victims were selected at random, and there was little evidence that crime had been the motive or that the victims had known their assailants. Nevertheless, for those journalists prepared to dig a bit deeper, evidence that the killings may have been part of a co-ordinated and calculated campaign directed primarily (though not exclusively) against the nationalist community was available. On the 10th July, for example, in a report carried only by the Sun, it was noted that "At least three Protestant execution squads are said to be equipped with a death list containing the names and photographs of 400 IRA men". How these squads operated, or where they got the list and photographs from, however, was not stated nor was the story developed any further. Also, while during the period examined here the number of Protestant victims claimed by the campaign almost equalled the number of Catholics, the overall pattern to the killings was quite different.⁽²⁰⁾ On the 30th July, the Catholic Ex-Servicemen's Association (CESA) issued a statement on the assassination campaign. Condemning a comment made by William Craig, leader of the Vanguard Party, that "Catholics are not distinguishable from the IRA", the Association stated that it was to seek an urgent meeting with William Whitelaw in order to draw his attention to the continued killing of Catholics by Protestant extremists. The statement, which was reported in full by the Irish News, but was ignored altogether by the popular press, went on to provide a breakdown of the killings since the imposition of Direct Rule in March, 1972. According to the statistics compiled by the Association since March, 1972,

42 Catholics had been killed by Protestants, 7 Protestants had been murdered by Protestants, and 13 Protestants had been murdered by Catholics.⁽²¹⁾ In that these figures presented a quite different perspective on the assassination campaign and its impact on the respective communities, that they were ignored by the popular press is not, perhaps, without its significance.

Anonymous and faceless violence

The reluctance on the part of popular journalists to explore the reasons behind civilian killings was equalled only by their reluctance to identify who was responsible for them. Indeed, insofar as the paramilitary groups featured at all in popular press reports, it was as anonymous and faceless "assassins",⁽²²⁾ "execution squads",⁽²³⁾ "gunmen",⁽²⁴⁾ and "terrorists"⁽²⁵⁾ - and on one occasion "teenage terrorists".⁽²⁶⁾ Generally speaking, the tendency on the part of all four papers was to refrain from identifying which of the various paramilitary groups were behind a given killing and instead left their readers to draw their own conclusions as to who may have been responsible on the basis of the identified religion of the victim alone. Indeed, over the five week period examined here, the popular press attributed responsibility for a killing on only two occasions.

As for the views of the paramilitary groups themselves, these were ignored altogether. No attempt was made to investigate what the various groups hoped to achieve by the assassination campaign, or where this campaign fitted in to their strategies. Indeed, on the two occasions when a spokesman for the paramilitary groups was quoted, it was simply to claim responsibility for an incident.

Following the official line

One possible explanation as to why popular journalists generally

refrained from investigating the reasons behind the killings, or who was largely responsible for them, and a further element of continuity in the coverage, was that they were heavily reliant upon the army and the police not only to provide accounts of incidents and to identify the victims, but also to attribute violence and supply the likely motives behind it. Over the period studied the tendency on the part of popular journalists was to accept the interpretations provided by such sources without question. Indeed, the analysis revealed no cases in which an assassination having been described as "motiveless" or "pointless" by the army or the police was challenged by a journalist working for the popular press. Thus, generally speaking, when an assassination was described as "motiveless" the likelihood was that this was the interpretation supplied by the army or the police rather than a conclusion based on the journalist's own investigations. The problem with this source dependency, as we shall see in the following chapter, is that it not only restricts the range of interpretations and perspectives available to the reader, but it also increases the likelihood of mistakes.

Indeed, over the period of the study, the popular press rarely, if ever, sought out alternative sources of information in its reporting of inter-communal violence. As we have seen, none of the papers sought out the views of the paramilitaries, or quoted the statistics quoted by CESA. When the popular press did canvass the views of those other than the army or the police, it was usually to provide a personal statement about the victim or to reinforce the particular line being adopted by the paper. Indeed, as Table 2 shows, the use of all external information sources, official as well as "unofficial",

was limited - and this reflected the high proportion of round-up reports carried by the papers.

Table 2

Sources quoted: the popular press				
Source	Daily Express	Daily Mail	Daily Mirror	Sun
Army	3	1	1	0
Police	2	4	5	4
Government	1	0	0	0
Relatives	2	3	2	1
Eye-witness	0	0	2	1
IRA	0	0	1	0
UDA	0	0	1	0
Total	8	8	12	6

Editorials

Primary news stories provide the basis for most editorials; indeed the decision to produce an editorial at all is an indication of the significance attached to such stories by a newspaper. It was hardly surprising to find then, given the low priority accorded to civilian killings as a news issue, that the assassination campaign rarely, if ever, surfaced as a subject in the editorial pages. Despite its cost in human terms, all four papers were either silent or extremely perfunctory when it came to the issue of assassinations. None of the four papers carried an editorial devoted exclusively to the issue; indeed, the Daily Express, the Daily Mirror and the Sun made no specific reference

to the killings during the entire five week period.

The Daily Mail did carry one editorial ("The Barricades Must Come Down", 4:7:72) which, though largely devoted to the IRA's ceasefire, did touch on the assassination campaign. According to the paper, the continued killing of civilians was simply one more indication that, despite the ceasefire, the rule of law in the North was still on the retreat. The continued activity of the "execution squads", the brutal treatment meted out by the kangaroo courts, and the fact that the "innocent are murdered and roughed up with the gangsters", the paper argued, are simply what happens when "justice goes masked and not wiggled". The Daily Mail's real fear, however, was that power in the North was on the point of passing from the authorities to the "politicians of the streets". If that happens, it went on to argue, the people of Northern Ireland could "succumb to a bout of communal bloodletting" that even the presence of the British Army would not be able to prevent.

Assassinations and the quality press

As Table 3 shows, in terms of the frequency at which they appeared as news, civilian assassinations attracted substantially more attention in the quality than in the popular press, a point clearly illustrated by the fact that the Guardian and the Times alone carried more reports than the four popular papers taken together.

Table 3

Coverage devoted to assassinations: the quality press			
News format	Daily Telegraph	Guardian	Times
Primary news	4	3	4
Round-up reports	12	14	16
Follow-up reports	1	1	1
Editorials	0	0	0
Total reports	17	18	21

Going beyond the general picture provided by the story counts, the greater attention given to political assassinations by the quality press was also reflected in the number of killings reported. Ignoring for the moment the news format in which they appeared and the amount of coverage they attracted, the Guardian reported 36 assassinations during the five week period of the study, the Times 30 and the Daily Telegraph 26. This compared with 21 killings reported by the Sun, 14 by the Daily Express, 15 by the Daily Mail and 11 by the Daily Mirror.

Where the two groups of newspapers also differed, though this was by no means consistent, was in their presentation of stories. While, as we have seen, the popular press tended to focus on the "human interest" aspects of incidents in its reporting of violence, such news values were generally accorded less emphasis by the quality press. Generally speaking, the tendency on the part of the quality papers was to report violence in a more uniform style which concentrated on the who, what, where and when of the incidents reported and which placed less emphasis on "human interest". For example, the two incidents that were accorded the most prominent coverage by the four popular papers, the assassination of the Orr brothers and David McClenaghan, attracted only passing attention in the Guardian and the Times, which reported both incidents as part of a round-up report. Indeed, the Guardian failed to report the killing of David McClenaghan until the 15th July, two days after the incident was reported by the rest of the papers, and even then only as a sub-story to the assassination of a Roman Catholic member of the Ulster Defence Regiment.⁽²⁷⁾ Only in the Guardian was it noted that those responsible for the attack on McClenaghan had been wearing the uniforms of the UDA. Furthermore, only in the Daily Telegraph, which, in terms of the emphasis it gave to the "human angle" in its reporting of violence, was closer to the popular press, were the two incidents evident in the headlines - though in the

McClenaghan case only as a sub-heading to a report on a new truce offer by the IRA.⁽²⁹⁾ However, in that both these styles of reporting are descriptive rather than explanatory in nature, the difference between the quality and the popular press in this respect was largely superficial.

Low profile violence

One significant point of convergence between the two groups of papers was to be found in the general lack of significance attached to civilian killings as news. The quality papers may have been more consistent in their reporting of the killings than their popular counterparts, but if anything, they accorded them an even lower profile as a news issue. As Table 3 shows, despite carrying almost twice the number of reports as the popular press, civilian killings surfaced in the headlines of the quality press on only 11 occasions as compared to 15 in the popular press. Moreover, as can also be seen from Table 3, the tendency noted in the popular press to report an incident once and then drop it without further development or elaboration was, in view of the higher number of killings reported, even more pronounced in the quality papers. Furthermore, on the one occasion each when the Guardian and the Times did follow up a previously reported killing (in both cases it being the funeral of the victim) it was as part of a round-up report rather than as a news story in its own right.

Thus, despite carrying almost twice the number of news items, the tendency to report civilian assassinations as discrete acts of violence was even more pronounced in the quality press. Indeed, despite the fact that civilian assassinations were running at an average of more than one a day, a surface reading of the immediate news points used by the quality press in its reporting of Northern Ireland would lead to the conclusion that relatively few victims were being claimed by the

assassination campaign during the period of the study.

Another unexplained shooting ...

The reluctance of the quality press to attach any great significance to civilian killings during the sampled period, was equalled only by their reluctance to provide any context or explanation for them. Insofar as the killings surfaced at all in the pages of the quality press, it was as a string of decontextualised, unexplained and thus largely inexplicable episodes of violence. Indeed, on occasion, like their popular counterparts, journalists on the quality press professed themselves perplexed as to what might be behind the upsurge in civilian killings. The Daily Telegraph, for example, concluding its report on the assassination of the Orr brothers, could provide its readers with no plausible explanation for the killings and simply reported them as a "mysterious bout of assassinations" which the police could establish no motive for. (30)

On other occasions when the reasons as to why a particular individual had found themselves subjected to violence were not immediately apparent, the papers simply ignored the background to the violence and reported the incident as unexplained or motiveless. Thus, reporting on one incident during the first week of the sampled period, Robert Fisk of the Times was to write: "There was another unexplained shooting in Belfast tonight when a youth aged 18 was shot ... from a passing car". (31) Reporting on another attempted assassination several days later, the same journalist was to inform his readers that "once again there was apparently no motive for the shooting". (32) On both occasions, the question of who or what might have been behind the incidents was further obscured by the paper's failure to identify the religion of the victims - a detail which may have afforded the reader some clue, albeit an unreliable one, as to who may have been responsible

for the violence.

Generally speaking, however, the quality press dealt with the background and the possible motives behind the incidents of violence it reported largely by ignoring them. In the majority of cases when the motive for a particular killing was not immediately apparent, or, as was more likely to be the case, when the army or the police were unable or unwilling to provide one, the papers simply reported the available details of the incident and left its background and significance to take care of themselves. Indeed, during the period of the study, the Daily Telegraph failed to attribute a motive of any description for 24 of the 26 assassinations it reported, the Guardian for 32 of the 36 and the Times for 29 of the 30.

In stripping the incidents reported of all but the bare essentials of age, sex and religion of the victim, and the manner in which they met their death, the dominant message promoted by this style of reporting was, if anything, simply senseless, inexplicable and, above all else, repetitive violence. Deprived of background and devoid of explanation, the killings were presented almost as an inventory of violence differentiated only by the personal characteristics and the number of victims claimed.

Moreover, even on those rare occasions when the three papers did go beyond the immediate details of the incidents they reported, the explanations they provided for the killings, if anything, served only to make the violence more rather than less inexplicable. According to the Times, on the one occasion when it did attempt to provide its readers with an explanation for the violence it reported, the upsurge in civilian assassinations was largely a result of the IRA's ceasefire. The truce, the paper argued, had simply provided both sides with the time and space to settle "old scores". As Robert Fisk, reporting on

a series of assassinations during the first weekend of the ceasefire, was to explain:

Whatever the motives for the five murders, it appears that efficient execution squads are operating within both communities. There have been several executions by the IRA in the past few months and some which may be attributed to Protestant extremists. It seems likely that during the next few weeks there will be more killings of this kind as old scores are settled and even innocent people are killed for revenge.⁽³³⁾

Insofar as the killings were not motivated by revenge, they were the product of another, and equally inexplicable asocial force - sectarianism. The Guardian spoke of the "sectarian terror" that had erupted in Belfast since the IRA's ceasefire"⁽³⁴⁾ and of the "wave of savage sectarian killings that had brought a new horror to the Ulster situation",⁽³⁵⁾ the Times of how the "apparently sectarian killings" have increased tension between the two communities,⁽³⁶⁾ and the Daily Telegraph of the "mounting sectarian assassination campaign by Ulster gunmen".⁽³⁷⁾ In that the repeated use of such labels as "unexplained", "motiveless" and "sectarian" served only to mystify and obscure, rather than to clarify, the social and political factors that might lie behind the killings, they fed off and, in the process, reinforced a view of the violence as being largely inexplicable.

The execution squads

The general reluctance on the part of the three papers to explore the background to the killings was equalled only by their caution in attributing responsibility for them. Generally speaking, the quality press dealt with the problem of identifying which of the various paramilitary groups was responsible for a particular killing largely by ignoring it. This was particularly true of the Daily Telegraph which, apart from noting that the police thought some of the killings may have resulted from a feud within the ranks of the IRA,⁽³⁸⁾ and one reference to the "Ulster gunmen", made no mention of the paramilitary groups,

nationalist or loyalist, throughout the entire period. Indeed, over the sampled period, a particular killing was attributed to an identified paramilitary group on only one occasion, and even then it was on the basis of a statement said to have been issued by the Official IRA. The statement, which was reported by the Guardian but repeated nowhere else, accused the Provisional IRA (which it described as "a bunch of trigger-happy gangsters") of being responsible for the killing of three men - the religion of whom the paper failed to identify.⁽³⁹⁾ Moreover, even on those rare occasions when the Guardian (twice) and the Times (once) did attribute responsibility for the violence they reported, the tendency was simply to lay the blame equally at the feet of both sides.

In the majority of cases, however, the three papers simply ignored the question of which of the various paramilitary groups may have been behind a particular killing and instead left their readers to draw their own conclusions as to who may have been responsible on the basis of the identified religion of the victims alone. In view of the fact that during the period studied it was not unusual for individuals to be killed by paramilitary groups operating within their own communities, this policy of delegating the decision to the reader was, to say the least, not without its problems.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Not least of these problems was that over the period studied, the Times failed to identify the victim's religion on 11 occasions, the Guardian on 6 and the Daily Telegraph on 4. Needless to say, in depriving the reader of this detail, the papers served only to render the violence even more incomprehensible.

The victims

What was also largely absent from the coverage accorded to civilian assassinations by the three papers was any attempt to place the incidents reported within a broader context in order to assess which of the two communities was suffering most from the campaign. Indeed, like

their popular counterparts, none of the three papers seemed inclined to make capital out of the fact that one community rather than the other was suffering. When the victim was identified with one of the two communities, this was generally done during the course of the story, not as a main news angle, a point illustrated by the fact that during the period studied, the religious identity of the victim featured in the headlines on only two occasions. On both, the victim was identified as being a Protestant, and on each the story appeared in the Daily Telegraph.

Any attempt to assess which of the two communities, if either, was suffering most from the campaign from a reading of the reports, was further impeded by the tendency on the part of the papers to restrict their assessment of the number of killings to a period commencing from the IRA's ceasefire. The fact that the campaign had commenced some three months prior to the ceasefire was, for all intents and purposes, ignored.⁽⁴¹⁾ In the majority of cases, individual killings were simply reported in isolation and the broader pattern to the violence, and its impact on the respective communities, ignored. Failing this, the victims were either added to the total number of casualties since 1969, or they were simply recorded as being the 10th, 11th, 12th ... Catholic or Protestant killed since the IRA's ceasefire. Thus, for example, concluding its report on the assassination of the Orr brothers, the Times informed its readers that "their deaths brings the total killed since 1969 to 405, 11 of whom have died since the Provisional IRA's ceasefire nine days ago".⁽⁴²⁾ Apart from calling into question the success of the ceasefire, such a policy provided the reader with little insight into the broader pattern to the killings. Indeed, by concentrating only on the period of the ceasefire when the number of Catholics killed roughly equalled the number of Protestants, such a policy served only to obscure the broader picture.

Setting the parameters

One of the major reasons behind the failure of the quality press to identify who or what may have been behind the violence it reported flowed from its reliance upon the army and the police for the information upon which its reports were largely based. Not only were the interpretations supplied by these sources accepted without question, but, as Table 4 shows, more often than not they were the only interpretations provided.

Table 4

Sources quoted: the quality press			
Source	Daily Telegraph	Guardian	Times
Army	0	0	1
Police	5	9	5
Government	1	0	1
Relatives	2	2	1
Eye-witness	0	0	2
Provisional IRA	1	1	1
Official IRA	0	0	1
UDA	0	1	1
Total	9	13	13

The net effect of this reliance upon official sources was that the police and, to a lesser extent, the army, functioned almost as the licensed interpreters of Irish political violence. Moreover, like their popular counterparts, even on those rare occasions when the papers

did canvass the view of those other than the army and the police, it was usually to provide a personal statement on the victim or to reinforce the interpretation supplied by the police.

Editorials

If the daily catalogue of violence against civilians was accorded little prominence as a news issue in the pages of the quality press, it was to attract even less attention in the editorial columns. Generally speaking, during the period of the study, it was the Provisional IRA and its campaign which provided the material for the majority of editorials produced on the subject of Northern Ireland. By focusing attention almost exclusively on the IRA, the leader writers forced the issue of the assassination campaign to the sidelines. As a consequence, the killings, horrific and tragic as they were, were largely, and in the case of the Times, completely ignored.

The Daily Telegraph carried one editorial ("Truce or Anarchy?", 4;7;72) which, though largely devoted to the IRA's ceasefire, did touch, albeit briefly, on the assassination campaign. While the paper welcomed the overall reduction in violence brought about by the ceasefire, it expressed concern over the "series of brutal murders" that the truce had brought in its wake. The paper blamed the low profile policies of the army (one of the conditions of the ceasefire had been that the IRA would be left to patrol nationalist no-go areas free from army interference) as being the major cause of the killings. According to the paper, the withdrawal of army surveillance had not only allowed the "IRA to flaunt its power more conspicuously than ever", it had also produced an ominous response from Protestant militants:

Behind their barricades, cruel private justice is now blatantly practised. There is some evidence that they [Protestant militants] have already started to put into effect their long advertised tactical plan for individual assassinations.

"To put it at its bluntest", the paper concluded, "old scores are being settled on both sides". The Guardian, in an editorial headlined "Patience: but can it last?" was also reluctant to attach too much significance to the killings. Laying the blame for the killings equally at the feet of both sides, the paper appeared to sum up the general attitude of the quality press towards the campaign when it concluded: "Little is gained ... by brooding over these hopeless blood feuds. Probably the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland are sick of them and revolted, like everyone else in the UK".

The Belfast Press

The purpose of this section is to compare the treatment accorded to civilian assassinations in the British press with two newspapers published in Belfast, namely the Irish News and the Newsletter.⁽⁴³⁾ My primary concern here is to establish the extent to which the Northern Irish press offered a different account of the killings to those that prevailed in the British press.

In many respects, the Irish News and the Newsletter are a mirror image of the divided society they serve. Both papers have a highly sectional appeal, each finding its readership almost exclusively in one of the North's two communities. Richard Rose, for example, in his 1971 study, Governing without Consensus, found that 87 per cent of the Newsletter's readership came from the Protestant community, while an even higher 92 per cent of those who read the Irish News were Catholic.⁽⁴⁴⁾ Given the clearly defined readership of both papers, it was not surprising to find that both papers functioned as barometers for the concerns, views and political opinions of their respective communities, and to some extent this was reflected in the way each paper handled the issue of civilian assassinations during the period studied.

Civilian assassinations and the Belfast press

If, as we have seen above, British newspapers attached relatively little significance to civilian assassinations as a news issue, the same cannot be said for their Northern Irish counterparts. In Northern Ireland's tight-knit communities, the assassination campaign was an issue of pressing social concern, and this was to be reflected in the prominence accorded to the killings in the pages of both the Irish News and the Newsletter.

A simple, but relatively effective, way of comparing the significance attached to a given event or issue by different newspapers is to compare where each newspaper located that event or issue as a news item. In the routine ordering of news priorities, the front page is generally reserved for what the particular newspapers regard as the most important stories of the day. Applying this general rule, it was found that a given assassination stood a far greater chance of appearing as a front page story in its own right in the Belfast press than it did in the British press. (Given the high proportion of round-up reports carried by the British press, any direct comparison between the two groups of newspapers would give a somewhat distorted picture. Although the British press carried a high proportion of assassination-related reports on the front page, only on a relatively few occasions did they provide the main news angle for a report.) A comparison between the two Belfast papers revealed that a given assassination stood a far greater chance of appearing on the front page in the Irish News than it did in the Newsletter. Of the 28 assassination-related reports carried by the Irish News only 5 failed to make the front page. In the Newsletter, the total was considerably higher with 28 of its 37 reports being relegated to the inside pages. One possible explanation for this was that in the weeks leading up to the sampled period, a

disproportionate number of Catholics had been claimed by the assassination campaign which made it a greater issue within the nationalist community.⁽⁴⁵⁾

A further indication of the greater significance attached to civilian assassinations in the Belfast press can be found in the frequency at which these killings surfaced as news, and the news formats in which they appeared. As Table 5 shows, the Irish News and the Newsletter not only carried on average more reports than their British counterparts, but they also gave them a higher news profile - neither paper making much use of round-up accounts in their reporting of incidents.

Table 5

Coverage devoted to assassinations: the Belfast press		
News format	Irish News*	Newsletter
Primary news	15	20
Round-up reports	2	1
Follow-up reports	12	16
Editorials	0	0
Total reports	29	37

*Three editions lost due to an industrial dispute.

As can also be seen from the above table, the tendency noted in the British press to report an incident once and then drop it (especially if it was reported in a round-up report) without further elaboration or development, was also less pronounced in the Belfast press. Generally

speaking, both papers tended to develop their stories more. If only limited details were immediately available about the victim's identity or the circumstances in which they met their death, this was usually stated in the report, and over the following days as more information became available, the story would be picked up again. The tendency for incidents to become running stories was, however, by no means consistent in either paper. As we shall see below, the likelihood of an assassination attracting subsequent coverage in both papers was determined largely, though not entirely, by the religion of the victim: violence against Catholics being more likely to attract subsequent and prominent coverage in the Irish News than violence against Protestants, with the reverse being the case in the Newsletter.

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However, while the Belfast paper^s carried more stories and gave them more prominence than their British counterparts, in terms of the way violence was routinely reported there was little difference between the two groups of papers. In the main, reports of violence in both papers were brief and routine in style: reporting the incident; a summary of the event; the age, sex, religion and area of residence of the victim, and the statements issued by the army and police. Generally speaking, the main difference between the two groups of papers in this respect was that the Belfast press usually, though not always, provided more detail about the victims, reported more condemnations, and provided more factual details about the incident rather than more analysis or explanation.

Going beyond the general picture provided by the story counts to examine in closer detail the treatment accorded to assassinations in the Belfast press, the analysis revealed evidence of sectionalism in both papers. In the main, during the period of the study, it was possible to abstract two broadly different accounts of the assassination campaign according to which of the two papers one chose to read. In effect, both

papers had developed different strategies for the reporting of violence directed against, or emanating from, the communities each served. However, having said this, it would be unwise to overstate the impact of sectionalism on the routine reporting of violence. If anything, sectionalism provided the backcloth against which each paper reported inter-communal violence; occasionally it would explicitly influence the way incidents of violence were reported; more often than not, however, it was evident only in a reading of the accumulated detail of the reports. Moreover, insofar as sectionalism was evident, it was during the course of the reports rather than as the main news angle.

Where sectionalism was usually most apparent was in the attention given to Protestant victims in the Newsletter, and the lack of attention they received in the Irish News. Given the clearly defined readership of each paper, however, this was perhaps hardly surprising.

The assassination of a Roman Catholic member of the Ulster Defence Regiment in the first half of the sampled period, provided a clear example of how sectionalism influenced the treatment accorded to violence by both papers.

On Thursday, 13th July, British troops discovered the body of Henry Joseph Russell deep inside Protestant East Belfast - a factor which suggested that loyalists rather than nationalists had been responsible for the killing.⁽⁴⁶⁾ Following the discovery of the body, little information had been made available by the police as to the victim's identity or the circumstances surrounding his death. As a consequence, the incident was to attract only passing attention in both papers. The Newsletter reported that the victim's name was being withheld by the police, the Irish News that the police had still to identify the body. Over the following days, as the police released more information, and it became clear that the victim was a member of

of the UDR, the story was picked up again by both papers.

The Newsletter which, of the two papers, tended to make most out of violence directed against the "security forces", devoted a lengthy report to the killing - which suggested that the victim's religion was less significant than his membership of the UDR. Headlined "UDR man was burned, stabbed and shot", the report opened by recounting how Russell had recently bought himself out of the RAF and returned to Belfast to look after his parents, who had been forced to move house following threats of violence - though it failed to mention that the threats had been made by loyalists. Missing the regimental lifestyle, the report went on, Russell had decided to join the UDR, a decision in the paper's view that had "probably cost him his life, and earned him a grim, gruesome and tortuous death". The paper described how the victim had been brutally tortured and quoted a police spokesman as saying how it was a "brutal, ghastly murder. No other words could describe it". The story noted that the police, basing their analysis on the fact that the "terrorists" may have sought information relating to the UDR, were working on the theory that the assassination bore all the "hallmarks of an IRA job". If this was the case, the paper went on, quoting Russell's unit commander, the murderers had been involved in a "fruitless extortion exercise"; as a new recruit, the victim knew little about the regiment or its members. Noting that Russell had been earmarked for possible promotion, the report concluded that statistically the victim was the "16th member of Ulster's part-time army to die in the terrorist campaign".⁽⁴⁷⁾ Several days later, under the headline "Tortured UDR man buried at Carrick", the paper took the opportunity provided by the victim's funeral to repeat much of its previous story - thereby ensuring that the killing was kept alive as an issue in the Protestant community.

The Irish News, on the other hand, was to be more guarded in its treatment of the Russell killing - there being little political advantage to be gained from over-publicising an attack on the UDR, even though the victim was a Catholic. While the Newsletter had treated the incident as a news story in its own right, the Irish News reported the killing as a sub-story to a report devoted to a gun battle that had taken place the previous day. Headlined "Guns keep firing: 5 more die", the paper ignored the background to Russell's membership of the UDR, reporting only that he had been stripped before being shot. The paper was also to be more selective in the use it made of the statements issued by the police, dropping those parts which attributed the killing to the IRA and quoting the police as being unsure as to the exact circumstances surrounding the killing. Similarly, while the Newsletter was to devote a lengthy report to Russell's funeral, the Irish News carried a brief statement on the victim in a report devoted to the funerals of two Catholics.⁽⁴⁸⁾

A further element of sectionalism in the reporting of the assassination campaign, and one closely related to the above, was to be found in the reluctance of both papers to attribute violence to paramilitary groups identified with their own self-designated community. On the six occasions when the Irish News did attribute violence (four of these being by way of statements issued by representatives of the nationalist community), it was to loyalist groups. A similar pattern was also to be found in the Newsletter which carried three reports attributing violence to the IRA, three attributing violence to the "terrorists" (a label which, in the context of its reports, usually implied the IRA), and one (by way of a statement issued by a nationalist paramilitary group) to loyalists. In the main, however, when no group had claimed responsibility, and when the police were reluctant to identify the likely perpetrators, in both cases this being on the

majority of occasions, the papers simply reported the details of the incident and left their readers to draw their own conclusions.

As Table 6 shows, journalists on the Belfast press, like those on the British press, were almost exclusively dependent upon the information services operated by the police for their accounts of day-to-day incidents of violence.

Table 6

Sources quoted: the Belfast press		
Source	Irish News	Newsletter
Army	0	1
Police	12	16
UDR	0	1
UDA*	1	2
UVF*	0	1
Nationalist politicians	1	0
Nationalist organisations	3	2
Unionist organisations	1	1
Alliance Party	1	0
Church leaders/ Catholic	1	0
Relatives/friends	7	4
Eye-witnesses	3	0
Total	30	28

*Ulster Defence Association

*Ulster Volunteer Force

However, while both papers may have been dependent upon official sources to cue them into incidents of violence and to identify the victims, the use they made of the additional information supplied by such sources did vary. The Newsletter, both in the attention it gave

to police statements and its apparent willingness to accept the interpretations they provided at face value, showed itself to have much in common with the British press. The Irish News, on the other hand, tended to be more cautious and selective in its approach to the statements provided by the police, ignoring those which attributed violence to nationalists or which challenged its own interpretation of a given incident.

As can also be seen from Table 6, both papers made relatively little use of alternative sources of information and interpretation in their day-to-day reporting of violence. When alternative sources were used, they were usually, though not always, drawn from within the community served by the paper. Sectionalism in the choice of commentators to condemn acts of violence or to assess their significance, was largely to be expected here. Given the clear social and political divisions that exist in the North, there are few sources of information capable of speaking on behalf of both communities. As a consequence, both papers have come to rely largely upon representatives of one of the two communities to interpret the significance of events for that community.

During the period studied, both papers, though this was by no means consistent, adopted one of three approaches to condemnations of violence emanating from representatives of the opposite community. First, they ignored them. The Newsletter, for example, ignored the statement issued by CESA which provided statistics indicating that a disproportionate number of Catholics had been claimed by the assassination campaign since the imposition of Direct Rule.⁽⁴⁹⁾ Secondly, they reported them, but dropped those parts explicitly directed against the community identified with the paper. And finally, they reported them without comment. For example, following a

statement made by Gerry Fitt, in which he accused the UDA of using its barricades to lure unsuspecting Catholics to their death,⁽⁵⁰⁾ the Irish News reported the UDA's reaction to the accusation without comment.⁽⁵¹⁾

Apart from those similarities and differences identified above, and marginal differences in emphasis and presentation, in their routine reporting of the assassination campaign, the Irish News and the Newsletter shared much in common with the British press. Their reports reflected the same journalistic style of simplicity and human interest; the same preoccupation with events rather than the issues behind them, and the same dependency upon official sources for information and interpretation. Of the two Belfast papers, the Newsletter, both in terms of its tendency to restrict its assessment of the campaign to the period during and after the IRA's ceasefire, and its tendency to describe assassinations as "mysterious" and "motiveless" killings, showed itself to be closer to the British press.⁽⁵²⁾

Conclusion

During the period covered by this study, innocent civilians were being assassinated in Northern Ireland in unprecedented numbers. Yet so infrequently did these killings capture the headlines that a reader relying solely on the British press could have been forgiven for being largely unaware of them. Insofar as the majority of these killings were reported at all by the British press, it was as a series of discrete episodes of violence devoid of context and explanation and tagged on to the end of reports devoted to other matters. Even on those rare occasions when civilian assassinations were considered to be of sufficient news value to merit treatment as a news story in their own right, little attempt was made to go beyond the immediate horror and tragic consequences of the violence in order to place the incident reported within a broader and more meaningful context. What was

largely absent from these reports was any attempt to explore, on the reader's behalf, the issues behind the events, not least among these issues being: why there had been an upsurge in the number of civilian assassinations; who was largely responsible for them; which of the two communities was suffering most from the campaign, and why; or where the killing of civilians fitted into the strategy of the various paramilitary groups. In other words, the newspapers included in the sample deprived their readers of the information and interpretation required if they were to arrive at an informed understanding of the assassination campaign and the social and political factors which underpinned it.

Notes

- (1) Kirkaldy, J. "Northern Ireland and Fleet Street: Misreporting a continuing tragedy", Alexander, Y. (ed.) Terrorism in Ireland, Croom Helm, London, 1983.
- (2) The Irish Times, 3rd September, 1982.
- (3) See for example: Curtis, L., Ireland: The Propaganda War, Pluto Press, London, 1984, Chaps. 5-6: "The Army, the Press and the Bombing of McGurk's Bar", The British Media and Northern Ireland: Truth the First Casualty, Campaign for Free Speech on Ireland, Information on Ireland, London, 1979.
- (4) For a detailed study of the assassination campaign during the period of the analysis see: Dillon, M. and Lehane, D., Political Murder in Northern Ireland, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1973.
- (5) The Irish Times, 4th November, 1983.
- (6) Dillon, M. & Lehane, D. Op. cit. 1973.
- (7) Ibid.
- (8) See for example: Winchester, S., In Holy Terror, Faber & Faber, London, 1974, p 94.
- (9) Daily Express, 3rd July, 1972.
- (10) Daily Mail, 3rd July, 1972.
- (11) The Sun, 6th July, 1972.
- (12) Ibid.
- (13) Ibid.
- (14) Daily Mail, 3rd July, 1972.

- (15) Daily Express, 6th July, 1972.
- (16) Daily Mirror, 11th July, 1972.
- (17) Daily Mirror, 2nd August, 1972.
- (18) Daily Mirror, 11th July, 1972.
- (19) The Sun, 6th July, 1972.
- (20) Dillon, M. & Lehane, D. Op. cit. 1973.
- (21) "CESA on Murder of Catholics",
Irish News, 31st July, 1972.
- (22) Daily Mirror, 2nd August, 1972.
- (23) The Sun, 6th, 10th and 13th July, 1972.
- (24) Daily Mirror, 11th, 12th July, 1972;
The Sun, 14th, 20th July, 1972;
Daily Express, 13th, 20th July, 1972.
- (25) The Sun, 20th, 21st, 28th July, 1972;
Daily Mirror, 14th July, 1972;
Daily Express, 20th July, 1972.
- (26) Daily Express, 20th July, 1972.
- (27) "UDR man tortured before being shot",
Guardian, 17th July, 1972.
- (28) The Times, 13th July, 1972.
- (29) Daily Telegraph, 13th July, 1972.
- (30) Daily Telegraph, 6th July, 1972.
- (31) The Times, 5th July, 1972.
- (32) The Times, 7th July, 1972.
- (33) The Times, 3rd July, 1972.
- (34) Guardian, 4th July, 1972.

- (35) Guardian, 15th July, 1972.
- (36) The Times, 6th July, 1972.
- (37) Daily Telegraph, 6th July, 1972.
- (38) Daily Telegraph, 29th July, 1972.
- (39) Guardian, 3rd July, 1972.
- (40) Dillon, M. & Lehane, D. Op. cit. 1973.
- (41) Ibid., Chap. 4.
- (42) The Times, 6th July, 1972.
- (43) For a brief account of the background to the Irish News and the Newsletter see: "Media Misreport Northern Ireland", Belfast Bulletin, No. 6, Belfast Workers' Research Unit, Belfast, 1979, pp 33-34.
- (44) Rose, R. Governing without Consensus, Faber, London, 1971.
- (45) Dillon, M. & Lehane, D. Op. Cit., 1973, Chap. 4.
- (46) Ibid., Chap. 6, pp 96-99.
- (47) Newsletter, 15th July, 1972.
- (48) "Martin Meehan at Louis Scullion funeral", The Irish News, 18th July, 1972.
- (49) "CESA on murders of Catholics", Irish News, 31st July, 1972.
- (50) "Fitt moves as another Catholic is found shot. Assassination protest to Mr. Whitelaw", Irish News, 28th July, 1972.
- (51) "UDA statement in reply to criticism by Fitt", Irish News, 29th July, 1972.

(52)

"Find the killers order by Whitelaw",
Newsletter, 27th July, 1972: "Shadowy
killers shoot two more", Newsletter,
31st July, 1972.

CHAPTER 6

The Military, the Police and the Press

Censorship of the news from the province became an issue in the early years of this decade, as soon as the British Army went in. The army and its political masters worked out a modus vivendi with the news media, partly by teaching army officers how to deal with the press, an activity sold to us as "public relations" but known to them as "psychological warfare" and partly by putting pressure on the broadcasting authorities to be careful, a process which they described as "exercising firmer editorial control" but which to others smells of "censorship".(1)

Over the twenty-one year period from 1945 to 1967, the British Army was to be the most active military force in the world. During this period, British forces experienced almost constant active service as Britain's policy of colonial withdrawal was enacted. Every year from 1945 onwards was to find British soldiers in action in one part of the globe or another as the army participated in as many as 50 "limited" conflicts and counter-insurgency campaigns. Indeed, an indication of just how active the army was during this period is that 1968 was to be the first year since the end of the war when no British soldier was either killed or wounded in battle. If one ignores a substantial number of less publicised operations, over the period 1945 to 1967, the British Army was involved in no less than seven major, and at times overlapping, campaigns: Palestine (1945-48), Malaya (1948-60), Korea (1950-53), Kenya (1952-56), Cyprus (1954-58), Suez (1956) and Aden (1957-67). The military experience gained in these operations combined to make the British Army the most professional and the most respected military force in the world.(2)

On the 14th August, 1969, two years after its withdrawal from Aden, the British Army entered the heart of Londonderry to start what was to prove, despite all expectations to the contrary, the longest military

campaign in its history. Little of the previous experience gained in earlier colonial campaigns was to fully prepare the army for the operational conditions it was to face in the Six Counties. This was hardly surprising. With few exceptions, the post-1945 experience of the army had been gained in relatively obscure parts of the globe against a predominantly black, non-English speaking population and, with the possible exception of Suez and Korea, in campaigns which had rarely caught the imagination of either the British public or the British media. With the absence of any real public interest at home, the army had been able to carry out its operations with a high degree of autonomy, and without the need to actively court public opinion or public support. One consequence of this insularity was that, while the army developed its military skills, it devoted little in terms of time and resources to the subject of public relations. As Alan Hooper, in his study of The Military and the Media, observed:

The media's frequent failure to provide adequate coverage of foreign affairs had a direct impact on the military. Because we were involved in operations abroad, often in remote places, military commanders were able to conduct their campaigns outside the glare of publicity. Visits from journalists were rare and therefore aroused interest among the military, but it was a curious interest in why their activities were considered to be worth reporting. There was little thought given by commanders to the effect on public opinion when making military decisions, and besides, most servicemen carried out their duties on active service assured of public support at home. Or so they thought. (3)

Operations in the Six Counties, from the very start, were to demand a radical change of attitude on the part of the army to the importance of the mass media and their potential role in shaping and securing public support. For the British Army, the conflict in the Six Counties was to prove a new experience in many ways. Not only was the population white and English speaking but moreover, and in the long term more importantly, the theatre of operations was the United Kingdom. As was

noted in previous chapters, this latter fact was to make events in the Six Counties the biggest news story in Britain for many years. The British media, which had previously shown little enthusiasm for the army's colonial campaigns, now had a potential civil war on its own doorstep. And the proximity of the conflict to one of the world's most important media centres assured a constant stream of national and international journalists.⁽⁴⁾ The British Army, which had become accustomed to carrying out its operations with little scrutiny from the media, now found its every move making front page news around the world.

Consequently, on entering Northern Ireland in the summer of 1969, the army was to find itself in a uniquely demanding situation: not only did its every move attract intense media interest but, moreover, unlike many of its previous campaigns, it now had to justify its activities and presence in the Six Counties to a British and international audience. Both these factors meant that the army could no longer afford to ignore the importance of the mass media. This chapter examines how the army and the police have responded to these demands and assesses the consequences of this response for the British media's coverage of Northern Ireland since 1969.

One of the aims of this chapter will be to trace how the information strategy of the army and the police has changed since 1969. I will argue below that since 1969, the role and strategy of the information services operated by the army and the police have evolved through three quite distinct phases, and that these phases correspond to, and indeed reflect, the changing social, political and military goals of the British state. A further aim of this chapter will be to examine how, following an initial period of consolidation during 1969 and 1970, the British Army has developed a highly sophisticated strategy of news-management which is likely to have significant consequences for the ability of the British media to report conflicts involving the army in

the future.

Since 1969, the army and the police have been both major participants in the Irish conflict and, at the same time, major sources of information about that conflict; a further aim of this chapter will be to examine how this potential conflict of interests has been reconciled and to assess the consequences of this for our understanding of events in the Six Counties.

1969-1970 Image building and consolidation:
the beginning of an information strategy

Prior to the outbreak of open communal violence during the closing months of 1968, the British Army had maintained only a small presence in Northern Ireland, and this reflected a growing feeling in Britain that the "Irish problem" had finally been resolved. The failure of the IRA's 1956-62 border campaign, and the organisation's subsequent decision to sell off its arms to the Free Wales Army, signalled for many the final chapter in the Irish story.⁽⁵⁾ The New York Times, commenting on the IRA's decision to call off its border campaign in 1962, summed up the feeling of many when it said:

The original IRA and Sinn Fein came in like lions ... and now they go out like lambs ... the Irish Republican Army belongs to history, and it belongs to better men in times that are gone. So does Sinn Fein. Let us put a wreath of red roses on their grave and move on.⁽⁶⁾

At the beginning of 1969, army headquarters based at Lisburn was a normal district headquarters, and as such it had a press office. In early 1969 this consisted of one civil service grade Senior Information Officer and one Assistant Information Officer.⁽⁷⁾ In this respect, headquarters Northern Ireland was no different from, say, headquarters Scotland or headquarters South East. Before Northern Ireland became a major news story in 1969, the main activity of the press office had been

routine public relations: promoting the interests of local regiments; arranging visits from local journalists and generally promoting the image of the army. Generally speaking, public relations was accorded a relatively low priority and, in comparison to to-day, it was a facet of the army's operations that attracted little in terms of resources and personnel.

A similar lack of concern for public relations also prevailed in the Royal Ulster Constabulary during the early 1960s. As late as October, 1968, as tension between the two communities developed into open conflict, the RUC had no press office in operation. This lack of concern for public relations was in itself hardly surprising: the force enjoyed the undivided support of the majority community, and there was little impetus for improving its image within the hostile Catholic ghettos. Moreover, the lack of interest in Northern Irish affairs in England meant that the force had no need to consider the possible effect of its image on public opinion outside of the Six Counties. The outbreak of open violence during the summer of 1969, and the media attention that this attracted to events in the Six Counties, came as something of a shock to the force. As one RUC press officer put it:

Believe it or not, when this trouble first erupted in Northern Ireland the RUC had no guns, it had no information at all ... with the result that when the world fell in, so to speak, and the news media of the world descended on them ... the RUC simply didn't have the structure or the means of explaining its position, and the result was that the RUC received a very very severe juggling from local, national and international opinion. And it took long years to retrieve the situation. (8)

It was not until late 1969, after the image of the force had already been severely tarnished in the eyes of many following its attack on a civil rights march in October, 1968, in full view of television cameras, that the force became sensitive to the importance of public opinion and set up a press office. (9)

The British Army did, however, have its own public relations office in being when it was called out on to the streets of Derry and Belfast in 1969. This was composed of a mixture of professional (ex-journalist) civilian public relations staff, and officers temporarily seconded from other units.⁽¹⁰⁾ Events over the coming months were to prove these existing information services, such as they were, inadequate.

Thus, at the outbreak of open communal violence in 1969, the army and police lacked both the organisational framework and the resources necessary to cope with the demands placed upon them by the world's media. The army which, on entering the Six Counties, assumed responsibility for policing (due to the fact that the indigenous forces were widely seen as being less than impartial), was quick to realise that in the coming months how it performed in front of the world's media would be as important as its performance on the streets of Derry and Belfast. According to Hooper:

Senior officers realised very quickly that there was a pressing need to educate officers (and through them NCOs and soldiers) about the media. The importance of public opinion was acknowledged, the requirement to provide good facilities through a sophisticated public relations organisation was clearly identified, and the value of television interviews was quickly realised.⁽¹¹⁾

The army, on finding its existing information facilities ill-equipped to deal with the demands of the media, immediately set about a reorganisation of its public relations office. Within days of entering the Six Counties, the army established a network of press offices at headquarters and unit level, and started to educate officers and soldiers on the importance of good relations with journalists.

During the weeks and months that were to follow, the army set in train a skilful public relations operation. This operation had two

related aims: to capture the "hearts and minds" of the nationalist community in order to allay their traditional fears and suspicions, and secondly, to legitimate its presence in the Six Counties to the British and international public. The campaign was approached on two levels. At one level it sought to placate the traditional fears of the nationalist community by presenting itself as an impartial "peacekeeping force". To this end, it initiated a series of social projects designed to win over their confidence. From November, 1969, these projects were to include the setting up of non-sectarian youth clubs in Belfast - dances, hiking trips and sporting facilities for young people - and a meals-on-wheels service for the elderly in Derry. (12)

The ability of the army to secure the second objective of its public relations strategy (public support at home and abroad) rested on its ability to convince journalists, and through them the British public, that their presence in the Six Counties was necessary if further bloodshed was to be avoided, and furthermore, was welcomed by the nationalist minority. To this end, the army adopted a policy of openness with the press, making every facility available to them, providing them with information, and allowing them to go out on patrols and operations and encouraging individual soldiers to explain their work to journalists. (13)

If it was a sympathetic press the army were after, then during the early weeks of their involvement, they had little cause for concern. From the very start it was clear that the majority of British journalists felt an immediate sense of identification with the army, and not surprisingly this found its way into their reports. Commenting on the entry of troops into Derry, John Chartres of The Times captured the feelings of many journalists when he reported, under the headline "Bogside accepts Army":

Whatever happens now, and whatever the political implications turn out to be, one thing is certain - the "dreaded" British army is no longer dreaded by anyone here except the utterly bigoted. If more troops are "going in" elsewhere in Northern Ireland, a vast proportion of its 1,500,000 people will probably say as most of us did at 5.15 pm yesterday in Waterloo Square here: "It's great to see you" ... It is only after 24 hours that one can appreciate the impact that the arrival of 350 cheerful (but highly professional) Yorkshiremen with soft brogues from the Dales and Moors, a fund of good stories from the Leeds and Huddersfield public houses, but with a skill at arms stretching back through Aden, Cyprus, Malaya and the Greek insurrection, made on a town that really was beginning to twitch with fear. (14)

Another report carried in the same edition also stressed the welcome accorded to British troops in nationalist areas of Derry. Under the headline "Yorkshire calm soothes Derry", the paper reported how: "Yesterday shopping housewives stopped to pass the time of day with patrols in the streets ... It was 'Tommy this, and Tommy that' to an extent to which Kipling never dreamed of". (15)

The Times was not alone in its attempt to present the army as a force welcomed by the Catholic minority. Trevor Hanna, writing in the Daily Mirror, described how: "The people welcomed the British Tommies almost as if they were an army of liberation. To them anything was better than the hated Ulster police"; (16) while the Daily Mail described how at the first sight of British troops "housewives who had been making petrol bombs rushed to the front door to cheer". (17)

The Daily Telegraph also left its readers in no doubt that the presence of British troops was welcomed by the vast majority of Derry's nationalist population. In a report headlined "Cheers as the troops move in", the paper reported how: "The people behind the barricades of Bogside, the Roman Catholic area of Londonderry, were cheering and singing late last night after the arrival of 300 British troops". (18)

The willingness of many British journalists to present the army as

a positive force in maintaining peace and reducing communal tension in the riot-torn cities of Belfast and Derry, together with the initial welcome afforded to the army by the nationalist minority, allowed the army to adopt a relatively passive approach to its dealings with the media. This was to prove shortlived.

1970-1971. From cheers to smears: the propaganda war

... the propaganda battle has not only to be won within the country in which the insurgency is taking place, but also in other places throughout the world where governments or individuals are in a position to give moral or material support to the enemy ... The mechanics of the business ... involves the provision of people to monitor the enemy's propaganda and prepare and disseminate material required for countering it and putting across the government's point of view. It can best be achieved either by direct action, as for example by the provision of leaflets, or by the setting up of an official wireless or television network, or by trying to influence the existing news media. (19)

As 1970 drew to an end, the political situation in the Six Counties had changed dramatically. The so-called "honeymoon" period during which the nationalist community had cast off its traditional fear and welcomed the army had, like many had predicted, proved shortlived. The initial optimism of the Catholic middle class, that the demands of the civil rights movement for social and political reform would soon be realised, was replaced by a growing sense of anger and frustration as Stormont dragged its heels over the reform programme, while in the Catholic ghettos, as each day passed, the army was beginning to look less like an "impartial peacekeeping force" and more like an army of occupation.

Perhaps the most significant change in the political complexion of the Six Counties was brought about by the emergence of the Provisional IRA. Born out of a split in the IRA in December, 1969, over the issues of abstentionism and the armed struggle, the Provisionals had quickly

adopted the role of the "people's army" and had committed itself to the twin aims of defending the nationalist community and making the North ungovernable.⁽²⁰⁾ The Provisionals' defence of the Falls Road during the rioting in June, 1970, had won the organisation widespread support in the Catholic ghettos. The army's subsequent decision to impose a curfew over the Falls Road in July, 1970, on the pretext of searching for IRA arms, only served to further increase the tension within the nationalist community and speed up the process of Catholic alienation.

The decision to reintroduce internment without trial in August, 1971, was the first real indication that the British state's assessment of the situation had altered since 1969. What had started as a breakdown in law and order had rapidly developed into an attack on the very legitimacy of the Ulster state and the British presence therein. The army, which had expected a brief "peacekeeping operation", now realised that it was expected to fight a long term counter-insurgency campaign against the IRA and its supporters.

Internment had been meant to undermine the link between the IRA and the nationalist community by destroying its organisational structure and by placing members and suspected members into quarantine. However, within weeks of "Operation Demetrius" it was obvious that not only had internment failed in its primary objective, but that it had also provided the IRA with a massive propaganda coup. As allegations of brutality leaked from the internment camps, violence in the North surged to new heights. The IRA, which internment had been meant to destroy, responded by intensifying its shooting and bombing campaign and stepping up its propaganda offensive. As one army officer was to comment:

The suddenness and viciousness of this propaganda was never more evident than in the period immediately following the imposition of internment. On the basis that if you throw enough muck some of it is bound to stick, the Army found itself accused of all manner of foul atrocities.⁽²¹⁾

The army quickly realised that if it was to maintain the initiative in the propaganda war, there was need for a:

... properly co-ordinated government publicity campaign to which the services must subscribe. The truth must be put out as quickly as possible and correspondents must be frequently and properly briefed, not merely with the facts, but also with the background to those facts. Accusations are always easy to make; they must be investigated/rebutted as quickly as possible, and all concerned must be aware of the deadline publication times for such media as newspapers, TV, weekly magazines and so on. (22)

As the army's military role evolved during the course of 1970 from a short term "holding" operation to a more conventional counter-insurgency campaign, its information strategy was modified to accommodate this new role. While in the closing months of 1969, the army had been able to trade off the initial welcome accorded to it by both the media and the minority community, in its new and aggressive phase, a sympathetic hearing in the world's press could no longer be guaranteed. The army realised that in this new phase, how it handled the media would be of crucial importance if it was to retain public support for its continued presence in the North.

The failure of internment was to force the army to re-evaluate its attitude to the media, and in September, 1971, as the North lurched closer to full-scale insurrection, the army set about reorganising its information services. Central to its new approach was the establishment of an Information Policy Unit (a PR think tank) at army headquarters Lisburn. The role of the IPU was to co-ordinate all aspects of the army's public relations strategy, to study trends in media coverage of the conflict and attempt to ensure that the army stayed one step ahead in the propaganda war. (23) The IPU was also to assume responsibility for the army's psychological operations - operations which were aimed at countering IRA propaganda by the use of conventional and less conventional means.

The department was placed under the direction of Maurice Tugwell, a former intelligence officer with considerable experience of counter-insurgency campaigns.⁽²⁴⁾ Tugwell's job, according to Richard Clutterbuck, was "not merely to react to the media - or events - but to take a positive initiative in presenting the news to the best possible advantage of the security forces".⁽²⁵⁾

A further indication of how important the army now saw public relations was that in November, 1971, a new chapter was added to Land Operating Manual, dealing specifically with public relations. The manual, which serves as a guidance document for all officers, identified three main aims of army public relations:

1. The requirement to provide information for national and worldwide publication, to convince national and world opinion that the cause to which the army is committed is a good one.
2. The importance of fostering good relations with the local community.
3. The need to preserve and improve the image of the army.⁽²⁶⁾

As we shall see below, when the army's desire to secure these public relations goals conflicted with its responsibilities to provide journalists with accurate information, it was the latter which more often than not came off second best.

As the army recognised the growing importance of the media following the failure of internment, more and more resources were channelled into training officers in how best to deal with the news media. A course on how to handle press and television interviews was established at the army's training ground at Beaconsfield as a direct consequence of the army's experience in the North.⁽²⁷⁾ The Army School of Instructional Technology was given responsibility for the course, which was designed to familiarise officers with interviewing techniques and presentation. By the end of 1971, over 200 officers

had passed through the course which, in 1973, was extended to include the Royal Navy. Since 1973, the Television Wing at Beaconsfield has trained approximately 300 officers a year on a mixture of one day and two-and-a-half day courses. In 1972, a media awareness course was also established at Sandhurst and incorporated into officer training courses. As with the Beaconsfield course, it was designed to provide officers with a working knowledge of the daily routines and demands of the news media. Since 1977, media awareness courses have been mandatory for all officers who have been selected to act as Unit Press Officers in Northern Ireland. (28)

By 1973, the army had at its disposal a highly sophisticated information network devoted almost exclusively to dealing with the media, and operated by staff well versed in the mechanics of news production and the requirements of journalists. According to the Guardian reporter, Simon Hoggart, in late 1973 the army had 24 personnel employed in a public relations capacity at Lisburn, and a further 25 PR officers drawn from each brigade stationed in the North. (29) By 1976, Andrew Stephen of the Observer noted that the army alone had more than 40 press officers operating in the North with a back-up staff of over 100. In conjunction with these, the RUC had a full-time staff of 12 press officers, while the government employed up to 20 Belfast people specifically to deal with public relations. (30)

The operational centre of the army's public relations service was located at Lisburn. The Lisburn press desk was manned 24 hours a day by army captains known as "watchkeepers" who represented the first point of contact for journalists seeking information on matters relating to the day to day conflict on the streets, and who passed on whatever information the army wished to release on a particular incident. Much of the information received by the press desk came from Unit Press Officers, whose job it was to feed information to the desk and look

after journalists visiting their units. Through this system, the press desk was kept informed of all incidents involving army units throughout the Six Counties which could then be passed on to any journalist who contacted Lisburn.⁽³¹⁾

Commanding the field

During the early years of the conflict, the extensive information service offered by the army made it the most important source of information for journalists in the North. The fact that no other organisation was capable of providing such a comprehensive and immediate news service placed the army in a position of immense strategic importance, enabling it to exercise considerable control over the flow of information about incidents of violence. Given that no other participant in the conflict was able to provide such a service, journalists quickly became dependent upon the army and police press offices, not only to inform them about what incidents might have taken place, but also to supply them with details and background information about these incidents. As Simon Hoggart was to observe in 1973:

Most journalists working in Northern Ireland are almost completely dependent on this information service (and the smaller one run by the police), simply because there is no other source for news of day-to-day violence.⁽³²⁾

One factor which contributed to this dependency on the information services operated by the army, and to a lesser extent by the police, was the very routines and imperatives of the newsgathering process itself. As Paul Rock has written:

In the main journalists position themselves so that they have access to institutions which generate a useful volume of reportable activity at regular intervals. Some of these institutions do, of course, make themselves visible by means of dramatisation, or through press releases and press agents. Others are known to produce consequential events. The courts,

sports grounds and parliament mechanically manufacture news which is ... assimilated by the press.(33)

Thus, in themselves, the very routines and imperatives of the newsgathering process are powerful factors in determining dependency on certain news sources. The need for a constant flow of information to satisfy their news desk, and the demands imposed by the need to work to tight deadlines, were enough in themselves to ensure that most journalists naturally gravitated towards the army, which had, so to speak, information "on tap".

Another factor which contributes to a dependency on official sources is the journalistic imperative of "objectivity" and "impartiality": not only do journalists require information "on tap", but also information that is "reliable". This means that whenever possible, journalists will attempt to provide news and opinions that have been generated by "accredited" and "authoritative" sources.(34) This means regularly turning to the "accredited" representatives of major social institutions: MPs for political matters, the CBI and trade union leaders for industrial matters, the church and police for social problems. These sources are "accredited" because of their institutional power and position, and because of their "representative" status. On issues of controversy, where the sources of any given information may be as important as its veracity, the pressures on journalists to seek out official sources is likely to be more pronounced. As Chibnall has written:

... despite the rhetoric of truth-seeking with which he may surround his activity, the journalist is primarily interested in the acquisition of official accounts (irrespective of their veracity) because his editors expect him to obtain them, and to obtain them quickly.(35)

The problem in Northern Ireland, as we shall see below, is that such sources, especially the army and police, are not impartial transmitters of information; on the contrary, they are as interested in using the media for the purpose of propaganda as "unofficial" sources are often assumed to be.

While at one level the routine working practices and imperatives of the newsgathering process enhanced the importance of the army as a primary source of information, at another level, the growing sensitivity of the conflict taking place in the Six Counties made it increasingly difficult for journalists to seek out alternative sources of information. What little autonomy journalists may have enjoyed in the summer of 1969 was slowly eroded during 1970. The entry of the IRA into open conflict with the army made the conflict in the North more like a conventional war story, in which the forces of law and order were in direct conflict with a clearly defined enemy. Within such a context, the question of whose side the media were on became a burning issue for broadcasting and print journalists. From 1970 onwards, any attempt on the part of the media to offer an impartial, let alone critical, account of the conflict between the IRA and the security forces attracted a barrage of criticism. As we have already seen in Chapter Two, the broadcasting authorities, which suffered the brunt of this criticism, responded by instigating a system of internal control, and by abdicating any responsibility to provide a critical analysis of events in the North.

While this criticism was mainly directed towards television which, with its massive audiences and high public profile, was assumed to be more influential, all journalists found the political space in which they worked reduced after 1970. In the aftermath of internment in 1971, official pressure on the media became so intense that 200 leading journalists met in London to protest against the "intensification of

censorship on TV, radio and press coverage of events in Northern Ireland".⁽³⁶⁾ In the press, the acceptable limits within which journalists, especially those working for popular papers, could handle the Irish issue were clearly laid down during the early years of the conflict. In November, 1971, the leader page of the Daily Express, in an editorial which served both as a warning to its own journalists, and as an assurance to its readers of whose side the paper was on, commented:

While British troops are involved in fighting a terrorist-anarchist organisation ... there is no room for impartiality ... There is no question here of political censorship ... people who bomb, kill and maim in order to smash the fabric of society put themselves outside the normal conventions, which include the freedom of speech ... the soldier or the policeman who never knows where the next shot is coming from deserves support in a hazardous and desperately difficult task. The snide remark which undermines his morale is almost as bad as the sniper's bullet.⁽³⁷⁾

As the conflict in the Six Counties became more acute during the early 1970s, journalists found themselves under increasing pressure to accept a view of the conflict as supplied by official sources. Under these conditions, criticism, and at times even scepticism, was likely to be construed as sympathy for the "enemy" or "irresponsible" journalism. While these conditions may have varied across Fleet Street according to the status of the individual journalist, and the political line of the papers they worked for, from 1971 onwards, as one journalist was to comment, "it was only the unusual journalist who took an anti-establishment line".⁽³⁸⁾

The most important consequence of this source dependency was that the army became what Hall has termed a "primary definer" of the conflict taking place in the Six Counties.⁽³⁹⁾ Because of the structured relationship between journalists and the army, the latter had an inbuilt

monopoly over access to the established means of social communication. By virtue of this monopoly, the likelihood was that in matters of controversy the army was likely to have its own interpretation of events accepted by the media. The significance of this, Hall argues, is that it:

permits the institutional definers to establish the initial definition or primary interpretation of the topic in question. This interpretation then "commands the field" in all subsequent treatment and sets the terms of reference within which all further coverage or debate takes place. Arguments against a primary interpretation are forced to insert themselves into its definition of "what is at issue" - they must begin from this framework of interpretation as their starting-point. This initial interpretative framework ... is extremely difficult to alter fundamentally, once established. (40)

In matters of a controversial nature, the nature of the army's role as a "primary definer" has enabled it to exercise considerable control over the way in which events are reported. A clear example of this was Bloody Sunday. Following the shooting of 13 civilians on the 30th December, 1972, the army justified its action on the grounds that its men had been fired upon first by IRA snipers, and that, in accordance with the standing orders contained in the Yellow Card instructions, the soldiers fired only at identified gunmen. (41) Moreover, army officers informed journalists that four of the dead were on the army wanted list - an allegation the army was later to retract. The army's account of events leading up to and during the shooting conflicted sharply with eye-witness accounts. According to several eye-witnesses, including a number of journalists, there had been no shots prior to the army opening fire, and that, rather than firing only at identified gunmen, the army had in fact fired indiscriminately into an unarmed crowd. (42)

Despite the conflicting accounts offered by the army and

eye-witnesses, the British press came down firmly on the side of the army. The Daily Express, for example, laying the blame firmly on the IRA, told its readers:

Many members of this organisation, the civil rights organisation, are neither civil nor right. They simply promote the aims of the IRA. And even those civil righters who do not condone violence provoke it by defying the ban on processions ... The bloody battle in Londonderry follows the familiar pattern of gunmen using street protests as cover. The toll is the price of mindless violence. (42)

In the days and weeks that were to follow Bloody Sunday, public debate surrounding the incident was to be dominated by the version of events supplied by the army. In effect, it became a debate not over the army's role in the killing of 13 unarmed civilians, but rather one about who fired first. Those seeking to challenge the army's account in any fundamental way had first to prove that the IRA did not open fire first - a demand that was almost impossible to satisfy.

The army's ability to set the terms of reference with regard to day to day incidents of violence was further reinforced by the speed at which it was able to disseminate information about violence, and the lack of any credible alternatives, especially given the commonly held belief that the "terrorists'" word could not be trusted. As Hoggart points out, these factors ensured that in most cases the army was guaranteed a prominent place for its own account:

When the British press prints an account of an incident as if it were established fact, and it is clear that the reporter himself was not on the spot, it is a 99 per cent certainty that it is the army's version which is being given. (44)

As Hoggart went on to argue:

This means that the army has the immense advantage of getting in the first word, and it is left up to the integrity of the journalist to check that word out. Some do, some don't. Most only check when

there is time or if the incident looks like becoming controversial, and a few hardly bother at all. (45)

Not only did the army have the advantage of getting in its version of events first, but the tendency of the British press to report an incident once and then drop it, often meant that the army's version was the only one reported. Over the years, there have been many occasions where a version of events put out by the army or police was later proven to be incorrect. However, given that it may be weeks and even years before an accurate account of the incident surfaces, by that time, given the perishability of news, its potential impact will have been reduced. (46)

Controlling the flow

From 1970 onwards, Northern Ireland was to provide the setting for two quite distinct, though interrelated, conflicts: the first, and the one which attracted daily attention in the British media, was the armed conflict. Away from public scrutiny, and rarely surfacing as an issue in the media, another and equally important conflict was taking place - the propaganda war.

As the Irish conflict intensified all sides were quick to realise the importance of the media, and all were eager to get their points of view across to the public. As one journalist was to comment:

the newspaperman newly arrived in Belfast finds himself courted from every quarter. As likely as not he will soon be whisked off to a genial alcoholic lunch at the Officers' Mess in Lisburn; a Provisional IRA front man will invite him where his charming wife will produce hot buttered toast and coffee; and at the Ulster Defence Association headquarters in the Newtownards Road any visiting journalist is assured of ginger cake and a mug of strong tea. (47)

However, while all sides may have been equal in their attempts to use the media for the purpose of propaganda, their chances of

succeeding were far from equal: the extensive information service operated by the army; the pressure on journalists to seek out official accounts; the fact that the army's version carried with it the authority of the state; and the generally held belief that the "terrorists" could not be trusted, all tipped the scales heavily in the army's favour. While the paramilitaries did, on occasion, score the odd propaganda victory, on the whole the propaganda advantage remained firmly with the army.

Nowhere was the importance of the media stressed more than within the army. All officers were issued with a restricted document titled Manual of Public Relations. Under the heading "Establishing Rapport", the document informed officers that reporters and photographers "should always be treated as guests of officer status", and that "hospitality should be offered to them on suitable occasions".⁽⁴⁸⁾ Journalists could expect to be wined and dined at the army's expense, and on some occasions invitations for drinks had no other purpose than to curry favour. Simon Hoggart recounts how, following a story in which he suggested that the army had used undue force in putting down a Protestant riot:

I was invited to Lisburn for lunch and drinks, and shown papers which suggested that the soldiers might, to some extent, have been justified. I am sure the lunch and drinks had nothing to do with it, but if I am completely honest, I think the approach might have made me a little more cautious when writing about the army.⁽⁴⁹⁾

One Irish journalist, however, found that following a number of reports critical of the army, invitations to Lisburn for free drinks rapidly dried up.⁽⁵⁰⁾

When it came to dealing with unsympathetic journalists, the army had a far more effective sanction than simply depriving them of free drinks - depriving them of information. Simon Hoggart recounts how,

following a succession of "anti-army" stories written by him and his colleague, Simon Winchester, the army responded by attempting to turn off the information "tap". "For about a fortnight", Hoggart wrote, "we were given 'minimal' co-operation by Lisburn - curt, unwilling accounts of violence, and no background or extra information at all".⁽⁵¹⁾

For Simon Winchester, it was not the first time that one of his reports had threatened his relationship with the army press office. In August, 1971, Winchester made the mistake of attributing an off-the-record statement to the army's General Officer Commanding, Harry Tuzo:

The row that ensued went on for days. Signals went out to army units across the country to the effect that I ... was to be regarded with something bordering on contempt by all other press officers. I was told not to come up to Lisburn again for some long while. It was suggested that I write - and in fact I did later write - a letter of apology to the general. I felt like a naughty schoolboy; and I was being punished with the one weapon the army could use with effect against me - the denial of information.⁽⁵²⁾

If this approach failed, the army could always put pressure on journalists through other channels. For example, when Andrew Stephen switched from the Observer to the Sunday Telegraph, one of his new editors was telephoned by a senior official at the Northern Ireland Office and invited to lunch. The journalist, the editor was informed by the official, was considered "irresponsible" by those who had been trying to "keep the peace in Northern Ireland", and what he wrote was "not helpful" in circumstances where lives were at stake. In the official's view, Stephen was "misguided" and would perhaps be better suited to working on another story.⁽⁵³⁾

While depriving journalists of information represents a potentially powerful sanction against unsympathetic journalists, as a technique of news management it is far from effective. Overt attempts to control the flow of news may leave the army open to charges of censorship and thus

undermine its credibility. Moreover, the tendency of journalists to share information, and the availability of other sources, such as radio and television, tends to weaken its effectiveness. Despite this, it remains a real threat, and without doubt one that made some journalists sensitive about being openly critical of the army.⁽⁵⁴⁾

A more effective technique of influencing news coverage (and one that is not restricted solely to the coverage of Northern Ireland) used by the army, was to leak information favourable to its own propaganda aims to sympathetic newspapers - often in the form of off-the-record briefings. To quote Hoggart again:

Another part of the public relations job is the passing on of basically non-attributable information, which newspaper readers can recognise by the warning signal "army sources believe" or "senior officers in HQ allege". This is information which no individual wants to be accountable for, and so inevitably must be treated with more caution. Again, it is entirely up to the judgement of the reporter whom he chooses to believe.⁽⁵⁵⁾

The leaking of information is a flexible technique and may be used to facilitate a variety of information goals. It may be used to undermine the morale of the "enemy" by creating the impression that the army is having some success in its efforts to beat the "terrorists". Following internment, for example, press officers at Lisburn:

made it their business to chat to journalists confidentially and to point out that the IRA's command structure had been severely fractured by the information gained during "deep" interrogation. The interrogation methods themselves, they would say, were harmless.⁽⁵⁶⁾

By leaking such information army officers hoped to draw attention away from the growing allegations of ill-treatment in the internment camps, and to conceal the fact that in terms of defeating the IRA internment had been a failure.

The main aim of strategically timed information leaks is to shape in advance the terms of the debate to the advantage of the army. By gaining prominence for the army's version in advance, the leaking of information can be an effective method of influencing news coverage. A clear example of just how successful this technique may be was to be found in the press coverage accorded to the Widgery Tribunal's report into the events leading up to and during Bloody Sunday. The report's findings, which were a matter of some sensitivity, while absolving the army, did contain some criticisms. The first day's coverage in the press, however, scarcely mentioned those aspects of the report which criticised the army and concentrated instead on the fact that the army had been cleared. Simon Winchester explained why:

The report itself was to be issued on the afternoon of Wednesday, April 19th. In fact, the astute press officers of the Ministry of Defence telephoned the night before - the Tuesday night - to "leak", in highly selective terms, the Lord's conclusions to be published the next day ... Those who read their front pages on Wednesday morning would have to have been very shortsighted indeed to have missed the results of the PR work. (57)

The Ministry of Defence's attempts to influence press coverage of the report were to prove highly successful. In their apparent willingness to present the army as an innocent party to Bloody Sunday, the British press brushed aside the criticism contained in the report and concentrated on the army's innocence: "Widgery clears paratroopers for Bloody Sunday", announced the Daily Telegraph. "Bloody Sunday Paras 'clear'", said the Daily Mirror. "Widgery blames IRA and clears the Army" declared the Daily Express. (58) By leaking in advance those findings in the report favourable to the army, the MOD in effect precluded any serious probe into the report. As Winchester was later to complain: Bloody Sunday became "a closed book with the Irish fully to blame". (59)

The leaking of information by the army in Northern Ireland is a frequently employed technique of news management and one which most journalists working on the story have had some experience of. The majority of journalists tend to be highly sceptical of such stories and are wary of using them unless they can be corroborated first.⁽⁶⁰⁾ Others are less so. According to one Irish journalist, who had little time for the less principled practitioners of the profession, some journalists regularly serve as sources for official leaks:

the military had their favourites - well, we jokingly called them in the profession the "tame Brits", because these were people who relied heavily on the police and military sources and published what they said as gospel.⁽⁶¹⁾

Another important technique of news management, though one that is used less frequently, is for the army or police to make a direct request to journalists to hold back on a story which it feels could be damaging to its operations if published. Evidence in this area, however, is less than substantial: such decisions are likely to be taken only at the highest level, and are inevitably cloaked in secrecy. The extent to which such requests are granted will tend to vary according to the circumstances in which they are made: the degree of trust between the "control" agency and the individual newspaper; the frequency of such requests; and the nature of the story itself. Evidence from recent years suggests that such requests are likely to be granted in circumstances where lives are at stake.⁽⁶²⁾

In Northern Ireland the relationship between the press and the security forces is such that on those occasions when such requests have been made, they stand an above average chance of being granted. According to one army Press Officer:

most times when one's asked for co-operation from the press one deals with frequently we get it ... the press

realise that if we were to say that information, if it were published, would cause us enormous problems and possibly endanger life, please hold-off, then I think we would find journalists hold-up. And don't forget, we have to entrust journalists in our normal routine of operation with information which is technically classified, technically secret, and I'm talking in terms of "tip-offs" about VIP visits and so on ... And so we are in the business of reasonably frequently taking the press into our trust, and our relationship with them and their honouring of that trust has been such that we continue to do that. (63)

Generally speaking, however, such requests are only likely to be granted under exceptional circumstances, and only after the army or police have sufficiently proved the case for delaying a story. As one Assistant News Editor on a Belfast based paper commented: "Quite often we are asked, and quite often we say no. But the time we will always say no to holding back on a story is when they won't give us a reason". (64)

On one occasion, the paper's editor only agreed to hold back on an exclusive story after an emergency editorial meeting and a visit from two high-ranking police officials. (65)

When it comes to influencing the reporting of political violence, however, the security forces are in a unique position to pursue their information goals. Given the fact that journalists are rarely on the spot when an incident takes place, they are more often than not reliant upon the security forces, not only to identify the victims, but also to suggest possible motives behind the act and to speculate as to who may have been responsible. If there is any ambiguity surrounding the incident, the only information journalists may have as to who was responsible for any given act of violence is the uncorroborated word of the army man on the spot. There is considerable evidence that in the past the army has used its position for the purpose of discrediting its opponents. Philip Elliott, in his study of news coverage accorded to Northern Ireland during 1974 and 1975, suggested that "Evidence has accumulated of journalists being deliberately misled, mainly to

implicate the IRA in violence carried out by loyalist extremists".⁽⁶⁶⁾
During the period of his study, Elliott uncovered a number of incidents that had initially been wrongly attributed to the IRA as a consequence of journalists taking the line of the army and police:

In each of the periods covered in our content analysis, a new loyalist organisation declared its hand and claimed responsibility for a series of murders carried out in the previous few days. Most of these had been wrongly attributed in the reports which appeared immediately after each incident, apparently in line with the account put out by the army or the Royal Ulster Constabulary.⁽⁶⁷⁾

In Ireland: the Propaganda War, Liz Curtis details a number of incidents in which the army and the police have sought to discredit the IRA by blaming it for acts of violence committed by others. For example, following the death of Sinn Fein leader Maire Drumm, shot by a gunman while in her hospital bed on the 28th October, 1976, attempts were made to attribute her killing to the IRA. The following day, however, two white hospital coats of the kind worn by the killers were found in the strongly loyalist area of Shankill. Eventually, in August, 1983, a loyalist - already serving a life sentence for killing a Roman Catholic - was charged with the murder.⁽⁶⁸⁾

Similarly, on the 4th December, 1971, a bomb exploded in McGurk's Bar, a Catholic pub in Belfast, killing 15 people. The evidence at the time pointed to loyalist responsibility. The army, however, anxious to use the incident for its own propaganda purposes, put out a story that the bombing had been an IRA "own-goal": that the bomb intended for somewhere else had gone off prematurely while in transit. The press was to be strongly influenced by the army's story and, with the partial exception of the Guardian, blame for the incident was widely attributed to an IRA bungle.⁽⁶⁹⁾ The above cases are exceptional only in that the culprits were eventually charged. In

many cases the army has been able to attribute responsibility safe in the knowledge that it may be many years later, if ever, before their story was proved to be incorrect - by which time the damage has already been done.

Once again, the responsibility for corroborating army accounts is left to the individual journalist. Some do; some don't; and sometimes it simply is not possible. One journalist found the army so unreliable when it came to attributing responsibility for acts of violence that he eventually ceased using them:

Gradually over a period I just stopped using them, and quite often I would use an eye-witness account from a civilian before I would use a British military press desk version of what was going on - because on many occasions I have discovered that the British military press desk was just putting out a line. (70)

"Black" Propaganda

No matter what has been said about Northern Ireland in the British press, and no matter what has been said about Northern Ireland on British television, fact has still to catch up with fiction. (71)

If the failure of internment precipitated a reorganisation and extension of the army's public relations office, it was also to lead to the development and extension of its covert or psychological operations. The British army had experimented with psychological warfare techniques (psyops), then called "Polwar" (Political War) since 1962. (72) Indeed, psyops as part of a co-ordinated strategy of counter-insurgency was to be employed in a number of colonial campaigns prior to 1969. In Malaya, for example, psywar techniques were used against the Chinese-backed Malayan Communist Party (MCP), who began an armed campaign against the British in June, 1948. (73) The propaganda aspects of the army's psychological operations in Malaya were co-ordinated through the Emergency Information Services (EIS). The head of EIS during 1950 and

1951 was Hugh Greene - who was to be ^{Director General} of the BBC in 1969. Greene's task had been to revamp the EIS and turn it into an effective propaganda agency capable of undermining the Communist opposition to the British presence. (74)

The objectives of the EIS, as formulated by Greene, were to include:

1. To raise the morale of the civilian population and to encourage confidence in the government and resistance to the communists with a view to increasing the flow of information reaching the police.
2. To attack the morale of members of the guerrilla groups and their supporters and to drive a wedge between leaders and the rank and file with a view to encouraging defection and undermining the determination of the communists to continue the struggle.
3. To create awareness of the values of the democratic way of life which was threatened by international communism. (75)

To these ends, Greene doubled the number of cinema projectors and speakers for showing government propaganda; installed 500 radio sets in villages; and appointed a Controller of Emergency Broadcasting, who could increase anti-communist radio programmes according to the planning of the Director of Operations. (76)

Psyops proved to be an enormous success in Malaya and, over the course of the next decade it was to be refined and developed during campaigns in Aden and Kenya. Consequently, prior to 1969, the army already had at its disposal a proven and sophisticated counter-insurgency doctrine. However, while psyops had been widely used in the army's previous colonial campaigns with some success, its use in Northern Ireland, especially during the early stages of the conflict, was resisted for political reasons. In Malaya, Kenya and Aden, psyops was primarily used in support of harsh military measures designed to break the enemy physically. While such measures had attracted little

attention in many previous campaigns, their use in Northern Ireland was politically unacceptable. As Chater has written:

The Army's counter-insurgency doctrine, evolved over 25 years of fighting insurgency in the Empire, was difficult to apply in Ulster because the doctrine was not designed for domestic use, that is, for a semi-peacekeeping role between warring communities within the United Kingdom. The restrictions and harsh measures which had made a successful campaign possible in Malaya could not be applied readily in Britain, with its long traditions of individual liberty and freedom of the press. In Malaya, thousands of miles away from home, operations beyond the jungle fringe could be conducted in almost complete secrecy; in Ulster, the daily movements of a patrol may be seen on TV that evening in Belfast and in London. Moreover, because Northern Ireland is constitutionally part of the United Kingdom, the problem is a domestic one, and politicians in London are more inclined to intervene directly in the actual conduct of security policy and operations....(77)

The failure of internment and the imposition of Direct Rule in 1972, combined with the growing realisation that the army could not defeat the IRA by purely military means, forced the army to re-evaluate its attitude to the use of psyops in Northern Ireland.

The decision to use psyops as part of a co-ordinated strategy in support of military operations in the Six Counties forced the army to channel more funds into psyops and extend its training courses. Prior to 1970, the resources devoted to psychological operations by the army were limited. In his now classic work on the theory of counter-insurgency, Low Intensity Operations, Kitson complained that at the time of writing (1970-71) the psyops resources available to the army compared to the armed forces of our European allies were limited and he bemoaned the fact that the British were "bringing up the rear in this important aspect of contemporary war".⁽⁷⁸⁾ According to Kitson, who was to command the 39th Brigade in Northern Ireland from 1970 to 1972,⁽⁷⁹⁾ the total psyops forces available to the three forces consisted of: (i) 1 staff officer at the Ministry of Defence;

(ii) 2 officers who ran courses on psychological warfare at the Joint Warfare Establishment and (iii) a service team deployed at the time at an undisclosed location (probably Oman)⁽⁸⁰⁾ overseas.⁽⁸¹⁾

By 1973, the picture had changed dramatically. According to figures released by the MOD in 1973, 637 army officers and 105 civilians had taken part in psyops training at the Joint Warfare Establishment in Salisbury.⁽⁸²⁾ In 1976, Robert Brown, Parliamentary Under Secretary for the Army, admitted in the House of Commons, in response to a question tabled by the Labour MP, Tom Litterick, that a total of 1,858 officers and 262 civilians had been given psyops training.⁽⁸³⁾

From 1967 onwards, training in psywar techniques was carried out at the Doctrinal Development School, Old Sarum, near Salisbury. Here army officers were trained in a range of psyops techniques developed over a period of 20 years. In 1972, courses on "Military Information Policy in low intensity operations" were run by Lieutenant-Colonel Brian Johnson. During 1972, Johnson's course was attended by a variety of specialists, including Alan Protheroe, a Major in Army Intelligence, and a BBC News Editor in 1969, and BBC 3 Controller Ian McIntyre, who was commissioned into the Intelligence Corps in the late 1950s.⁽⁸⁴⁾ The JWE continued to organise the training of psyops until 1979, when it was moved to Latimer, Buckinghamshire, near the National Defence College.

A small number of British Army officers were given psyops training in the US Army Institute for Military Assistance at Fort Bragg, Carolina. One such officer was Lieutenant-Colonel Railton, who was later to assume charge of military propaganda in Northern Ireland as head of the Information Policy Unit during 1974-75. His successor at the IPU, Lieutenant-Colonel James Barden, had also been trained in psyops at Old Sarum.⁽⁸⁵⁾

In 1976, two confidential documents describing in some detail the Salisbury courses were leaked to The Times. The documents, entitled "Training in Psychological Operations", defined psyops in the following terms:

The primary aim of psychological warfare is to support the efforts of all other measures, military and political, against an enemy, to weaken his will to continue hostilities and reduce his capacity to wage war. Psychological warfare relates to an emergency or a state of hostilities, and it is with the further subdivision of strategic psywar, tactical psywar and psychological consolidation that its employment can be best examined.

Strategic psywar pursues long-term and mainly political objectives. It is designed to undermine the will of the enemy or hostile group to fight, and to reduce the capacity to wage war. It can be directed against the dominating political party in the enemy country, the Government and/or against the population as a whole, or particular elements of it. It is planned and controlled by the highest political authority. (86)

Talking about psyops units at work, the document said:

The primary task of a psyops unit is the dissemination of propaganda ... in addition to the dissemination of propaganda through its own resources, a psyops unit can gather and supply propaganda material for radio, television, newspapers, and magazines. (87)

When asked whether or not psyops was being used in Northern Ireland, Lieutenant-Colonel James Barden, head of the IPU, agreed that it was, but said that there was nothing sinister about this. (88)

Psyops in Northern Ireland

From 1971 onwards, the techniques of psychological warfare, developed at Old Sarum and Fort Bragg, were put into practice in Northern Ireland as the army sought to complement its military offensives by going on the propaganda offensive. As the IRA's military campaign against the army intensified in the months following internment, the nationalist community found itself the target of a stream of propaganda, some of it true, some partially true, but much of it

totally fictitious.

All aspects of the army's propaganda campaign were co-ordinated through the IPU located at army HQ Lisburn. Here, according to David McKittrick of the Irish Times, on the same corridor which housed the army's press desk (which provided the main information service for the local, national and international media), was an office labelled "Psyops", the office of Visor, the magazine for soldiers serving in the Six Counties, and the office of one of the key figures in the army's psyops operation, Colin Wallace.⁽⁸⁹⁾

The use of psyops in Northern Ireland (or "black propaganda" as it is popularly known), had four main aims: first, it sought to undermine support for the IRA within the nationalist community by presenting both the organisation and its aims and methods in a bad light; secondly, it sought to demoralise IRA volunteers and weaken their resolve to continue the armed struggle; thirdly, it sought to protect and consolidate the army's position and strategy in the Six Counties by discrediting individuals, groups, politicians and government ministers of all parties and on both sides of the Irish Sea, whose policies the army opposed; and finally, it sought to distance national and international support (especially in the US) from the IRA by discrediting the organisation as a credible and legitimate political force. Thus, in broad terms, the aims of psyops in the Six Counties were no different from its aims in previous colonial campaigns to discredit the "enemy" and to facilitate the tactical and strategic aims of the army.

Psyops against the IRA

The methods employed by the army to secure the first two of these four aims were diverse.⁽⁹⁰⁾ Some of these methods were highly sophisticated; others less so. For example, in 1974 the IRA had stuck up posters in nationalist areas showing an armed and masked IRA volunteer

surrounded by children with the simple slogan: "Victory '74". Psyops experts from Lisburn reproduced the poster, but added: "But not through the barrel of a gun". In this instance, the plan backfired; IRA supporters took great delight in scribbling out the first two words.⁽⁹¹⁾

The same year, a series of four posters appeared on the walls of West Belfast, each entitled the "Killers' Code", and each bearing a separate injunction:

1. Torture, tar, bullets and bombs are the way to keep the people on our side.
2. Any Roman Catholic who doesn't do what he's told must be threatened first - then shot.
3. Men, women, children and babies - it doesn't matter who we kill, only how many.
4. Never shoot a man on his own. Let his wife and children see just how brutal we are.

At the bottom of each poster was the same slogan: "SAY NO TO THE IRA".⁽⁹²⁾

Psyops experts also attempted to discredit the IRA in other ways. On occasion, they took to printing counterfeit leaflets claiming responsibility for IRA bombings. The leaflets would claim responsibility for the act without compassion for the innocent victims or their families, and without expressing guilt. Experts working out of Lisburn also took to inundating newspapers with letters signed "A Derry mother of six, disgusted by the violence".⁽⁹³⁾

Psyops experts, however, were also involved in a series of acts which were both illegal and potentially deadly. In a report published by the Sunday Times on the 13th March, 1977, reporter David Blundy exposed 15 incidents which occurred over a five year period from 1972. The incidents included how paratroopers set off bombs which they hoped would be blamed on the IRA; how soldiers in plain clothes used non-standard weaponry to shoot at civilians; and how soldiers with

black hoods and non-standard weaponry - implying that they had been involved in assassinations - had been discovered driving a car by police in Belfast.⁽⁹⁴⁾ Dillon and Lehane, in their study of Political Murder in Northern Ireland, also provide examples of soldiers in plain clothes having been responsible for the assassination of civilians.⁽⁹⁵⁾ Recent revelations by a former intelligence officer relating to what has been described as "Ulster's Dirty War" also implicate intelligence units in assassinations and bombings.⁽⁹⁶⁾ If anything, these rather crude attempts to mould public opinion represented only a minor part of the army's psyops campaign against the IRA. The main thrust of psyops during the early 1970s was directed at journalists, and through them local, national and international opinion.

According to two confidential memoranda, one of them a policy document, leaked to the Times in February, 1976, but compiled at least two years previously, officers at Lisburn saw the work of the press in Northern Ireland as actively destructive of the army's military campaign. One of the reports called on the MOD to pay more attention to "psychological warfare" and argued that: "In day-to-day dealings with the press the authorities must apply themselves to scoring more tricks than the terrorists".⁽⁹⁷⁾ One of the reports, written by a Lieutenant-Colonel at Thiepval Barracks, Lisburn, argued that the difficulties in Northern Ireland: "have presented a fascinating challenge to the prevailing notions of what constitutes a proper degree of control over the content of news coverage".⁽⁹⁸⁾ The report rejected the option of outright censorship because "there are ways of influencing even the most anti-establishment reporter".⁽⁹⁹⁾ The report, which criticised almost every Fleet Street newspaper, went on to argue that, if handled properly, the media could be used to the army's advantage:

Because of the sort of situation Northern Ireland has developed in to, the spectacular story is better than no story; speculation is no more than an accepted area

of work for the reporter who has a deadline to meet. I realise that this weakness can be used to our advantage and there are more than enough reporters who are willing to act as "kiteflyers" or channels for "leaks", but on balance the initiative is with the terrorists and their supporters. (100)

The policy of leaking information to selected journalists in order to "score tricks" over the "terrorists", or simply to influence news coverage to the advantage of the army, was nothing new; indeed, as I have argued above, it is a standard technique of news management and one which is not confined to the army. (101) A major source of such leaks during the early 1970s was Colin Wallace, a press officer and a key brain behind the IPU. (102) In 1980, Wallace, who had by then been forced to resign from his post after leaking confidential information to Times reporter Robert Fisk, confided to David McKittrick of the Irish Times that much of the information he had given to journalists in Northern Ireland "was what he called black propaganda and misinformation aimed at discrediting the various individuals and groups." (103)

Wallace, who ran psyops from 1968 to 1975, made it his business to search out potential "kiteflyers" - journalists who were prepared to act as channels for army leaks, and who would accept army versions without question or scepticism - for army black propaganda. Examples of stories leaked by Wallace and other psyops experts at Lisburn during the early 1970s are legion. And, as a consequence, separating fact from fiction became an everyday part of a reporter's life in the Six Counties. In a report for the Observer in 1979, Andrew Stephen described how, on one occasion, the army successfully blamed a loyalist bomb on the IRA. The bomb, which exploded in the strongly nationalist Falls Road, was generally believed by most journalists to have been the work of loyalists. Following the attack, however, an army officer attempted to convince a Times reporter that it was the work of the IRA. The press officer had telephoned the journalist and told him that the

army were convinced that the bomb was a "fumble finger" - an IRA bomb intended for somewhere else that had gone off prematurely. Despite the fact that the army's version could not be validated, it was quickly taken up by the national media:

Before long a reporter on BBC television's Nine O'Clock News was informing the nation that it was widely assumed that the Falls Road explosion had been caused by an IRA bomb going off prematurely.

Next day the Provisional IRA announced that by finding the car number plates they had identified the car as one stolen from a Protestant area, which a spokesman for the Royal Ulster Constabulary quietly confirmed. Nearly seven months after the explosion, all the available evidence still suggests that the bombing was deliberately carried out by loyalists. (104)

The policy of deliberately attributing violence to the IRA, even if it was clear that it was the work of others, had many attractions for the army. The pressure of deadlines often means that journalists may be forced to rely on the uncorroborated word of the army officer on the spot simply to satisfy their news desk's demand for copy. Moreover, it is often hard to prove one way or the other who was responsible.

Psyops officers also attempted to discredit the IRA by presenting it as a corrupt bunch of criminals whose political rhetoric was little more than a front for illegal activities. In 1973, a story leaked by Wallace to two reporters working for the Sunday Times, Chris Rhyder and Paul Eddy, concerned alleged corruption in the very highest ranks of the IRA. The story, which appeared in the Sunday Times in April, 1973, under the headline "IRA Provo Chiefs Milk £150,000 from Funds", related to a document the army claimed to have intercepted as it was being smuggled out of Long Kesh on its way to the IRA's Belfast Commander, Seamus Twomey. The letter, said to have been written by an IRA detainee, alleged that high ranking Provisionals were embezzling funds acquired from IRA bank robberies. (105) The army hoped that the alleged letter would discredit the IRA within the nationalist community and sow

seeds of discontent within the membership. The validity of the letter was seriously undermined, however, when it was discovered that one of the sources quoted by Eddy and Rhyder had worked for army intelligence.⁽¹⁰⁶⁾ Despite this, the army were delighted with the leak. Counter-insurgency expert Major-General Anthony Deane-Drummond cited the Sunday Times story as an example of how "true stories can be put about on the methods or the motives of the terrorists which can help destroy their morale and lead to disintegration", and claimed that it had "directly led to the virtual disbandment of the IRA unit". It was, he went on to say, "a benign use of the psychological weapon".
(107)

In its efforts to use the media for its own propaganda purposes and in particular in its efforts to generate a negative public image of the aims and methods of the IRA, the army had the scales weighted heavily in its favour. Not only did it enjoy a virtual monopoly over the dissemination of violence-related information, but equally important, it enjoyed the almost uncritical support of large sections of the British press. These two factors assured the army of easy access to television, radio and the press; they also ensured that its views would be treated sympathetically. In his study of the news coverage accorded to Northern Ireland in 1974 and 1975, for example, Philip Elliott found that not only did British journalists tend to take the information supplied by official sources on trust, unless there were good reasons against it, but also that the army was generally portrayed in a positive and sympathetic light by all sections of the British media. "Throughout the two periods studied", Elliott writes, "the army appeared almost above the fray - brave, tormented, but largely inactive except as a rather superior kind of Boy Scout Troop".⁽¹⁰⁸⁾

The favourable treatment accorded to the army, and the credibility and ready access accorded to its statements, contrasts sharply with the

British media's treatment of the IRA. Indeed from the onset of the present round of the conflict in the Six Counties, certain sections of the British press have demonstrated a remarkable willingness to print stories that cast the IRA in an unfavourable light - usually on the flimsiest of evidence and often without any evidence whatsoever.⁽¹⁰⁹⁾ Elliott notes that, in its reporting of violence emanating from ambiguous or unknown sources for example, there was "a tendency on the part of the British popular newspapers to jump to the socially acceptable conclusion ... that the Provisional IRA was responsible for any violence".⁽¹¹⁰⁾ Liz Curtis, who had documented some of the more bizarre examples of anti-IRA bias in the British press, has observed how:

The habit of writing the IRA into headlines on the slightest excuse sometimes has ludicrous consequences. When former Northern Ireland Prime Minister Brian Faulkner died in March, 1977, the Daily Express headlined the story, 'Faulkner, target of the IRA, dies in fall from horse'.⁽¹¹¹⁾

The lower standard of proof demanded of official accounts, the strategic position enjoyed by the army as an information source, and the hostility generated by the IRA enabled psyops officers to gain media exposure for anti-IRA stories which bore little if any relation to fact.

Psyops against politicians

As a policy of discrediting opponents of the army, psyops was a highly flexible and multi-purposed instrument; and since the early 1970s, its use has not been restricted solely to those engaged in armed opposition to the army's presence in the Six Counties. According to the Sunday Times reporter David Blundy, towards the end of 1974, a committee comprising the Northern Ireland Press Attache, Michael Cudlip, an officer in charge of army information, and Lieutenant-Colonel

James Railton, head of the army's IPU, met at Stormont Castle to discuss ways of discrediting politicians adjudged hostile to Government policy in the Six Counties. (112)

Two politicians who were to be subjected to the machinations of army psyops during the mid-1970s were Ian Paisley and William Craig, leader of the extremist Vanguard Party. Colin Wallace was to play an important role in both cases. According to Blundy, during an army press briefing attended by a Sunday Times reporter, attempts were made to link Ian Paisley with a small and somewhat obscure Protestant paramilitary group called Tara. An army intelligence report on Tara described one of its key members, William McGrath, as being a homosexual and using blackmail about homosexual activities to force people to join the organisation. The document also implied that McGrath owed more allegiance to the Red Flag than the Union Jack. According to Blundy:

The purpose of the army briefing was clear: to link Paisley with homosexuals and Communist sympathisers. There is of course no truth in this. Our sources claim that the army has produced three anonymous documents on this theme which circulated in Belfast. (113)

Indeed, the story had been doing the rounds in Belfast for some time. Colin Wallace had approached several journalists with the story during August, 1974; all had refused to handle it. (114) The rumour that Paisley was linked to Tara was, however, potentially explosive: Paisley had always been vociferously anti-homosexual and, in 1978, was to launch the "Save Ulster From Sodomy Campaign" as part of a campaign to prevent the 1967 Act, which legalised homosexuality in Britain, from being extended to the North.

Perhaps the most spectacular smear to originate from army psyops (also said to have been leaked by Wallace) concerned attempts to link the leader of the Vanguard Party, William Craig, to the kidnapping of the West German Honorary Consul, Thomas Niedermayer. On the 27th

December, 1973, Niedermayer was abducted from his home in Belfast. In October, 1974, journalists working for the Irish Times and the Times attended a press briefing at Lisburn during which an army press officer attempted to link the kidnapping with William Craig on the grounds that Mrs. Craig was alleged to have been having an affair with Niedermayer. None of the journalists were prepared to handle the story. A German newspaper, Bild, did, however, run the story and, in November, 1975, it lost a libel action to the Craigs, who received £8,000 damages. By the time Niedermayer's body was discovered in March, 1980, it had been established that the IRA had been responsible for his abduction. (115)

Psyops units working out of Lisburn have not restricted their use of black propaganda to those on the political fringes. On occasions, they have also used psyops against their own political masters. Perhaps the most notable case was the attempt to discredit the 1974 Labour Government's policy on internment. In early July, 1974, Merlyn Rees had implemented a policy of releasing internees as part of a gradual phasing out of internment. Army officers at Lisburn firmly opposed Rees' policy and used black propaganda as a means of discrediting it. On the 9th July, 1974, journalists were invited to a press briefing at Lisburn at which the army attempted to blame an upsurge of violence directly on the release of 65 internees. According to the briefing given to journalists:

Army intelligence reports report that well over half of the men released are re-involved, whether voluntarily or not, in violence within a couple of months of getting out. (116)

According to the Sunday Times:

these figures were a "complete fiction". The intelligence reports actually put the figure at less than 20 per cent. But these reports did not reach either the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland or Ministers at Westminster. Joe Haines, the Prime Minister's Press Secretary at the time, says that the figures for the re-involvement of

internees given to the Cabinet were more than 40 per cent. "We felt that elements in the Army were working against us", he told me. (117)

The army also sought to discredit the Labour Government in 1975 by leaking information which suggested that it was being soft on the IRA. The main objective of the leak was to force the Government to break off talks it was having with the IRA. In early 1975, an army intelligence summary was leaked to the press which indicated that Seamus Twomey, head of the Provisionals, was not to be arrested if seen by the army. The story was to prove highly embarrassing to the Government. Merlyn Rees at first denied that such a summary existed. Later, however, he discovered that it did, but that its basic premise was incorrect - Twomey could be lifted at any time. In 1977, the Northern Ireland Office maintained that the summary had been written by a junior officer who had simply got it wrong. But David Blundy was to write:

However since such summaries are checked and approved by army headquarters, it is difficult to believe that senior army officers did not know of the Twomey report. (118)

Psyops against journalists

As well as attempting to manipulate journalists through the leaking of misinformation, the army was also involved in the surveillance of reporters working in the North. According to the Times reporter, Robert Fisk, the army "had at their disposal extensive classified files on British and Irish journalists working in Belfast". The files, Fisk wrote, "contain information, some of it almost certainly gathered from tapped telephone conversations". (119) While the army refused to admit that it possessed such files on reporters, a number of journalists were aware that their movements and telephone conversations had been the subject of surveillance. Fisk described how:

On one occasion, for example, an appointment I made with a reporter on a local Belfast newspaper to talk about alleged police corruption in Belfast, was discussed at a military conference at Lisburn within 12 hours. (120)

On another occasion Fisk was invited to lunch by a former SAS officer who, during the course of the lunch, informed Fisk that their conversation would be "off the record". Over the meal, however, the officer asked Fisk about the sources of several stories he had written about the army, the police and the IRA. Fisk, increasingly suspicious of the officer's motives, invented several fictitious names. Despite the officer's promise that their conversation would remain confidential, Fisk was to write:

he made a detailed note of all those in his written report to the SIB [Special Investigation Branch] which was written on the following day. All the names I mentioned, complete with inaccuracies, are in it. (120)

Guardian reporter Anne McHardy was another journalist who was to find her activities in the North subjected to army surveillance. In 1977 she said she had received a "very unpleasant shock" when she discovered that her phone had been tapped, and that officials working for the Northern Ireland Office had been listening to the tapes. (122)

Though surveillance of journalists on this level is generally felt to be a thing of the past, some journalists working in the North are convinced that the tapping of telephones has continued, and some are still wary of using their phones to discuss sensitive information. (123)

The withdrawal from psyops

During the late 1970s, the army started to wind down its psychological operations in the North and it gradually withdrew from the co-ordinated use of black propaganda against individuals, groups and organisations perceived as being hostile by the army. According

to a report by Robert Fisk of the Times, on the 13th March, 1975:

The British Government has effectively prevented army officers in Northern Ireland from continuing a "black propaganda" campaign against suspected extremists and their supporters by taking over control of the department that decides the army and police information policy in the province. (124)

According to Fisk, this did not mean that officers would no longer be empowered to leak information, scurrilous or otherwise, about the lives of extremist suspects, only that the more grotesque use of black propaganda would be restricted. (125)

A number of factors lay behind the army's decision to withdraw from its overt policy of news management. Compared to its routine public relations policy, psyops had been a crude and highly unpredictable strategy of news management, the short term benefits of which were often outweighed by the long term damage to the army's credibility as an information source. While the use of black propaganda had enabled the army to "score tricks" over the "terrorists" in the propaganda war, many journalists had become increasingly suspicious of the army. Andrew Stephen described how, following the army's success in blaming the IRA for a bomb attack which was generally believed to have been the work of loyalists, those journalists who had been misled by the army were less willing to trust them in the future:

In the short term the Army had scored a public relations success: they had managed to blacken the name of the "enemy", the Provisional IRA. But otherwise, it rebounded on them, for each journalist involved was less inclined to believe future military versions of events. (126)

Simon Winchester, of the Guardian, also found the army's credibility as a news source seriously tarnished after being misinformed about the details of a shooting incident. During a curfew imposed on the Falls Road, the army was to inform journalists that, in an exchange between the army and the IRA, only 15 shots had been fired by soldiers.

Figures released later showed that the real number of shots fired by the army had been 1,457. Winchester was to write:

Ever since those later figures were quietly published, many reporters found it terribly hard to accept contemporary accounts of a serious disturbance by the army public relations men. Never, since then, have I found myself able to take the army's explanation about a single incident with any less a pinch of salt than I would take any other explanation. (127)

The use of psyops not only undermined the army's credibility as a news source, but at times it was also to prove highly embarrassing and attracted unwanted publicity to the security forces and the government. Following the Paisley and Craig blunders, a tighter rein was placed on the use of psyops. According to Andrew Stephen:

Since these embarrassing episodes, there has been a much tighter control over what the Army press officers are allowed to say to journalists. In effect the Northern Ireland Office tells them what they can and cannot say; and the Army has to obtain Northern Ireland Office permission to issue statements with even the remotest political ramifications. (128)

In early 1977, the use of black propaganda was further restricted, this time at the behest of the then Northern Ireland Secretary of State, Roy Mason, an individual who had himself once advocated a total news blackout as a means of defeating the IRA. (129) According to a report by Anne McHardy of the Guardian on the 26th February, 1977:

All statements issued by the army press desk at Lisburn in Northern Ireland are being vetted by the Secretary of State for Ulster, Mr. Roy Mason, to stop the use of "black propaganda" by soldiers. Statements prepared by regiments operating in the province have all to go through the press desk before being issued. (130)

According to the report a tighter rein had been placed on the army press desk following a number of instances in which stories leaked by the army had embarrassed the government. McHardy wrote:

The Northern Ireland Office is now adamant that "dirty tricks" will not be used again, neither will any form of propaganda not based strictly on the truth. All army statements are therefore vetted by Mr. Mason's staff at Stormont Castle. (131)

However, while the credibility damage and the occasional embarrassing blunder perhaps influenced the decision to withdraw from the use of psyops, they were not conclusive factors. A more skilful and sophisticated application of black propaganda could well have been implemented had the policy been compatible with the British state's long term political strategy for the North. Undoubtedly, the most important factor behind the withdrawal from the use of black propaganda was that such a policy was no longer compatible with the changing military and political goals of the British state. The three-pronged strategy of the British state of normalisation, criminalisation and Ulsterisation, as it evolved from the mid-1970s, necessitated a subordinate military and information role for the British army. As the policy of Ulsterisation developed, and the public profile adopted by the army reduced, there was a corresponding reduction in the army's information role. One British journalist working for a quality paper, who has covered the conflict since 1969, described this process in the following terms:

As part of the "civilianisation" process the army's press briefings, and the army's press point of view, were withdrawn and the onus was placed on the Royal Ulster Constabulary. This was just simply part of the political direction to restore "civilianisation" to Northern Ireland. Part of the process which stemmed from the army's original arrival in an emergency role in 1969. At that time the RUC was discredited, they had no press role to play at all. The army completely took over that role as well as the direct, on the street, security measures. Since 1976 there has been a gradual process of ending this structure; the police now handle all security enquiries except for particular specific points relating to particular army units which would be outside the scope of the RUC. (132)

Consequently, as the state's policy on the Six Counties evolved from the mid-1970s onwards, the conditions under which psyops had been

used in the past no longer existed. As the violence of the early years slowly declined, Northern Ireland slowly slipped from the front pages of the press, and the role of the press as a primary terrain on which the army sought to wage its campaign against the IRA became less significant. From 1976 onwards, the balance of power on the security front increasingly shifted towards the police.⁽¹³³⁾

Ulsterisation: 1977 ...

The army's role as a major source of information for journalists reporting Northern Ireland reached its peak in 1976; since then, in line with the gradual process of Ulsterisation, the RUC has increasingly assumed responsibility for providing journalists with the routine information on which they construct their reports. An early indication that the balance of forces within the security forces was changing first came in early 1975 when, as part of the army's attempts to reduce its visibility, it ceased its practice of issuing monthly incident bulletins outlining the number of shootings, hijackings and bombings.⁽¹³⁴⁾

From 1976 onwards, the "Ulsterisation" of information slowly gathered pace. In 1977, the army stopped providing a round-the-clock press desk, first reducing it to 18 hours and then to 12. By 1983, the press office at Lisburn worked normal office hours closing at 6 p.m. with just one press officer on night call who could be paged if an important enquiry was received from a journalist.⁽¹³⁵⁾ The reduced service provided by the press desk was also accompanied by a reduction in the number of staff briefed to deal with journalists. By 1981, the army's staff of 40 press officers had been reduced to 14 press officers attached to ground units (including the Ulster Defence Regiment), and six officers and Ministry of Defence officials at Lisburn.⁽¹³⁶⁾ In 1982, the status of the Lisburn office was downgraded when the Lieutenant-Colonel then in charge was replaced by a Major. By 1984, the army's press office had

been reduced to its pre-1969 size. At present, the office consists of one Senior Information Officer seconded from the Government Information Service, and two Information Officers, one of whom produces the army news sheet, Visor. (137)

As the process of Ulsterisation progressed during the late 1970s and early 1980s, journalists contacting the army press desk at Lisburn found army spokesmen increasingly unco-operative. The lack of co-operation from the army and the RUC forced one Thames Television producer to complain bitterly in a letter to the Times in December, 1980, about what he saw as obstacles being placed in his way by the army. These obstacles, he argued, were making it difficult, if not impossible, to report on the army's counter-insurgency operations. Peter Gill complained that:

New, and unpublished restrictions on press coverage introduced earlier this year by army headquarters in Northern Ireland and the Royal Ulster Constabulary - restrictions dating from changes of command in both forces at the turn of the year - mean that only the barest information on incidents is released and little else. (138)

He continued:

There is in current force an overriding policy that Press attention on the army's role in Northern Ireland should be kept to an absolute minimum. No public justification for these restrictions has been offered, but the outlook seems to be that an absence of Press, and particularly TV coverage may help in winding down the conflict. (139)

Journalists who contacted the army press desk for routine information during this period were increasingly referred to the RUC. By 1982, as one journalist was to comment, the army had "such a low profile that they are not to be seen at all from the propaganda point of view":

As for speaking to the press, that's all left to the police now. All calls in regard to subversive activity

are to be made through the local police not the army at all. They no longer have this overt department and there is no longer a press desk. Everything has been shoved on to the police. (140)

By transferring the role of information provision to the police, an important element of the "normalisation" process was facilitated. During the early 1970s, the constant flow of information provided by the army was the method by which it had been able to command the attention of the press and thus maintain the high public profile compatible with its "peacekeeping" role. Over this period, the army not only welcomed the attention of the press, but actively sought it by contacting journalists in order to "sell" stories favourable to the army. To-day, the journalist wishing to hear the army's account of an incident has to already know of the incident and then contact the army for a statement. If the journalist does not know of the incident, the army is not necessarily going to tell him. In this way, the official attempts to convince national and international opinion that the North was returning to "normal" was facilitated.

While the "primacy of the RUC" primarily reflected the changing structure of decision making, and the changing responsibility for security in the North, at another level the increasing information role played by the RUC was an integral part of the British state's policy of criminalising the conflict in the North. An early indication of this policy came in 1977 when the army changed the manner in which it gave out information. According to Chris Rhyder of the Sunday Times, the change came about in an effort to cut down the number of army propaganda blunders which were attracting undue publicity. Under a report headlined "Army plans to stress 'successes'", Rhyder noted that the army had adopted two changes in the way it released information:

Firstly, the "watchkeepers" who man the army Press desk at Lisburn 24 hours a day, no longer volunteer blow-by-blow details of every attack and shooting incident.

Instead they draw reporters' attention only to army successes, such as defusing a bomb or uncovering caches of arms. They will, however, confirm the details of a particular incident in answer to a specific inquiry. (141)

Rhyder also noted that there had been a change in the style of language used when reporting events, a change which reflected the British state's attempts to de-politicise violence in the North as part of its policy of criminalisation:

An incident that in the past would have been reported like this: "Shots were fired at an army foot patrol in Belfast", might now be reported by the army like this: "There was an attempt to murder members of an army foot patrol in Belfast". (142)

As one senior army Information Officer commented when explaining the army's reduced information role:

In Northern Ireland army stories inevitably may involve terrorist crime. The army press office keeps in touch with the RUC press office and recognises that it is for the police not the army to be the prime source of information to the press on crime - even when that crime is perpetrated against soldiers. The office will consider requests from journalists to accompany patrols, interview soldiers and film operations: but our policy reflects the fact that the army is the junior partner in the security forces to the police, and we are unlikely to automatically agree to press requests for facilities if we believe those requests should more appropriately be made to the police. (143)

As the RUC became the primary information source about events in the North, army public relations have increasingly reverted to their pre-1969 role: arranging press visits from local journalists, undertaking public relations for the Territorial Army, and working on behalf of units that recruit in the Six Counties.

As the army wound down its information facilities, the RUC expanded its own operations and started to provide a 24 hour news service. The operational centre of the RUC's information service is located at Brooklyn House, East Belfast. Here all aspects of the RUC's

information policy are co-ordinated. In 1982, following the reorganisation of the RUC by Sir John Hermon, the information services of the RUC were centralised, and the press office was integrated into the central control room - known as Force Control and Information Centre. Force Control and Information Centre had a combined staff of 60 - composed of a mixture of information officers and operational police officers.⁽¹⁴⁴⁾ It is a highly efficient operation using sophisticated technology capable of dealing with thousands of telephone calls per day. As one journalist was to comment, it's "like Star Wars".⁽¹⁴⁵⁾ Irish Times reporter Peter Murtagh described the control room:

On one wall of a huge room with a high ceiling, there is a map of Northern Ireland about 20 feet high. Beside it there are two maps of the North's motorways and the wall has two large charts indicating precisely how many RUC reservists are available at any one time and where.

There are eight console desks with phones, computer terminals and the room also has computer visual display units. The air is filled with the humming of electronic machinery at work.

Operations are co-ordinated from a central console desk. This includes the confidential telephone line which is tape recorded and never answered directly by staff. The desk also has a radio receiver which allows control to listen to every single radio transmission made by police anywhere in the North.

Every RUC station has a message switching system - a means of communication similar to a telex. Information also arrives via radio and computer. A number of senior officers, the Chief Constable and some sections at headquarters, have special visual display units into which selected important information is put, thus allowing them to follow events minute by minute.

The entire system means that the RUC knows what is happening anywhere in the North before anyone else, save those directly involved.⁽¹⁴⁶⁾

As a consequence of Hermon's centralisation of RUC operations, information policy is more tightly controlled than ever - operations and information about operations are now co-ordinated from a single point. In this respect, the information strategy of the RUC is far more efficient than the army's ever was: the chance of the RUC's

right hand not knowing what its left is doing, as was so often the case with the army, has been greatly reduced.

Generally speaking, journalists working in the North find the RUC a much more reliable source of information. As one journalist put it: "They are reliable. They are sound. They are only going to tell you what they want to tell you, but they don't deliberately mislead you".⁽¹⁴⁷⁾ Another journalist commented:

We find them [the RUC] very reliable because there has been so much criticism over the years that they are frightened to tell us anything but the truth - or what is fairly close to the truth - because they know that one way or another we are going to find out the truth and either write it or go back to them. And they'd face monstrous criticism not only from us but from various MPs both in Westminster and Stormont.⁽¹⁴⁸⁾

While most journalists find the RUC a more reliable source of information, journalists are still aware that they may have an interest to pursue as much, if not more than the army used to. It is in the provision of information about violence involving its own members that the tension between the RUC's role as a major participant in the conflict, and as a major source of information about the conflict, is often at its greatest. As was so often the case with the army, when the RUC's desire to protect its image conflicted with its duty to provide journalists with accurate information, it was the latter that has more often than not come off second best. As one experienced Irish journalist said, while the RUC was usually more accurate on routine matters, when it came to its own violence:

... the police press desk then became a buffer, which seemed quite often more anxious to stop the press finding out exactly what was going on, and on occasions disseminated false or misleading information.⁽¹⁴⁹⁾

In recent years, the RUC's covert operations against suspected IRA and INLA members have resulted in accusations from some journalists that

the force had deliberately sought to mislead them by putting out false information. One such case was the shooting of three IRA members in 1982. On the 11th November, 1982, an RUC special operations unit shot dead three IRA volunteers at a roadblock near Lurgan. On the night of the killings, the police issued a statement that the three men, Gervais McKerr, Sean Burns and Eugene Toman, had been shot after their car had crashed through a police roadblock. That night, BBC news showed the bullet-ridden car. The car had more than 25 bullet holes in the driver's door and a further 10 holes in the boot. This appeared to contradict the police version that the car had been fired upon after it had crashed through the roadblock at high speed. The following day, the police altered their initial statement saying that the car had been stopped at the roadblock and had then accelerated towards the policeman who had waved it down. The killing provoked a bitter political row with nationalist politicians who demanded a full inquiry into the incident. (150)

Despite the controversy surrounding the police version of the shooting, a month later, in a similar incident, the press were still giving credence to the account provided by the RUC. Following the shooting of Seamus Grew and Roddy Carroll, both members of INLA, in almost identical circumstances, the Guardian was to report that:

The shooting is the third of this type in just over a month. On November 11 police shot dead three IRA men who crashed through a roadblock in Lurgan. (151)

While the Times reported that in the previous month "Three IRA men were shot after their car went through a roadblock in Lurgan". (152)

The killing of Grew and Carroll raised further suspicions that the RUC was involved in a "shoot-to-kill" policy against known IRA and INLA members, and that it was deliberately pursuing a policy of misinformation in order to conceal the involvement of an army undercover

unit and Special Branch officers. While the initial statement put out by the RUC stated that Grew and Carroll had crashed through a roadblock, this was later to be proved a complete fabrication. It was not until 15 months later, when one of the officers involved (who was later to be charged with the murder of Grew) admitted in court that the RUC had deliberately misinformed journalists in an attempt to cover up the events leading to the shooting.⁽¹⁵³⁾

Police attempts to conceal the involvement of the army in covert operations have also forced the RUC into positions where it has had to put out incorrect or misleading information. On the 2nd February, 1983, Eugene Cornelius McMonagle, an IRA volunteer, was shot dead by an undercover soldier. For several hours after the killing, the police would only tell journalists that two civilians had been shot in an incident. Confirmation that the army had been involved was only given after it had been reported on radio and television. The police later issued a statement saying that a soldier on plain-clothes duty was "accosted by two men, one of whom was said to have been armed. The armed man grabbed him and there was a struggle. Shots were fired by the soldier".⁽¹⁵⁴⁾ A later police statement confirmed that no gun had been found at the scene of the shooting. The police statement was strongly contested by the victim's sister and neighbours, who claimed that he had been babysitting for a neighbour.⁽¹⁵⁵⁾

These, and similar incidents, have done considerable damage to the RUC's credibility in the eyes of many journalists. As one of them, reflecting on the RUC's handling of journalists during the alleged "shoot-to-kill" incidents, was to comment: "I don't know if I'll ever listen to what they say again without some doubt at the back of my mind".⁽¹⁵⁶⁾

What was unusual about these incidents was not that journalists

had been deliberately misled by the police, but rather that the police had been found out. Generally speaking, unless an incident looks like becoming controversial, police statements are more often than not taken at face value. As one journalist was to comment: "It's the unusual journalist who'll go out and dig up a story, and find a version that is contrary to the police version".⁽¹⁵⁷⁾

The ability of the RUC to secure prominence for its own version of events in the press is made easier by a combination of factors that not only strengthen its position as a "primary definer", but also inhibit journalists from going beyond police statements in search of alternative accounts. First, the ability of journalists to check and cross-check every statement issued by the police is limited by the pressure of deadlines, time and manpower. The days when every national newspaper maintained a large staff in the North are long gone. While the Daily Mirror and the Daily Mail each employ at least two full-time journalists in Belfast, the rest of the British press rely on the efforts of a single reporter with occasional contributions from "stringers". This obviously places constraints on the time and energy of many journalists, who are increasingly forced to prioritise their resources and make crucial decisions as to what event or issue should command their attention. As we shall see in the next chapter, in ordering their priorities, journalists are forced to take account of the particular requirements of their news desk and the perceived news value of events. Routine acts of violence, however, are increasingly low on the list of priorities. One journalist working for a quality paper, described the kind of decisions he frequently has to make when ordering his time and resources:

For instance, if it is only one person, if it's a bomb and only one person is killed you have to, especially if you are the only one person covering the whole of Ireland, you have to make up your mind if it's going

to be worth your while for your timing and the type of paper you are. Is it worth your while to drive all the way there and all the way back, and might not your resources be better channelled doing something else? And these are judgements you have to make there and then, no more than that, you can't do any more. (158)

Another journalist commented that. "it would have to be pretty big to drag us out of Belfast these days". (159) Consequently, if an incident takes place close to a deadline, and it is a "routine" act of violence some distance from the journalist's base, then the likelihood is that a reporter will rely on the police press desk, local radio and television in order to get some version of the incident in time for his copy deadline. Thus, the pressure of deadlines, the constraints on time and manpower, not only magnify the role of the information services operated by the police, but, more importantly, increase the reliance of journalists on them. This tends to increase the likelihood of journalists taking the official line and, as we have seen above, this may increase the likelihood of mistakes.

While some journalists religiously cross-check police statements, if it is at all possible, others have little incentive to provide anything other than the official version of events. As one journalist working for a popular paper put it:

I am working for a newspaper which, for whatever reason, doesn't tend to delve too deeply into incidents and the background to incidents. They want a straight bang-bang account of what happened, and there is little time for analysis. Because the RUC are the only source of information on these sorts of events [acts of violence] we have to take their word for it. (160)

Consequently, the RUC often has the immense advantage of getting its version of events across first and it is left up to the integrity of the individual journalist to cross-check that version. However, the RUC is attuned to the requirements of the press, and it is aware that if it puts out a misleading statement its chances of being caught out are slight.

Moreover, it is also aware that if it is later to be proved wrong, the correct version is unlikely to be given the same prominence or have the same impact. As one broadcasting journalist explained:

If, for example, a policeman shoots a guy in Armagh, and when he files his report he says that the guy didn't stop or he was running away - he makes up a story, when in fact all he did was to shoot the guy point-blank in the chest - it is going to take a while before this policeman is brought in and questioned by his own men. Even if it is done in the most proper manner, it, is still going to take a while to get this guy, to turn him around and say "this doesn't make sense" ... He may admit a day later, or even a day or two later, that the cock-and-bull story he made up that went to the press desk, that went to all the journalists, that appeared in all the papers in London and across the world, was a lie. But by that time the story is dead; in a journalistic sense, it's gone. People have heard that the IRA man raised a rifle and that's why he was shot and we later find out that that was a load of bullshit. But by that time everybody has been heavily influenced by that report, and second day reporting doesn't get anywhere near the same attention as first day reporting does.

So in that sense, and I don't think it's a conspiratorial thing, the authorities would say we got it wrong but we finally admitted it; we told you the correct story so you can't find fault with us on that. But they know in the back of their mind, they are experienced enough to know, that they have won a propaganda battle by getting out the wrong story ... However, although they gain in one sense, in another sense they lose credibility when they get the story wrong, as we all, as journalists, are saying: "well, so much for the RUC; they don't know what the hell is going on". So it is bad for them if they get the story wrong. (161)

The RUC press office is undoubtedly aware of the importance of credibility and in this sense they have learnt from many of the earlier mistakes of the army. As one senior RUC press officer put it:

... the one thing that is impressed most of all on a new member of staff, and it's done deliberately and dramatically, is that when you speak you're not speaking as John Bloggs. You, your voice, is the RUC ... Within minutes what you say will have been disseminated to hundreds of outlets - literally around the world. It will be broadcast in New York, it will be running in a newspaper in New Zealand, it'll be out on the streets in Berlin. You can't ring back an editor and say "I'd like to withdraw that". It's irretrievable, absolutely irretrievable. Journalists will forgive you if you ring them back fifteen minutes later saying, "I have additional information"; they will never forgive you for saying, "by the way, I got that wrong, can I have it back?" Because you can't have it back; it's gone, out into the ether for ever. (162)

This is not to say that the RUC has not been willing to put its credibility as a news source on the line if the stakes have been high enough. And, when the stakes have been its political credibility internationally, the RUC, like the army, has been prepared to use black propaganda as a means of discrediting those who threaten its position. A clear example of this was the RUC's response to the controversy surrounding the interrogation techniques being employed against internees at RUC detention centres during the late 1970s.

Allegations that the security forces were ill-treating internees, including the use of sensory deprivation, were not new. In the year following the imposition of internment, the RUC had interrogated as many as 3,000 suspects under Regulation 10 of the Special Powers Act, 1922. Allegations of ill-treatment that were to flow from Palace Barracks, the main interrogation centre, forced the then Conservative government to instigate an official inquiry under Sir Edward Compton. As a result of this and subsequent reports on the issue, the government had been forced to state its determination to stop any further ill-treatment of suspects. (163)

Consequently, when a new wave of allegations against the RUC came in in the mid-1970s, they were politically explosive. The allegations, which centred on the treatment of detainees at Castlereagh, had been circulating in the North for some time but had attracted little in the way of media interest. A number of television journalists had attempted to tackle the issue in 1977 against stiff opposition and with mixed success. (164) However, following a report by Amnesty International in June, 1978, and after the IBA had already responded to official pressure and banned one programme on the subject, Weekend World broadcast a programme on the torture allegations. Among those interviewed was Dr. Robert Irwin, a police doctor who had done work for

the RUC for ten years, three of them at Castlereagh. In the programme, Dr. Irwin described how, during his work at Castlereagh, he had examined between 150 and 160 people with injuries of one kind or another. Responding to the allegations made by government and police officials that these injuries were self-inflicted, allegations which had been given substantial coverage in the press, Dr. Irwin said: "These are injuries which could not be self-inflicted. Ruptured eardrums, I would say, being one of the most serious could not possibly be self-inflicted". (165)

The programme caused an outcry. The Northern Ireland Office accused it of being little more than a thinly disguised attack on the RUC and the army, while the RUC complained that it was likely to put the lives of policemen at risk. In an effort to discredit Dr. Irwin, the RUC commenced on what amounted to a smear campaign. By leaking stories to the press which cast Irwin's motives into doubt, the RUC sought to undermine the credibility of his testimony. According to the Irish Times:

First indications of press office willingness to supply background information detrimental to Dr. Irwin came on Sunday night when one reporter was told the doctor had "got a bit of demotion".

The press officer also mentioned: "You know his wife was raped a while ago" and suggested that Dr. Irwin seemed to hold a grudge against the police for failure to track down the rapist. (166)

Press officers also suggested to other journalists that Dr. Irwin was a "drunk", had "domestic problems" and was "sour and bitter" towards the RUC over losing his job. (167)

Attempts to discredit Dr. Irwin's testimony were to prove unsuccessful. On the 16th March, 1979, less than a week after the rape smear, the Bennett Report confirmed Dr. Irwin's allegations when it concluded that there had been "cases in which injuries, whatever

their precise cause, were not self-inflicted and were sustained in police custody".⁽¹⁶⁸⁾ In the wake of the Bennett Report, new procedures and safeguards were introduced to ensure that the brutal methods employed at Castlereagh would not be repeated.⁽¹⁶⁹⁾

Nevertheless, while smear campaigns such as the one pursued against Dr. Irwin may appear to fail in their primary objective, they may function to confuse the media and divert public attention away from sensitive issues to more manageable ones. And indeed this may well be their main intention. Thus, while the smear campaign itself may well be adjudged a "failure" in other respects, it may well be considered a "success". When judged in these terms, the information campaign waged by the authorities to discredit the allegations flowing from the detention centres (which culminated in the smear against Dr. Irwin) was a success. As Liz Curtis was to write:

Now at last, nearly three years after the first torture allegations had been made about Castlereagh, two years after the first television expose, steps were taken to lessen the brutal interrogation methods. This was no thanks to the press who, instead of promoting investigation, had actually hindered it. Instead of demanding a public enquiry at the outset, the press had duplicated the authorities' fury, attacking the BBC and ITV instead of government. The quality press had been diverted into defending the need for press freedom in a democracy, instead of examining how that 'democracy' was infringing human rights. Some sections of the press had dutifully acted as black propaganda outlets for the authorities. Both BBC and ITV had been intimidated into long periods of silence.⁽¹⁷⁰⁾

The apparent willingness of the authorities to accept the short term damage of being "caught out" for the diversionary advantages of the smear tactic has again been clearly demonstrated by the campaign against John Stalker. Appointed to investigate a previous RUC cover-up over the killing of Michael Tighe, Seamus Grew and Roddy Carroll, the Stalker enquiry, and its likely implication of the RUC, MI5 and the Special Branch in "dirty tricks", was politically explosive. In its

efforts to break the link between the nationalist community and the IRA and INLA, the British state has sought to convince nationalists that the civil powers in the North represent the impartial forces of law and order. Furthermore, successive British governments have sought to legitimate the continued British presence in the North on the grounds that it is simply there to "keep the peace". As the Times was to warn in 1983, security force activities which undermined this public image could do irreparable damage:

For if suspicion were converted into belief, and the belief into knowledge, that the civil power in Northern Ireland has resorted to countering the armed subversion of lawful order by its own perversion of lawful means, then not only would the confidence of the nationalist community be lost forever, the moral basis for Britain's presence in the Province would vanish. (171)

The political implications of the RUC's "shoot-to-kill" policy were so great that the authorities were prepared to destroy the credibility and the career of a senior and highly respected police officer in order to hinder the Stalker enquiry. The campaign against John Stalker, whoever's fingerprints eventually prove to be on it, has been highly successful. The allegations against Stalker may have been discredited, and the investigations into the RUC may well have continued, but Stalker has been permanently isolated from the enquiry, which has subsequently lost much of the independent rigour which had initially made it such a threat. Furthermore, as the details of the Stalker controversy slowly surfaced during the course of 1986, Stalker, rather than the subject of his investigations, has commanded the attention of the press and public. Thus, while in the short term the Stalker controversy may have generated a lot of unwanted publicity for the authorities, in the long term it may well be seen as a calculated political gamble that paid off.

Despite the immediate damage done to the RUC's credibility as an information source, the campaign against Stalker, like the earlier one

against Dr. Irwin, is unlikely to threaten the RUC's relationship with the media. Since the mid-1970s, the RUC has become the primary source of information about daily incidents of violence. The journalist who frequently questions the RUC's word runs the risk of upsetting his relationship with an important information source and may thus endanger his ability to gain information in the future. As one journalist, when asked whether the RUC's control over the information flow had made journalists sensitive about criticising them, was to reply:

Yes, I think it is common among English newspapers. There is little direct criticism of the RUC these days; everyone thinks they are doing a rather splendid job. The days when, well the Sunday Times used to be famous for having a go at the RUC, but those days have gone as well. (173)

At present the RUC is in a much stronger position to control the flow of information than the army were during the early 1970s. Since the mid-1970s, the issue of Northern Ireland has slowly slipped from the front pages of the British press; stories which, in the early days, would have commanded front page coverage, are increasingly relegated to the inside pages. Individual killings, be they members of the security forces or civilians, are so "commonplace" that they may not even surface as a news item - except perhaps in the stop press. While the quality press continues to give daily coverage to events in the North, the popular press now tends to reserve most of its Irish news for its Northern Edition. As we shall see in the following chapter, only the most spectacular or horrific acts of violence now stand a chance of running all editions. This lack of interest in the daily conflict in the North, coupled with the RUC's sophisticated information service, suggests that in the future Northern Ireland is likely to attract even less attention than it does now.

Conclusion

On the 13th March, 1977, the Sunday Times, in an editorial titled "Terrorism: why both sides need to be kept in the public eye", asked its readers two questions concerning the relationship between the media, the state and "terrorism":

Should the media give prominence to terrorism ... given that the aim of much terrorism is to publicise a cause and that a denial of publicity might discourage repetition?

And: ... ought the media to report the opinions of the enemies of the State there in Northern Ireland, or complaints of malpractice against those fighting them? (174)

Their reply to these two questions, in that it is particularly germane to the arguments laid out above, is worth quoting at length:

The case against such reporting is that it damages the strength and credibility of a national effort. There is clearly force in this, and it is not to be discredited by the fact that it is the plea behind the proposed new curbs on the Press in South Africa. Good governments, too, need strength, and their servants need respect. The argument on the other side is that the citizens on whose behalf the effort is being made, the war waged, need the fullest possible picture of its course. That must include information about the aims and strength of the other side, as conveyed in interviews, and about the cost to the Government side - not just in death and wounds and waste, but in the moral damage that may come from the absorption of immoral methods into general use.

... The notorious problem is how a civilised people can overcome uncivilised people without becoming less civilised in the process. Retaliation in kind will not do. It stiffens resistance, and it destroys the moral claims on which the State's effort is based. Yet it is a constant temptation for the forces of order. Since those forces are understandably slow in disclosing their own lapses, it sometimes becomes the business of the media to inquire into them instead.

Certainly the media need to exercise scrupulous judgement in doing so, and in publishing the outcome. They have often been wrong. They have erred on both sides of the truth: they have occasionally been over-credulous of faults said to have been displayed by their own Government's forces of order, and they have sometimes believed too readily in the virtues and successes which those forces claim. The latter brand of credulity, in particular, has been common in the history of war reporting for a hundred years; and more than one war

has been fruitlessly prolonged, and has caused avoidable evil as a result.

The example of South Africa, and of a great many other countries where the forces of order are even less open to journalistic scrutiny, is not altogether irrelevant. If soldiers and policemen, however well meaning, are left free to pursue the State's aims in a way that is immediately convenient, and if politicians condone resulting excesses in the name of the general good, then the general good may well turn out to have been lost somewhere along the way. (175)

Even this guarded defence of the media's right, if not duty, to report the activities of the State and its representatives during times of conflict with objectivity and honesty, has a hollow ring when laid against the record of the British press in its reporting of Northern Ireland. Since 1969, the British press has been subjected to a sustained attempt on the part of the British army, and to a lesser extent, the Northern Ireland police, to enlist it, willingly or unwillingly, as an ally in the conflict against the "enemies" of the state. Too often British journalists have shown themselves willing, if not eager, to accept the "Queen's Shilling". There have, of course, been some notable exceptions. Robert Fisk of the Times, Simon Winchester of the Guardian, Mary Holland of the Observer and those journalists of the Sunday Times Insight team, have all contributed some sterling reports over the years. In the main, however, too many journalists have all too easily allowed other considerations to divert them from their responsibility to provide the British public with a comprehensive and thoughtful account of the Irish conflict.

The campaign to blacken the name of the IRA through the use of psyops, the stifling of any criticism of the role of the British state and its representatives in Northern Ireland, and the slow "domestication" of the Irish conflict could not have been a success without the complicity of British journalists. While the majority of journalists were aware of the army's campaign against the media, few accept

responsibility for its success. Some blame those cross-channel journalists, of which there were undoubtedly many, who were content to sit in the bar of the Europa Hotel; some blame the lack of interest in Britain and the imperatives of news value; others blame their news desk and back-bench sub-editors for changing otherwise investigative copy into uncritical reports. Few, however, blame themselves.

Notes

- (1) Elliott, P. "Misrepresenting Ulster: news as field-dressing", New Society, 25th November, 1976.
- (2) The army are regularly used as advisers by other countries, and a unit of the SAS provide security in Oman.
- (3) Hooper, A. The Military and The Media, Gower Publishing House, Aldershot, 1982, p 183.
- (4) See for example: Eamon McCann, The British Press and Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Socialist Research Centre, 1971.
- (5) Kelley, K. The Longest War: Northern Ireland and the IRA, Zed Press, London, 1982.
- (6) Quoted in A History of Northern Ireland, Buckland, P., Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1981, p 105.
- (7) Interview with Army Press Office by author, 19th April, 1984.
- (8) Interview with RUC Press Officer by author, 19th April, 1984.
- (9) Clutterbuck, R. The Media and Political Violence, Macmillan Press, London, 1981, pp 95-96.
- (10) Ibid., p 96.
- (11) Hooper, A. Op. cit., 1982, p 184.
- (12) Charter, D.A. "Intelligence and Psychological Warfare Operations in Northern Ireland", Royal United Services and Institute Journal, September, 1977.
- (13) Ibid., p 11.

- (14) The Times, 16th August, 1969.
- (15) Ibid.
- (16) Daily Mirror, 16th August, 1969.
- (17) Daily Mail, 16th August, 1969.
- (18) Daily Telegraph, 16th August, 1969.
- (19) General Frank Kitson Bunch of Fives, Faber, London, 1977, pp 286-287.
- (20) Kelley, K. Op. cit. 1982, Chap. 4.
- (21) Cooper, G.L.C. "Some Aspects of the Conflict in Ulster", Military Review, Vol. 53, No. 9, 1973.
- (22) Ibid., p 95.
- (23) Charter, D. Op. cit., 1977, p 25.
- (24) An example of Tugwell's thinking on the issue of counter-insurgency see: "Revolutionary Propaganda and the role of the Information Services in Counter-Insurgency Operations", Canadian Defence Quarterly, Vol. 3, Autumn, 1973.
- (25) Clutterbuck, R. Op. cit., 1981, p 96.
- (26) Quoted in Ireland: the Propaganda War, Curtis, L., Pluto Press, London, 1984, p 233.
- (27) Hooper, A. Op. cit., 1982, Chap. 13.
- (28) Ibid., Chap. 13.
- (29) Hoggart, S. "The army PR men of Northern Ireland", New Society, Vol. 26, No. 575, 1973.
- (30) Observer, 29th February, 1976.

- (31) Interview with Army Press Office by author, 19th April, 1984.
- (32) Hoggart, S. Op. cit., 1973.
- (33) Rock, P. "News as external recurrence", in Cohen, S. and Young, J. (eds.) The Manufacture of News: Deviance, Social Problems and the Mass Media, Constable, London, 1974, Chap. 3.
- (34) Hall, S. et al. Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order, Macmillan, London, 1978, Chap. 3.
- (35) Chibnall, S. Law and Order News, Tavistock, London, 1977, p 39.
- (36) Quoted in: "The British Media and Northern Ireland: Truth the first casualty", Campaign for Free Speech on Ireland, Russell Press, London, 1979, p 3.
- (37) Chibnall, S. Op. cit. 1977, p 41.
- (38) Interview with journalist by author, 14th April, 1984.
- (39) Hall, S. et al. Op. cit., 1978, p 57.
- (40) Ibid., pp 58-59.
- (41) The Yellow Card instructions lay down the conditions under which a soldier is allowed to open fire.
- (42) Winchester's account of the shooting casts doubt on the army's statement that it had only returned fire after being fired upon by snipers. Nevertheless, despite Winchester's eye-witness account, the main thrust of the Guardian's coverage gave greater credence to the army's version.

- (43) Daily Express, 31st August, 1972.
- (44) Hoggart, S. Op. cit., 1973.
- (45) Ibid.
- (46) For examples see Curtis, L., op. cit. 1984.
- (47) Observer, 29th February, 1976.
- (49) Op. cit., 1973.
- (50) Interview with journalist by author, 19th April, 1984.
- (51) Op. cit., 1973.
- (52) Winchester, S. In Holy Terror, Faber, London, 1975, pp 173-175.
- (53) Quoted in: "The British Media and Northern Ireland: Truth the first casualty", Campaign for Free Speech on Ireland", Russell Press, London, 1979, p 27.
- (54) Though many journalists are reluctant to admit that they are "soft" on official sources, others did accept that the army's and later the police's control over routine information did tend to lead to a degree of self-censorship.
- (55) Op. cit., 1973.
- (56) Quoted in Curtis, L., 1984, op. cit., p 232.
- (57) Winchester, S. Op. cit., 1975, pp 210-211.
- (58) All newspapers cited on 20th April, 1972.
- (59) Winchester, S. Op. cit., 1975, pp 210-211.
- (60) Interview with journalist by author, 19th April, 1984.

- (61) Ibid.
- (62) Murdock, G. et al. Televising 'Terrorism': Political violence popular culture, Comedia, London, 1983, Chap. 4.
- (63) Interview with Army Press Office by author, 19th April, 1984.
- (64) Interview with journalist by author, 17th April, 1984.
- (65) Ibid.
- (66) Elliott, P. Op. cit., 1976, p 400.
- (67) Ibid., p 400.
- (68) Curtis, L. Op. cit., 1984, pp 99-100.
- (69) For a more detailed analysis of the coverage accorded to the bombing see: Campaign for Free Speech on Ireland, 1979, op. cit., pp 35-36.
- (70) Interview with journalist by author, 19th April, 1984.
- (71) Interview with journalist by author, 10th April, 1984.
- (72) Watson, P. War on the Mind: The Military uses and abuses of Psychology, Hutchinson, London, 1978.
- (73) Bloch, J. and Fitzgerald, P. British Intelligence and Covert Action, Junction Books, London, 1983.
- (74) Ibid., p 72.
- (75) Ibid., p 72.
- (76) Ibid., p 72.

- (77) Chater, D.A. Op. cit., 1977, pp 25-26.
- (78) General Frank Kitson Low Intensity Operations: Subversion, Insurgency, Peace-Keeping, Archon, London, 1971, p 189.
- (79) For an assessment of the impact of Kitson's time in the Six Counties see: Ackroyd, C., Margolis, K. et al., The Technology of Political Control, (second edition) Pluto Press, London, 1980.
- (80) Though there is some dispute as to its exact location: Watson, P., 1978, op. cit., suggested that it was in the Six Counties.
- (81) General Frank Kitson Op. cit., 1971, p 189.
- (82) Guardian, 28th October, 1976.
- (83) Ibid.
- (84) Flagilot, R. Britain's Military Strategy in Ireland: The Kitson Experiment, Zed Press, London, 1983, p 66.
- (85) Ibid., p 66.
- (86) Ibid., p 65.
- (87) Guardian, 28th October, 1976.
- (88) Ibid.
- (89) Curtis, L. Op. cit., 1984, p 232.
- (90) See for example: Faligot, R., 1983, op.cit., Chap. 3; Curtis , L., 1984, op. cit. Chap. 10.
- (91) Curtis, L. Op. cit., 1984, p 235.
- (92) Faligot, R. Op. cit., 1983, p 68.
- (93) **Ibid., p 68.**
- (94) Sunday Times. 13th March, 1977.

- (95) Dillon, M. and Lehane, D. Political Murder in Northern Ireland, Harmondsworth, Penguin, London, 1973.
- (96) Guardian, 2nd May, 1973.
- (97) Times, 24th February, 1976.
- (98) Ibid.
- (99) Ibid.
- (100) Ibid.
- (101) Leaking information for political advantage is a day to day feature of political life. The Lobby system is often little more than a "formalised" system of leaking. See for example: Colin Seymour-Ure, "Parliament and Government", Royal Commission on the Press, Working Paper No. 3, HMSO, 1977, p 117-130.
- (102) For more details on Wallace see: Curtis, L. op. cit., 1984, Chap. 10.
- (103) Ibid., pp 235-236.
- (104) Observer, 29th February, 1976.
- (105) Curtis, L. Op. cit., 1984, p 236.
- (106) Ibid., p 237.
- (107) Ibid., p 237.
- (108) Elliott, P. Reporting Northern Ireland; a study of news in Britain, Ulster and the Irish Republic, University of Leicester Centre for Mass Communications Research, 1976, Chap. 5, p 3.
- (109) See for example: Macann, E. The British Press and Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Socialist Research Centre, 1971: "Media misreport Northern Ireland", Belfast Bulletin, No. 6, 1979, Belfast Workers' Research Unit.

- (110) Elliott, P. Op. cit., 1976, Chap. 2, p 4.
- (111) Curtis, L. Op. cit., 1984, p 110.
- (112) Sunday Times, 13th March, 1977.
- (113) Ibid.
- (114) Ibid.
- (115) Ibid.
- (116) Ibid.
- (117) Ibid.
- (118) Ibid.
- (119) Times, 25th March, 1975.
- (120) Ibid.
- (121) Ibid.
- (122) Guardian, 11th July, 1978.
- (123) Interview with journalist by author,
18th April, 1984.
- (124) Times, 13th March, 1975.
- (125) Ibid.
- (126) Observer, 29th March, 1976.
- (127) Winchester, S. Op. cit., 1975, p 71.
- (128) Observer, 29th February, 1976.
- (129) See Chap. 3.
- (130) Guardian, 26th February, 1977.
- (131) Ibid.
- (132) Interview with journalist by author,
12th April, 1984.

- (133) "Ulsterisation" is essentially a strategy of counter-insurgency. Modelled on the American policy of "Vietnamisation" its primary aim is to lower the "visibility" of "external" armed forces. In the case of Vietnam and Northern Ireland, the general aim is to placate opinion abroad and at home. Ulsterisation is also intrinsically linked to the policy of "criminalisation": once defined as criminal political violence in the North is then said to be the sole concern of the police.
- (134) "Media Misreport Northern Ireland", Belfast Bulletin, No. 6, op. cit., 1979, p 31.
- (135) Interview with Army Press Office by author, 19th April, 1984.
- (136) Ibid.
- (137) Ibid.
- (138) Times, 19th December, 1980.
- (139) Ibid.
- (140) Interview with journalist by author, 16th April, 1984.
- (141) Sunday Times, 27th February, 1977.
- (142) Ibid.
- (143) Interview with Army Press Office by author, 19th April, 1984.
- (144) Interview with RUC Press Office by author, 19th April, 1984.
- (145) Interview with journalist by author, 14th April, 1984.

- (146) Quoted in Curtis, L., 1984, op. cit. p 254.
- (147) Interview with journalist by author,
15th April, 1984.
- (148) Interview with journalist by author,
12th April, 1984.
- (149) Interview with journalist by author,
19th April, 1984.
- (150) Guardian, 15th November, 1982.
- (151) Guardian, 13th December, 1982.
- (152) Times, 13th December, 1982.
- (153) Guardian, 29th and 30th May, 1984.
- (154) Guardian, 4th February, 1983.
- (155) Ibid.
- (156) Interview with journalist by author,
15th April, 1984.
- (157) Interview with journalist by author,
14th April, 1984.
- (158) Ibid.
- (159) Ibid.
- (160) Ibid.
- (161) Interview with journalist by author,
18th April, 1984.
- (162) Interview with RUC Press Office by author,
19th April, 1984.
- (163) Taylor, D. Beating the Terrorists, Penguin Books,
Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1980.

- (164) Ibid.
- (165) Curtis, L. Op. cit., 1984, pp 63-67; see also:
Taylor, P., 1980, op. cit., Chap. 16-18.
- (166) Curtis, L. Op. cit., 1984, pp 65-66.
- (167) Ibid.
- (168) Ibid., p 67.
- (169) Taylor, P. Op. cit., 1980, Chap. 18.
- (170) Curtis, L. Op. cit., 1984, p 67.
- (171) Times, 5th January, 1983.
- (172) Observer, 31st August, 1986.
- (173) Interview with journalist by author,
15th April, 1984.
- (174) Sunday Times, 13th March, 1977.
- (175) Ibid.

CHAPTER 7

Reporting Northern Ireland: the view from within

I think that we, the BBC and the press as a whole, will be held to be guilty of not having warned people of what was going to happen in Northern Ireland in the late Sixties. There was a total silence about what went on in Ulster during those years, and when the explosion occurred, in 1969, people were dumbfounded. I think also that there have been other areas where we have been less than good. But Northern Ireland's a classic case where - partly because of my own background knowledge - there was a conspiracy of silence in the BBC and in the media generally. And historians will charge us with that, I suspect. (1)

(Alasdair Milne, 1981)

On the 5th October, 1968, the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA), formed in February, 1967, to articulate the growing discontent of Northern Ireland's nationalist population, concluded a summer of growing political activity with a planned civil rights march. The march, stimulated by the success of the first organised civil rights demonstration some two months earlier, was scheduled to cross the River Foyle into the predominantly nationalist city of Derry. That NICRA should have chosen Derry for what promised to be the biggest civil rights demonstration so far, was not accidental. For, despite their majority status, Catholics in Derry suffered many of the social, economic and political injustices experienced by Catholics throughout the Six Counties. The purpose of the march was to call public attention to these injustices and thus pressurise the Unionist hierarchy into reversing the policies it had pursued against the Catholic minority since partition. (2)

Two days prior to the march, the Stormont Home Affairs Minister, William Craig, used a threatened counter-demonstration by the Apprentice Boys as a pretext for banning the march. Despite the march's new-found illegality, NICRA decided to ignore the ban. The march, and the response it was to elicit from the Ulster police, were to mark the

events of the 5th October as a turning point in the subsequent history of the Six Counties. The RUC, who were out in force to prevent the march taking place, responded to the Catholic demonstration in a brutal fashion: with batons drawn, they launched an unprovoked and indiscriminate attack on the marchers - among them, the Westminster MP for East Belfast, Gerry Fitt. Scenes of baton-wielding policemen attacking peaceful and defenceless demonstrators, captured as they were by British television cameras, were to have a significant impact on public opinion beyond the Six Counties. As Kelley has written:

Gerry Fitt was interviewed by television reporters as he stood at the scene of the RUC's charge, his jacket, tie and shirt spotted with blood. This image of a member of the British Parliament, wounded during an unprovoked police charge as he attempted to march in support of one person/one vote, was flashed into millions of British homes and all around the world that October evening. English people, almost totally ignorant of the situation in the Six Counties, could hardly believe what they were seeing on their "tellys". This was part of the United Kingdom in the year 1968? Peaceful demonstrators were being beaten and arrested for demanding the passage of anti-discrimination laws? What sort of place was Northern Ireland anyway? And why was it that the marchers' complaints had never once been fully discussed at Westminster? (3)

Northern Ireland, after decades of neglect by both the British state and the British media, had finally forced its way on to the political and journalistic agenda. Thus was born the longest-running story in the history of the British media. Nearly two decades on, the conflict in the Six Counties has become almost a Fleet Street institution: like Parliament, the law courts, football stadiums, and the royal family, the conflict generates a frequent volume of reportable activity and like these other institutions, it provides a staple topic of news for the broadcasting and print media. Moreover, like the reporting of these other institutions, the coverage of events in the Six Counties has been routinised: the framework of values within which the conflict is reported; the parameters of what is acceptable and

unacceptable; the relationships between journalists and their information sources; and the journalistic "no-go areas" have, over time, become firmly established. Journalists posted to the Six Counties in 1986, unlike their colleagues in 1969, have an established framework of newsgathering practices to draw upon and to guide them as they go about the task of reporting. This framework or modus operandi, established over two decades of trial and error, constitutes the primary focus of this chapter.

The British media's failure to address the issue of Northern Ireland prior to 1968, and the inadequacy of its subsequent performance, has attracted criticism from many quarters. Critics from the left have accused journalists of failing to stand by their professional code of ethics in the face of political pressure and external attack. As a consequence, journalists have been held collectively responsible for a reporting failure on the issue of Northern Ireland. At worst, journalists have been portrayed as the compliant tools of the state and its representatives in the Six Counties, and ^{of having} allowed their newspapers to function as uncritical conduits for the view of the dominant social and political elite on both sides of the Irish Sea. From the political right, the same journalists have come under attack for failing to give sufficient support to the state and for allowing their professional imperatives to take preference over the need to defeat "terrorism".

Journalists on the other hand (though, as we have seen in Chapters 2 and 4, there are exceptions to this) tend to reject such criticisms out of hand as the paranoid dreams of "outsiders" who, for ideological reasons, or simply through ignorance, fail to fully comprehend the constraints and imperatives of their profession.⁽⁴⁾ At best, journalists tend to draw on the professional model and terminology provided by the Fourth Estate theory when defending their

role, and see themselves as professional "watchkeepers", anchored only to the values of their profession and the public interest. Others, though aspiring to this role, are keen to stress the limitations of time, space and audience interest which place obstacles in the path of its attainment.

At their extremes, all the above perspectives are problematical in that they shed little real light on the role performed by journalists in the Six Counties or the forces that shape this role. The first view denies the real autonomy that journalists enjoy as they go about the routine task of newsgathering and, by implication, assumes a network of conspiracy by the journalists from the ground upwards to report only those aspects of the conflict acceptable to the British state. The other view, by focusing on those isolated occasions when the media have gone against the immediate interests of the state and its policy in the Six Counties, ignores the general level of support the state has been able to command from the media in its campaign against national and international "terrorism". Likewise, the notion of journalists as fully autonomous professionals obscures, and indeed ignores, the real constraints imposed on journalists by the newspapers they work for: by the assumptions and values that underpin and help shape the way they approach the reporting of political violence; by the political consensus surrounding the issue of Northern Ireland in British politics; and by the inevitable problems of reporting a political and military conflict involving their own nation state. All these factors, as we have seen in previous chapters, have helped shape and define the political space in which journalists carry out their role as newsgatherers.

The purpose of this chapter is to chart a path through these popular, if at times unhelpful, conceptions of the role performed by journalists in the Six Counties. One of its aims is to come to some

understanding of the practical problems encountered by journalists in the reporting of a protracted and violent conflict in close proximity to, and involving, their own nation state. Of interest here is not only the way journalists perceive these problems but, perhaps more importantly, how they have sought to resolve them on a daily basis. A further, and related, aim is to establish what it is about the way journalists approach the routine task of newsgathering that helps make news about Northern Ireland the way it is. Of particular interest here is how conventional journalistic concepts such as "news value", "impartiality" and "balance" are applied on a daily basis to the reporting of political violence.

The themes and arguments developed in this chapter draw heavily on the accounts provided by journalists in a series of formal interviews and informal discussions during 1984 and 1985. As the background to this fieldwork has already been examined in some detail in Chapter 4, it need not detain us here apart from a few general comments.

First, when talking about "routine" newsgathering practices, it is necessary to bear in mind that these "routines", like the conflict they enable journalists to report, are not static. As I have argued in previous chapters, both the conflict itself and the state's strategy for combating it, are part of a dynamic process which has constantly entered into new phases. For those whose task it is to report the conflict, each new phase (be it the "peacekeeping" and consolidation phase of late 1969, or the Ulsterisation phase of the mid-1970s and early 1980s) has brought in its wake new problems which necessitate the modification of previously existing routines, a clear example being how the "routine" practice of using the army press office as a primary source of information had to be modified in the light of Ulsterisation. Thus a further aim of this chapter is to provide a historical overview of how reporting patterns have evolved since 1969. Secondly, while it

is tempting to use the collective term "journalists" when discussing the reporting of Northern Ireland, its usage has to be approached with a degree of caution, primarily because it tends to simplify what is in reality a collection of different groups of journalists often operating under different conditions, constraints and according to different newsgathering routines. Indeed, the conditions and constraints under which journalists operate may vary considerably according to their individual status and the nature of the newspaper they work for. The journalist working for a Belfast-based sectional paper like the Irish News or the Newsletter, for example, is unlikely to be subjected to the same editorial requirements as the journalist working for a mass circulation tabloid like the Sun or the Daily Mirror. Indeed, a further purpose of this chapter is to establish just how, if at all, the conditions under which journalists working for newspapers vary. Thus, where possible, I have avoided the collective term "journalists" except when describing general trends and when locating these trends within a wider historical perspective. Elsewhere, journalists are distinguished according to the nature and location of their papers and the status and role they perform in the news process.

Journalism and Northern Ireland: a case study

Alasdair Milne's description of the British media's failure to prepare the public for the ensuing conflict in the Six Counties as a "conspiracy of silence" is unusual for its candour, but perhaps more so in that it is a view shared by few of his journalistic colleagues. For many journalists, the relative attention paid to social and political issues by the media is determined not by the machinations of political elites in league with newspaper proprietors and their underlings, but rather by the intrinsic value of those events as news. Northern Ireland, according to this view, failed to surface as a news

issue prior to 1968, not because it was an issue that successive governments and successive generations of journalists had chosen to ignore, but because what was happening in Northern Ireland was not "newsworthy". As one journalist, when asked why the press had failed to address itself to events in the Six Counties prior to 1968, replied: "Well, why should it? There was nothing happening before that",⁽⁵⁾ while another, when asked the same question, replied: "Well, it was so terribly boring; nothing happened; there were no murders".⁽⁶⁾ While such explanations are hardly supported by the available historical evidence which, in stressing the political rather than the journalistic imperatives in explaining the lack of coverage during this period, tends to support the explanation forwarded by Milne, they do offer a partial insight into how journalists view the social and political world they report.⁽⁷⁾ From the close-up world of journalism, what is "happening", and thus what is newsworthy, is defined in terms of events rather than processes. Indeed, it may well be, as some have argued, that this event or "climax" orientated view of news selection is a contingent and defining characteristic of the news process itself, and that, even leaving aside the specific political factors that attended the British media's approach to Northern Ireland, it may well be that the same approach would have prevailed. Galtung and Ruge, for example, have argued that the very nature of the organisational structure and the imperatives of the news process may result in the under-reporting of trends and that, as a consequence, "the event that takes place over a longer time-span will go unrecorded unless it reaches some kind of dramatic climax ...".⁽⁸⁾ In the specific case of Northern Ireland, it took the violence (the climax) that the civil rights movement brought in its wake to attract the press rather than the social and political processes that made both the civil rights movement and the violence inevitable.

Whatever reasons lay behind Northern Ireland's failure to surface as a news issue, there can be little doubt that, prior to 1968, the British media tended to regard Northern Ireland as a separate, and indeed, almost alien country. As one Irish journalist was to comment:

Well, I think in many ways the British press - even the Tory press - when they on the one hand follow the old Empire line that Northern Ireland is an integral part of Britain, underneath it all they accept it as a different country. And, up until 1969, because there was nothing spectacular happening, they ignored the political problems that existed here. Not just the problem of gerrymandering by the Unionists, or almost totally ignoring the political debates in the old Stormont Parliament, but they also ignored the social problems that existed which in many ways gave rise to the violence: the bad housing, the dire unemployment, higher food prices, higher energy costs ... All of these things would have been major stories but they were ignored by the British press. (9)

Reflecting on the same theme, another Irish journalist said:

Prior to 1968 Northern Ireland would have been classified rather like Yorkshire or the Grampian area: an industrial backwater and an outpost. The news existed vaguely; there were brief flurries of violence in the 1950s, the odd escapade involving the IRA, but nothing concerted. And I think the British attitude was see no evil, hear no evil, and that was it - it was quiet enough and it just trundled on. (10)

This is not to say that Fleet Street was totally indifferent to Northern Ireland; the Six Counties was a market for the press and most newspapers maintained a correspondent there. During this period, however, newspapers tended to reserve their coverage of Irish affairs for their Irish editions - a variation on their Northern editions. In this respect, Fleet Street's perception of Northern Ireland as a separate country with its own distinct audience was reinforced. As one journalist who has covered Northern Ireland for a Fleet Street paper for thirty years explained:

if you read them [the London editions] you found quite often that there was very little in them because very little was happening before 1969. It was just another

state or statelet which was quiescent. All the stories were pretty petty, so why should they have paid attention to it? Few people were being killed, the IRA campaign of 1956-62, only six people were killed in that, and spread over those years it didn't make many headlines - in London anyway. Of course at that time every national newspaper had its Irish edition and therefore we were getting an inflated view of our own importance in that our papers would be arriving in the morning and we had splashes of local stories, but when you saw the London editions there was probably nothing in them.(11)

In the period prior to 1968, the British press, much as they do to-day, reserved much of their coverage of the social, political and economic life of the Six Counties for their Irish editions. The only stories concerning Northern Ireland which stood a chance of running all editions were those that related to violence and conflict. Reflecting on the period up until 1968, the same journalist said:

Most of our work between 1956 and 1962, the hard news that made the London editions, was IRA troubles again, but 90 per cent of the time we were just covering new industries. The end of 1962 the IRA said they had given up their campaign; they had no local support and they weren't going to continue. And from 1962 to 1968, a very short period of six years, the place was flourishing. All the stuff we were sending was about new industries, new orders for shipyards, and stability. But I doubt very much if a paragraph of that ever penetrated to Fleet Street.(12)

The reaction of many newspapers to stories relating to social and political malpractices in the Six Counties was to be no different. As one journalist complained: "They weren't interested enough. I mean these stories were sent but I don't think they were interested".(13)

Political malpractices such as gerrymandering and vote rigging, and open discrimination in housing and employment, which might normally have whetted the appetite of investigative reporters had they been taking place in Europe or America, were simply dismissed as Irish eccentricity:

They just said it was one of our little foibles over here; our different system. Just as to-day, in Bengal or the Punjab, all sorts of systems operate which we are not

privy to, or if we do read about them we say: "well, that's their system". So it took the violence to put it in the headlines, not parliamentary debate.(14)

The policy of news segregation pursued by many newspapers in the half century following partition, together with the British state's policy of turning a blind eye to the policies of a state it had helped create, ensured that little in the way of news about the Six Counties found its way to the British public. The British public, which was daily being informed of social and political discrimination in the Southern states of America, could scarcely have been aware that similar complaints were being made almost on its own doorstep. An image of "normalisation" was in effect facilitated.

1968: Fleet Street goes into action

If the factors that gave rise to the civil rights movement had generated little interest in Fleet Street, the same cannot be said for the violence the movement was to generate in the Six Counties. In the immediate aftermath of the October events, journalists from all over the world flooded into Northern Ireland. After decades of neglect, Northern Ireland was elevated, literally overnight, to the status of an international news story and, in the weeks and months that were to follow, the world's press beat a path to Derry and Belfast. The interest displayed by the world's media was hardly surprising; as one journalist with considerable experience in Northern Ireland explained:

For a change, Western Europe had a war, a religious war, on its doorstep; something that was unheard of. These types of wars were usually associated with Central America, the Middle East and perhaps some parts of the Far East, but certainly not in the United Kingdom itself. It was a revival and a resurrection of what people had forgotten in 1916.(15)

Many of the journalists arriving in Belfast or Derry for the first time were to suffer from the same complaint that afflicted the audience they

went there to serve: an almost total ignorance of Northern Ireland, its geography and culture, or the social and political factors which had given rise to the violence they had gone there to report. As one Irish journalist on a Fleet Street based paper described the first batch of journalists despatched to cover the conflict:

most of these journalists hadn't even heard of Northern Ireland before the rioting began in a place called Londonderry - and the only reason they would have heard about Londonderry was because of the music, "The Londonderry Air". I met lots of these journalists when they first arrived and they were completely ignorant of Northern Ireland, its geography, its topography, its political or religious set-up. They knew nothing at all about it; they had to start from scratch. (16)

Eamonn McCann recounts how, in the weeks and months following the events of October, 1968, some journalists:

mindful of the May Days in France that year spent much of their time trying to identify a local Danny the Red. Others would wander into the Bogside and ask if they could be introduced to someone who had been discriminated against. Most people prominent in the events preceding the October march had experiences such as Miss Rhoda Churchill of the Daily Mail coming to their front door seeking the address of an articulate, Catholic, unemployed slum dweller she could talk to. (17)

If a lack of background knowledge about Northern Ireland was a common problem for many English journalists first posted to the Six Counties in 1968, among overseas journalists, it was a universal one. An Irish journalist recounted with some amusement how a Japanese television crew spent much of their time in search of someone capable of translating the local dialect. Even in America, a country we commonly associate with a close interest in the Irish issue, the sudden emergence of Northern Ireland as a major news story sent many journalists scurrying for their maps of Europe. An American journalist, then working for the American network ABC, described his own experience:

I was working in New York City at the time on the news desk of ABC when the march across Craigavon Bridge took place and Gerry Fitt got bludgeoned on the head by an RUC man and got his head cracked open. When Gerry Fitt, now Lord Fitt, got hit on the head, that somehow or other triggered some immediate interest - at least as far as I was concerned. I think that was the time when suddenly Northern Ireland became important to Americans, or at least of renewed importance to America. I remember it distinctly because I was told by my editor to call Belfast and see if I could get hold of Mrs. Fitt to do a radio interview with her on the phone. I didn't even know where Northern Ireland was, and this is important because it shows my lack of understanding at the time. I also didn't understand why I had to go through the British telephone system to get to Northern Ireland, which shows, even then, that I didn't really understand why, or that, Northern Ireland was not part of the rest of Ireland and that it was part of the United Kingdom. In other words, all of this was fuzzy to me; which was probably symbolic of general attitudes and general knowledge. (18)

Lacking background information and established contacts and routines, the early months of the conflict must have been a testing time for many journalists. And, as a consequence, many of them became reliant upon official sources, some for the simple reason that Northern Ireland was indeed a different if not alien country, and they naturally gravitated towards those sources whose values, assumptions and accents they were familiar and felt most at home with. (19) For others, it was simply a matter of expediency: without recourse to these sources, many would have found the task of reporting difficult if not impossible.

As one Belfast based journalist explained:

the first batch of journalists were ignorant of the set-up and they were frightened of the set-up. And they were frightened to go out on the scene because not only did they not understand the people and what was going on for most of the time, but also they didn't understand the lingo; they didn't know what in hell the people were talking about. So they felt at home, and they felt secure when they phoned up the army and they got a fellow Englishman on the other end of the phone. And he then got some version of what happened out there ... most of them were quite happy to accept this and file it in their newspapers, and their newspapers were quite happy to get some version. They were only too glad of copy in those days because it was a difficult situation and the stories were new and the stories were big. (20)

The practical problems of reporting open and violent communal conflict were not limited solely to British and overseas journalists. As one Irish journalist was to explain:

... the fact is that it was all new to us; one minute we were covering flower shows and dog shows and ancient car rallies, and the next moment we were plunged into a situation like this. Nobody really knew what to expect. And in the case of the local papers, we had to contend with really big writers coming from Fleet Street and places like that who had been to war zones and knew what it was like. (21)

Overnight, Northern Ireland had been transformed from a journalistic "outpost" and "backwater" to one of the most sought after postings on Fleet Street. Journalists hoping to make a name for themselves, or simply to revive one, queued up for the posting. The magnitude of the events stimulated an immediate demand for copy and Fleet Street in its efforts to satisfy public demand flooded the Six Counties with journalists - at one stage the Daily Mirror had twelve journalists in Derry alone. (22) During the early months of the conflict, most newspapers tended to reserve the postings for their most experienced or promising journalists. Many were selected because they had reported previous colonial campaigns; as a consequence many of the early reports were peppered with references to Cyprus, Aden and Malaya. (23) The first batch of reporters, as one Irish journalist was to describe them, were "very much the first eleven". (24)

The attraction of the posting was hardly surprising: journalists make their names and secure their promotions by getting their reports into the papers, and the bigger the story the greater is the demand for their copy - and Northern Ireland, for a change, was undoubtedly the biggest story of the time. Add to this the ingredients of violence and danger and it is easy to understand why a posting to the Six Counties became a priority for many journalists. As one Irish journalist with

little sympathy for his Fleet Street counterparts put it: "It was a glamour posting; the boys at the bar, the bombs up the Falls Road; the petrol bombs and the gas".⁽²⁵⁾ During this period, a posting to Belfast or Derry could provide a stepping-stone on the road to a highly successful career.⁽²⁶⁾

To-day, much of the initial attraction of the posting has faded and journalists, in much the same way as they report the conflict itself, have become more selective; interest in the posting now tends to ebb and flow according to its salience as a news issue. During the relatively quiet period prior to the 1981 hunger strike, for example, the posting generated little interest among journalists on one quality paper. As the journalist who eventually accepted the posting explained:

Very few people were interested in the job at the time because it was very quiet, and obviously if you are to make your reputation in journalism you need to get "hot news". But I had done a couple of stints for the regular journalist and I became interested in the story. However, when the hunger strike started in 1981, suddenly there was a queue of people wanting to get out to Northern Ireland because it was a big story.⁽²⁷⁾

Despite the story's diminishing news value in recent years, many journalists sent, or volunteering to do their "stint" in the Six Counties still regard it as a good posting, though one journalist on a quality paper bemoaned the fact that, while the posting had once been considered a passport to a foreign posting, he had been "offered absolutely nothing at the end of it".⁽²⁸⁾ Another journalist, who first took up the post in 1982, admitted to reacting to the news of his posting with a degree of trepidation: "I had no real objection, though I must admit that at first I thought I'd done something wrong. But I was delighted when I got here".⁽²⁹⁾ When asked what kind of posting it was considered to be among his colleagues, he replied:

Well, it was considered to be the best, but as you can appreciate, Ireland's news value has decreased over the years, and possibly in more recent times it is thought to be a bit of a backwater. I would disagree. I say it is still a very good posting; you are still turning out very good news stories every day and it is still the best running story in Britain. (30)

Moreover, while the posting may no longer be a stepping-stone to a foreign posting, many journalists still regard a stint on the story as being good for their careers. As the same journalist put it: "you can get more front page splashes in a year here than many journalists get in a lifetime". (31) A journalist on a quality paper described the posting in the following terms:

In English terms it is considered a good story, especially if you are working for a serious newspaper or a "heavy" newspaper, because it is a major political problem. It may not get the coverage it deserves, but it is perceived as that and it still produces copy day in, day out. It may not always get in, but when something happens, it happens big. (32)

Not all journalists operate on the rota system whereby they are sent out to the Six Counties for periods of eighteen months to three years; many are permanently based there. And among this relatively large group, attitudes to the posting are more ambivalent. One journalist complained that if a better posting were to materialise, nothing would keep him there. (33) Others, mostly Ulstermen working for the British press, see it simply as a job. The attitude of many Irish journalists, especially those working for the locally based press, is strikingly different; many are highly critical of their Fleet Street counterparts who now tend to consider the posting as a backwater. A familiar complaint is that the story no longer attracts the quality of journalists it once did, and that this is reflected in the standard of coverage the conflict now attracts. (34)

As political interest in the Six Counties has declined and the

coverage accorded to the conflict has diminished, there can be little doubt that many news editors now view the posting as little more than a testing ground for their junior reporters; as one Irish journalist put it: "a place to send the cubs to break their teeth".⁽³⁵⁾

The marginalisation of Northern Ireland as a news issue, especially in the popular press, is unlikely to be reversed in the future and the likelihood is that the attraction of the posting will decline still further. In one respect the goal of "normalisation", so central to the strategy of the British state, has been partly achieved. Like the period of "normality" that preceded the outbreak of the present round of troubles in the late 1960s, the divisions and conflict between the two communities continue to manifest themselves on a daily basis but once again, they are no longer sufficiently dramatic to be of news value. However, as we shall see below, while many newspapers may no longer regard the Irish conflict as a priority news issue, they still regard it as a politically sensitive one and their attitude to how their journalists cover it remains anything but indifferent.

Autonomy and control: all the news that fits

Reporters who know what is expected of them; news editors and sub-editors trained to recognise and eliminate "unhelpful" references; editors appointed with "sound" attitudes; boards of management composed of substantial businessmen; the whole sprawling machinery of newsgathering and publication automatically filters, refines and packages the information fed in to ensure that the news, as printed, is fit to print. The general picture is enlivened by occasional bursts of maverick radicalism. A "fearless expose" every now and then helps to maintain the official myth of the independent press (and can be good for circulation) but does not alter significantly the pattern which emerges.⁽³⁶⁾

A common assumption that readers of newspapers often make is that the reports that appear under a journalist's name are the product of his endeavours alone; in reality, this is rarely, if ever, the case. Journalists, as often as not, are only partly responsible for the

stories that go out on the streets in their names. The journalist may be the messenger, but how that message is delivered to its audience is the outcome of a series of decisions taken largely beyond their control. While the journalist may provide the raw material for a given story, how this material will appear as a news item depends upon the decisions taken at an editorial level. As one news editor on a quality paper put it: "a story doesn't get itself seen in the paper without passing through hands".⁽³⁷⁾ These "hands" act rather like filters; they select, order and distil the body of "raw" information provided by the journalist into its final shape as a news item. Needless to say, decisions taken at an editorial level once the journalist has filed his copy, exert a powerful influence over both the form in which the story will appear in the paper, and the prominence it will be accorded as news. That newspaper readers may assume that news stories come from the journalist's pen to the newspaper page in an uninterrupted fashion is hardly surprising; the decisions taken by editors and sub-editors are not revealed in the text itself, nor are the processes which help shape the text themselves evident to the reader.

The first, and perhaps the most important, decision taken by those responsible for the information supplied by journalists once it arrives at the news desk, is whether to use it. The quantity of potential news on any given day is always greater than the available space. And a routine task of editorial staff is to decide what events or issues will be selected to appear as "news", which will be filed for later use (perhaps as a space filler on a quiet day) and which will be "spiked". In ordering their news agenda for any given day, the main criterion against which a story will be judged is its newsworthiness. The news agenda for any given day is highly flexible, and how its priorities are ordered will depend on how editors and sub-editors weight the range of stories available according to their "news value".

One assistant news editor on a Belfast based evening paper described a typical morning news conference in which the day's news agenda is shaped:

At our morning conference, there will be the editor, his deputy, his two assistants, the chief sub, the picture editor, the features editor and the news editor. All the news editor does, and it is basically his show, is he takes the editor through the various stories we have lined up for the day. At nine o'clock in the morning he has his book marked, and he will say: this is the least we can expect to-day. At no stage at this time will anybody say we will lead with this or we will lead with that - unless it is obvious. I mean the morning that they are sitting there at nine o'clock when the New Ireland Forum's report is produced, about 95 per cent of that conference will be taken up with how are we going to cover it; who is going to do the report? Will it be ready? Is it done already? Did you do it last night? Who is on duty? Where are we going to get the action? Where are all the best stories? I mean that is predictable; and those are the easy mornings. But quite often, like this morning, we went through the whole thing and before he left, the editor went down his list and said: the airport story, that's still a running story, there is still a strike there, or the Carroll shooting, there is obviously still a lot of mileage there. And he leaves people in no doubt that unless something better comes up that is possibly going to be our lead. Before the pages are laid out at eleven o'clock, he will come down for another consultation with the chief sub and say: what have you got? He will then read two or three of the top stories and he may say: yes, I think you are right. Really I am out of it at that stage; we have got the story, we have researched it and our reporters have written it. (38)

In journalistic circles, when it comes to determining which of the stories they write will be selected for use on any given day, news value is often viewed as the ultimate gatekeeper. For example, one journalist who queried his news desk about why one of his reports had failed to surface in the paper was informed that: "It's 'news value' and it just didn't make it". (39) News value, however, despite the way in which journalists often talk about it, is neither an objective criterion of utility to all journalists, regardless of the papers they work for, nor is it necessarily an ingredient intrinsic to those events or issues that are successful in the selection process. On the contrary, as Galtung and Ruge have demonstrated, for an event to be

successful in the selection process, it will have to satisfy a series of conditions.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Some of these conditions are general and are applicable to news selection the world over; others are culturally determined. The events or issues selected as news will also determine a series of other considerations which may vary from newspaper to newspaper reflecting both the newspaper's image of itself and the audience it is hoping to reach.

Once a story has been selected for use, the next decision is how is it to be presented in the paper. And it is as a result of decisions taken at this stage that the final form in which the story will appear as a news item will be determined: what aspect of the story is to be emphasised (its news angle), what is to be omitted, what weighting is to be given to the views of its participants, what headline it should have, and where it should be located in the paper. Again, these decisions will tend to vary from paper to paper and may result in the same incident attracting quite different coverage. As one journalist explained:

Every newspaper has its own approach to how to report the news over here, and you can't disguise the fact that the way one newspaper might report a statement by Sinn Fein will be reported differently in the Daily Mail because newspapers have to take a different approach to the way they report news.⁽⁴¹⁾

Collectively these decisions, taken on a daily basis, help shape the individual newspaper's identity or "house style": that is the paper's corporate approach to the social and political world it reports. This house style, as we shall see below, constitutes an important point of reference for journalists as they go about the daily task of newsgathering. At one level, it helps orientate them to the kinds of issues and events their news desk is likely to be interested in, while at another level a newspaper's tradition of handling certain types of

issues helps define the parameters in which journalists approach the reporting of social and political events. As one journalist on a popular paper explained:

I can't expect to write a story in Guardian style ... because it wouldn't get into the paper. It applies to every other kind of reporting; it applies to industrial disputes, like the miners' strike as well, because you have to write to the house style. (42)

This is not, of course, to argue that the limitations imposed by a newspaper's editorial line impinge on all journalists equally; much depends upon the nature of the newspaper, the status of the journalist within it, and his field of specialisation. (43) Generally speaking, the quality press are regarded as "writers'" papers: that is to say that a journalist working for a quality paper is likely to enjoy a considerable degree of autonomy and can expect to see his reports appear in the paper with only minor modifications. The popular press, on the other hand, are generally regarded as "editors'" papers: in many cases the journalist may simply provide the bare "facts" of a story with the actual story being written by sub-editors.

While such generalisations correspond to real differences in the degree of autonomy and control enjoyed by journalists working for the various sections of the British press, as we shall see below, even journalists on the quality press complain about the lack of control they are able to exercise over their copy once it has been filed. The degree of autonomy enjoyed by journalists will also tend to vary according to their field of specialisation. The journalist covering events in the Six Counties, even for a quality paper, is likely to find that his reports are subjected to closer editorial scrutiny than journalists working on less sensitive issues. As one news editor on a quality paper explained:

All people who write about it, or who treat Northern Ireland stories in the paper ... are careful in the handling of stories from Northern Ireland because we are perfectly aware that it is an extremely sensitive issue. Therefore, we don't just take the first piece of copy and slam it in; we pause, and we think. (44)

Indeed, the scrutiny of reports for statements likely to have political repercussions is a primary function of news editors and sub-editors. In Northern Ireland, where the source of a story may be as important as its content, and where the "terrorists" are commonly assumed by journalists and editors alike to be out to use the media for the purpose of propaganda, editorial scrutiny is likely to be more acute. Stories dealing with, or statements emanating from "unofficial" sources are likely to be subjected to close scrutiny. As one assistant news editor on a Belfast based paper explained:

What we do here if we are in any doubt we go to the editor and we say: right, what do you think? And he reads it, and if he is in any doubt, there is a line of communication in this office (and we probably take more care over it than any other paper) and it is not left to me. It is not left to me because in the back of my mind may be a little prejudice and that may be colouring my opinion on the statement. So I hand it over to the news editors and ask them what they think. If we are really worried, then we go to the editor and he brings his assistant and his deputy and we all discuss it - and that goes for anything that's dicey. At the end of the day we may say we'll use it, or we'll use part of it, or we won't use it at all. And that is the only way we can do it ... Quite often we have get togethers like that and the meeting may end up split. But the editor usually gets his way because he is the one that goes to gaol, or he is the one that has to take the stick when the shit hits the fan ... This happens on the nationals too. Quite often the nationals' guys put stuff over and then the back-bench start to query it and they end up doing memos here and memos there, and lawyers looking at it and everybody looking at it. And in the end they have to take a decision. It goes on every day in newspapers and not only in this conflict. But I think you are more open to it in a place like Northern Ireland because these guys [the "terrorists"*] are all professionals now; they have had 16 years to learn their trade and they are pretty good at it. (45)

* [...] Author's comment

The degree of editorial scrutiny over a journalist's output may also vary if the journalist is working in a social, political or cultural context different to that of his paper's host country. Indeed, one news editor on a quality paper who covered Northern Ireland for the same paper in the mid-1970s, likened the relationship between the news desk and the journalist in Northern Ireland to that of the foreign correspondent. A primary function of the news desk, she argued, was to balance the received opinions and values of the country in which the journalist operated with those of the news desk. At a basic level, she explained, this simply meant ensuring that possible distortions from the journalist's geographical and cultural isolation were counter-balanced by the values and expectations of a British audience. Such a function, by necessity, is likely to entail a high degree of editorial scrutiny. Far from being a cause for concern, she went on to argue, this was essential in order to ensure that news coverage was placed in a perspective that was meaningful to its audience:

The automatic assumption tends to be that there is a sinister pressure from above [on the journalist in the field*] whereas, in fact ... there is an interest in what is an extremely important story. And obviously the reporter on the ground has to react to the interest being displayed, because it is the interest not just of his news desk, but it is the interest of his [natural*] constituency. One thing I am always conscious of is the difference between being there and being here ... if you sit down in Westminster and hear something being said it would sound reasonable; but sit over there and hear the same thing said by government and it would sound totally unreasonable. You would immediately feel the Unionist or Republican bristling, and you would have a better sense of the local reaction and then of the viability or non-viability of what the government was suggesting. And it is exactly the same: you sit over there and you tend to react to the received opinion of the locals and forget your constituency over here - your readers, and how you might react to the same story if you were part of the reading public over here. One of the things that any news desk is going to be doing, because we are part of the general public, when it is talking to someone out of the country (which effectively you are regardless of the legal niceties of it, you are outside the country) is putting the view of the public here, the voting

* [...] Author's comment

public, the tax-paying public, of the ordinary bloke in the street who wishes they [the Irish] would go and bury their heads in a bog. This is something you have to take on board to keep the whole thing in perspective. (46)

This view of the editor as a "news broker" seeking to reconcile different and possibly conflicting news perspectives is highly problematical and raises many more questions than it provides answers for. What is the "interest" of the journalist's "natural" constituency, and who defines it? Is it a view of the "public interest" as defined and expressed through the party-political line of the individual newspaper? Or does it simply mean the view of the authorities or the government presently in office? Moreover, what does "putting the view of the public here" mean in practice? Does it simply mean giving preference and greater prominence to the "official" perspective? Or does it mean ensuring that only those views compatible with, and supportive of, the journalist's domestic constituency should be reported? Implicit in this formulation of the relationship between journalist and news desk is the notion that what eventually emerges as news is the product of negotiated settlement between those responsible for processing news and those responsible for gathering it. It thus implies that a balance of power exists between those at various stages in the news process when it comes to determining how news about Northern Ireland is selected, processed and presented. However, as we shall see in the following section, in the daily interaction between journalist and news desk, it is the latter rather than the former that exercises the greatest influence over how news about Northern Ireland is produced.

"Writing for the house"

As I have already noted above, many national newspapers operate a rota system for the reporting of Northern Ireland in which journalists are posted to the Six Counties for varying periods. In order to ease

the transition from one journalist to another, the journalist taking up the post for the first time is likely to be briefed prior to the posting. This may simply be on a casual basis in which the departing journalist isolates the potential pitfalls that may lie in wait, suggests useful and reliable information sources, and perhaps suggests convenient watering holes. It is also likely that the journalist taking up the post for the first time will be given a general briefing by his news editor. A similar policy is no doubt adopted on other postings. Most journalists see this as a normal and routine practice and most deny that the purpose of such briefings is to consciously lay down the parameters in which they are expected to work. As one journalist on a popular paper was to comment on his briefing:

My news editor spoke to me about how they [the paper*] covered Northern Ireland, but there was nothing specific. I was not told you only report police statements and you ignore the IRA ... it was a fairly general sort of thing and there was no specific briefing. (47)

And a journalist on a quality paper said: "Yes, obviously we were briefed; you couldn't get out to a place like that cold - or not easily". (48) Any suggestion that the purpose of the briefing was to sensitise her to the paper's way of covering the conflict was, however, quickly dismissed:

If what you are essentially asking is, did anyone here take me on one side and say: "write it like this, look at it this way, this is our line", then the answer is no, nobody ever did. (49)

Another journalist on a quality paper reacted strongly to the idea that editorial staff consciously attempted to influence the way in which journalists work:

This is a constant criticism, which is quite irritating, of critics of the press. They seem to have this idea that journalists are deliberately told to slant their stories. And in my experience of 25 years as a journalist I have never come across it. (50)

* [...] Author's comment

Such defences of journalistic autonomy are both automatic and widespread among journalists working in Northern Ireland. And indeed this is hardly surprising. The very notion of direct editorial control over how they report day to day events in the Six Counties is likely to conflict not only with the journalists' own perception of themselves as impartial and independent reporters, and with their daily work experience in which they may enjoy considerable freedom not only to cultivate their own sources among all parties to the conflict, but also to pursue and write stories critical of both sides. Moreover, what, to the outsider, may look like direct editorial interference in the way they report events, may, through the eyes of the journalist on the ground, be nothing more than a perfectly normal and daily feature of editorial/journalist relations.

Indeed, overt attempts on the part of the news desk to influence the stories journalists write and how they approach writing them, are a crude, and in the long term, unnecessary means of exercising control. And, as we shall see below, if anything, direct intervention into how journalists report the Irish conflict on the part of the news desk is likely to indicate a malfunction in their relationship, rather than being a contingent and daily feature of it. This is not to argue that no limitations are placed on the journalists' scope for independent action by the newspapers they work for. Journalists working for Fleet Street based newspapers are expected to maintain frequent contact with their news desk, and many talk to their offices in Manchester or London several times during the day: to file copy, to provide up-dates on ongoing stories and for general guidance. As one journalist on a popular paper explained:

Well, I work to a news desk in Manchester, and I have daily contact with them and they take a lot of interest in what goes on here. A lot of people will tell you that, of the popular papers, this paper has a commitment to Ireland second to none, and probably of all the

nationals it runs a close second or third to the Times and Guardian. So yes, they do take a lot of interest, and they do discuss what goes on here with me every morning and again every afternoon. (51)

And it is in these daily points of contact that the wishes and attitudes of the news desk are likely to be impressed on the journalist.

As the same journalist explained:

I just tell them in the morning what is happening and what I intend to do; and they suggest that I concentrate on one particular story, or they say they are not interested and to try and dig up something else. (52)

Interaction of this kind between the journalist in the field and his organisational base is part of the daily routine of all journalists regardless of their field of specialisation. (53) Few journalists see it as being anything other than normal: "that is simply an exchange of information between people working for the one organisation and that always happens and it would be wrong if it didn't". (54) The actual degree of contact between journalists and their news desk does vary. Some journalists, mostly those permanently based in the Six Counties, claim to receive little direct guidance from their news editors who, they claim, leave them free to cover events as they see fit. As one journalist on a popular paper, when asked whether the sensitivity surrounding Northern Ireland was reflected in the attitudes of his news desk, replied:

... that question should really be put to the Guardian incumbent or the Times incumbent, who is speaking to his London desk every day and learns from them what their attitudes are. We have none of these inhibitions; no trouble, we just send in the facts every day and no one has ever asked me to slant anything in any particular way. (55)

Attempts on the part of editorial staff to directly influence what journalists write (as opposed to a more general control over what

stories they require) do occur. As one journalist on a popular paper revealed:

There had been a spate of sectarian killings a few years ago, and we had carried at great length one day a very moving account of the funeral of a chap who had been butchered, incidently by loyalist terrorists, and during the same week the IRA carried out a few attacks as well. Later in the week a Sinn Fein worker was murdered and I went to cover his funeral. And I was told by my people to see what it was like and if it was a stunt to write it as a stunt. So I said: "what do you mean?" And they replied: "well, if the IRA turn up and fire gunshots over the coffin, we want all that, we must have how the IRA hijacked the funeral". Well, they didn't hijack the funeral, the whole thing was swamped by policemen and undercover security men. But there was none the less a reading from the IRA and an oration made about how the armed struggle goes on. I was told to write a story saying that this was the IRA turning a man's funeral into a propaganda stunt for the television cameras. Which, by and large, it was; but we were contributing to it. (56)

How frequent such incidents are is almost impossible to ascertain (while journalists may discuss editorial intervention among themselves they are, not surprisingly, reluctant to do so with outsiders), though it is unlikely that they are common. Moreover, to concentrate on the relative absence or presence of direct editorial control as a means of explaining why journalists report Northern Ireland in the way they do, is to miss the point: while such examples may provide ammunition for those who adhere to a conspiratorial model of the relationship between the media and the state, they are likely to divert attention away from a series of less sinister, but more significant pressures that impinge on a journalist's scope for independent action and help orientate him towards the particular requirements of his paper. It is these pressures, emanating from the routine and institutionalised newsgathering procedures and reaffirmed in the daily interaction between journalist and news desk, that best explain why news about Northern Ireland takes the form it does.

The journalist newly arrived in the Six Counties, whether or not he has been briefed and whether or not his briefing highlighted what was expected from him, will, within a matter of months if not weeks, quickly discover the effective limitations within which he is expected to work. Whether these limitations are actively delineated from above or not hardly matters; the response of the news desk to the journalist's first reports will quickly indicate what kind of stories his desk is interested in and how they want them to be written.

An early indication of what is required from the journalist may well reveal itself in the way his copy is handled once it has been despatched to the desk. Many journalists, and this cut across the quality/popular divide, complain about the lack of control they have over their reports once they have been filed. A common complaint from many is that they are often the focus of criticism for how events in the North are reported in the press or for particular stories that appear under their names but over whose final shape they had little control. As one journalist on a quality paper explained:

Others would criticise us and say that journalists are not giving it enough space, but I don't think that is true actually. I think most journalists will write it as fully as they have always done; it is what happens to it in London which is nothing to do with me. What happens in London is absolutely nothing to do with me, that is done by editors and sub-editors making editorial decisions. (57)

In that editorial imperatives may differ from newsgathering imperatives, the potential for conflict between the journalist and news desk is never far below the surface. And journalists are frequently unhappy about the editorial handling of their stories. Sometimes this may simply be over what they regard as a lack of sensitivity in the handling or presentation of a report: "The essence of the story is still the same, maybe I don't think it's being given the prominence or weight

it should have".⁽⁵⁸⁾ In other instances, however, editorial decisions can quite significantly alter the "message" intended by the journalist: a diversionary or inappropriate headline; an eye-witness's statement badly edited; a paragraph cut here, an important sentence there; subtle as these changes may be they can fundamentally alter the meaning of a story - and in extreme cases make the story unrecognisable to the journalist under whose name it appears. Moreover, because these changes are often relatively small, the journalist may be reluctant to make an issue of them and may simply accept them as a legitimate, if at times frustrating, prerogative of his news desk. And, as one journalist on a quality paper explained, complaining rarely achieves much other than frustration:

a few lines cut here and there which can completely alter the tone of a piece is almost impossible to argue about. You get bland apologies that the cuts were made for reasons of length and yes, the subs should have referred back to you but after all it was near the edition time and we're all professionals. It is never admitted that the cuts are those sentences which are critical of the army, or make the point that Faulkner is not entirely accepted by the whole community. If you push it, they tell you that you are imagining things. You can end up thinking that you are. There's nothing you can do about it.⁽⁵⁹⁾

Changes, even minor ones, however, are likely to alert the journalist in the field to the particular requirements of his news desk and, while they may be explained away on grounds of insufficient space or news value, it would be the unusual journalist who did not make a mental note and bear such changes in mind when writing a similar piece in the future.

The news desk may also indicate to the journalist in the field what it expects from him through the power it exercises over the selection process. Most journalists in Northern Ireland claim to write an average of between two and three stories a day, the percentage

of these making the paper varying according to its commitment to the issue. One journalist on a popular paper claimed that an average of 50 per cent of the stories he wrote made the English edition and slightly more the Irish edition. Journalists on the quality press generally lay claim to a higher success rate. One journalist on a quality paper claimed never to have had any problem getting her stories in the paper but noted that the prominence accorded to them did tend to vary:

The difference it makes is in the position it goes into the paper in. Obviously you can't put something on the front page for ever; but I always found it relatively easy to get stuff in and it was generally sympathetically handled across here. (60)

If journalists exercise little control over how their reports appear in print, they often have even less control when it comes to determining which of their reports will be used in the first place. Journalists frequently talk of stories "not making it" or "not surfacing". As one journalist on a quality paper elaborated:

There was a story which I thought was quite important: there was a by-election in West Belfast for a local council seat which was really run-of-the-mill except that Provisional Sinn Fein did particularly well and the SDLP disastrously - that was seven weeks ago. Now I thought that was quite important; I didn't write it long, but I thought it was important. I thought it was an indicator of what was happening in the Roman Catholic community. But it didn't appear. (61)

More often than not, however, journalists are reluctant to read anything sinister into the fact that their stories may be "spiked". As the same journalist, when asked why he thought this particular story had failed to appear, replied:

I've no idea. I do think you must recognise the pressure of space. There is a lot of pressure especially if you look at the column inches devoted to home news in the paper. There are a lot of stories competing for a particular number of column inches and I think there is a difference of

perspective ... I find a lot of people over here are critical. Journalists, particularly Irish journalists, are critical of the amount of space, not just my paper but other papers give to Northern Ireland; I don't think they realise the amount of pressure that space for local news gives, and it is difficult to explain to them. I mean I remember saying to somebody here once, and he was fascinated by my deadline for filing copy to get it in the first edition, I can file copy up to ten past eight at night for one paragraph. If a big story happened at ten past eight, I could still get a paragraph on the front page. Normally they like me to have copy in as early as possible during the day ... Some of the Irish papers, their deadline is not until 10.30 at night. I mean that's just a problem of mechanics. I mean it's different for other papers, it's different for popular papers, they have later deadlines. But it is a problem. But I can't say why certain stories don't surface and certain stories do. (62)

The journalist's initial reaction to such omissions and alterations is likely to be one of complaint. As one popular journalist was to comment:

I have complained; yes I have complained often. I bitterly complain in fact, because I'm working for an English paper ... and you are trying to acquaint people in England with what is going on here. You are trying to make them understand why there is violence, why there is a war going on. But many times that doesn't make the English editions - sadly. (63)

In the long term, however, it is unlikely that a journalist will constantly court conflict with his news desk, for fear of being labelled "troublesome" or simply to make life easier for himself. Some simply accept the inevitable and philosophically dismiss such incidents: "That's an occupational hazard of journalism". (64) Others are simply worn down: "You can't cry. You can't complain every day. It just becomes a bore and it becomes a bore to the people in London". (65) For the journalist who places professional integrity above a quiet life, dissatisfaction with his newspaper's coverage of Northern Ireland may leave no other option but to resign. (66)

The daily pressures on journalists to follow the line of least resistance by conforming to the demands of their news desk are many, and

for the career journalist they are significant. Perhaps the most important of these pressures is the simple necessity of getting his stories into the paper. As we have seen above, the overwhelming priority of all journalists is to see what they write in print (and it would be an unusual journalist indeed who did not) because it is on the basis of these stories that their future career prospects are determined. For this reason alone it would be an unusual journalist who constantly despatched stories he knew his desk would not use, or wrote them in a style he knew would endanger their chances of making it in the paper. If getting stories into the paper is the essence of journalism, then it is not surprising that journalists adopt strategies designed to secure this end. And there can be little doubt that journalists, either to pre-empt conflict, or simply to avoid the frustration of stories being "spiked", practise a degree of self-censorship. As one journalist on a quality paper explained:

You must remember that every journalist wants what he writes to appear, and in practice all journalists know pretty well what their paper's line is, what is expected of them. There is a fair amount of self-censorship. This happens without thinking. No journalist I have met writes what he knows will be cut. What would be the point? If he has a story he knows will cause some controversy back at the news desk, he will water it down to make it acceptable, (67)

Consequently, even without direct pressure from above, it is unlikely that a journalist would fail to notice what kinds of stories go down well. And, given that time spent researching and writing stories that don't make it is time wasted, it is even more unlikely that they would not take this into consideration when ordering their priorities and writing their stories. As one journalist, when asked whether or not he would take the likelihood of a story making the paper when ordering his priorities on a given day, replied: "I would yes; because I wouldn't devote too much time to it if I didn't think it was going to make it into the paper". (68)

For the journalist working for a popular paper the rewards for going against the wishes of his news desk may hardly seem worth it.

As one journalist explained:

I am working for a newspaper which, for whatever reason, doesn't tend to delve too deeply into incidents and the background to incidents. They want a straight bang-bang account of what happened, and there is little time for analysis. (69)

As a consequence, the same journalist went on to argue, the rewards for providing anything more than the bare minimum required to satisfy his desk were unlikely to be great:

I have to work to my paper; I can't, even if I could, even if I wanted to, write an in-depth analysis of why the violence is happening, because I know my newspaper wouldn't print it. (70)

The increasing marginalisation of Northern Ireland as an issue in the pages of the popular press; the limited space devoted to detailed discussion and analysis; the limited ability of the journalist to influence his paper's editorial line; the increasing competition to get stories in the paper combined with the general attitude of editors and sub-editors that Northern Ireland is boring and doesn't sell papers; all are factors likely to persuade the journalist that conformity is the best policy. After all it's just a job, and the posting will soon be over. Self-censorship, on the other hand, does have its rewards: the chances of getting stories into the paper are increased and the constant frustration caused by complaining is reduced. As the same journalist explained, writing to the house style reduces the likelihood of editorial interference in the stories they write:

I mean that doesn't happen to me. My copy obviously gets tinkered with but for cosmetic reasons only. By and large my copy is untouched; but then again like I said, I know who I'm writing for. (71)

The ability of journalists to counter the limitations that are either directly or indirectly imposed upon them as they go about the daily task of newsgathering is limited. Some seek other outlets for their stories, experiences and perspectives denied expression in their paper. As one Irish journalist explained:

I mean quite often after a story when a number of journalists are gathered at the bar and we discuss the story, they [English journalists*] will say what they know happened, but that's not what appears in print the next morning ... I think it's a case of self-censorship; in other words just sending in what they know their editors or news editors want. The facts that don't appear in the British press quite often are sent to me. British journalists regularly ring me up and say to me: "well, this is the true story of what happened on such or such an occasion, or on such or such event; we can't publish it so we'll give it to you because we know you'll publish it" and that happens maybe two or three times a week. (72)

In the main, however, most journalists have passively, if at times reluctantly, accepted the limitations and pressures that were to become a daily feature of the working environment in the Six Counties. There have, of course, been some notable exceptions. Following the introduction of internment in 1971, official pressure on the media became so intense that 200 leading journalists met at the ICA in London to protest. The fact that over 200 journalists felt compelled to make such a protest was unprecedented, and it gives some indication of the pressures increasingly being placed on journalists reporting the conflict in the North. (73) The long term impact of the protest was, however, minimal. Fearing for their careers, the majority of those present refused to declare themselves publicly and asked for their names not to be published. The fact that no comparable protest has taken place since 1971 (with the partial exception of the one-day strike over the Real Lives programme) should not be taken as an indication that the pressures and restrictions have been relaxed.

* [...] Author's comment

As we shall see below, if anything Northern Ireland's diminishing news value has reduced still further the political space in which journalists can handle events in the North.

Unravelling the onion: political violence as news

The only time the British press, to my recollection, showed major interest or started to show major interest, was during the civil rights campaign. At that time, strangely enough, it was a sympathetic press to the civil rights people. Then they started to write specials as well as handling the day-to-day news of the civil rights campaign. They started to do more in-depth features about the causes behind it: the discrimination against Catholics; the fact that more Catholics would have been unemployed than Protestants - this kind of thing they began to look at. And that continued until the early 1970s, until the civil rights struggle took a more violent turn. I mean instead of the street battles and the street riots we had the emergence of the Provisional IRA ... When this happened the British press changed its whole attitude to the Northern Ireland situation and it reverted to the British Empire role: you know, Northern Ireland is under attack from Irish republicans. And they therefore became very British again and any sympathy they had for the civil rights cause vanished overnight virtually. (74)

In 1968, the violence generated by the growing strength of the nationalist opposition to the social, economic and political hegemony enjoyed by the majority community, was to breach the silence that had prevailed on the subject of the Six Counties for most of the previous forty years. This is not to suggest that it was the violence, and that alone, that attracted the media to Northern Ireland. As Kirkaldy has noted, a number of factors, for which the violence was simply a trigger, combined to elevate events in the North to the status of an international news story:

The troubles appeared to have all the "right" ingredients: for 1968 was the high point of the opposition in America and elsewhere to the Vietnam war and the year of the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia. In France, an alliance of workers and students nearly toppled the Fifth Republic and student activism was at a peak in most western democracies. Civil rights, with its slogan or "One Man - One Vote" evoked memories of similar campaigns in America and the Third World. The latent violence that lay within

Northern Ireland was also something that attracted media attention - press coverage between the first and second civil rights march increased by 500 per cent as the potential for violence became apparent. (75)

Violence may not have been the only factor that brought journalists flooding into the North, but there can be little doubt that, as the conflict continued year in, year out, without apparent solution or foreseeable end, it has been the violence that has kept them returning - albeit in steadily decreasing numbers.

The criticism often made of the British media's coverage of Northern Ireland, that it has tended to concentrate almost exclusively on the issue of violence while paying little if any attention to the social and political dimensions of life in the Six Counties, is one that is commonly accepted by journalists in the North. Many believe that this is inevitable given the imperatives of the news process. Violence, as one journalist explained, tends to dominate the headlines for the simple reason that bad news always makes better copy than good news:

... all news agencies operate on the principle that if it's bad news, if there are five dead, well, that's important; if there is only one dead, why that isn't important. So, unfortunately, it is deaths and the way they happen that does attract interest in news and public interest. The criticism of journalists, people who accuse journalists of only being interested because the story means a lot of deaths and injuries and whatever, is unfair; because journalists are only members of the public themselves; they are simply operating in a job situation. But anyone picks up a newspaper and reads with interest if he sees an airplane crash with hundreds of dead. It's a human nature thing - right? So it is not fair criticism, I don't think, of journalists that they are only interested when people die; it's people in general who are interested in bad news. That's what sells newspapers because they want to read that kind of thing - tragically though. (76)

Generally speaking, journalists were unhappy about the emphasis placed on violence, and many expressed a desire to write more considered pieces reflecting upon aspects of life beyond the violence. But, as one journalist on a popular paper explained, despite efforts to

move into other subject areas, the news always came back to the violence:

I found, for instance, that at one stage someone would say to me: "we'll leave all these murders and bombs to the agency and you go off and do something different - some happy stories". Great, but it didn't last for very long; you would be on the road for a week doing this very thing and then something horrible would happen and they would say: "come back quick; come back quick, it's needed, it has to be done". And there you were, back on the old treadmill again and the happy stories would be forgotten. (77)

It was no good criticising the press for this, the same journalist went on to argue, because if violence was given undue attention it was because of public demand:

I don't criticise them [the press*] at all. I think we use a proper yardstick commensurate with public demand ... We have tried and other papers have tried to digress, if you like, into happier stories and more or less ignore the prevalent horror, but after a few days they have to come back to it again - that is still the main thrust of the news. No matter how much you try to deal with happy events, it doesn't last for very long because the headlines still come back to the action - people being killed. (78)

The desire to shift the focus of news coverage away from violence and its aftermath was also evident among journalists working the locally based press. As a deputy news editor on a Belfast paper explained:

I mean we are a fairly heavy evening paper and we like political and industrial stories; though recently we are finding - because we have had such a large helping of this trouble over the past 15 years - that obviously there is a tendency among our readers to say: "oh, another bomb, forget it". So we are finding in fact that we are going for happier stories because you get some weeks when you have nothing on your front page but blood, guts and mayhem; and it is a large helping of that week in, week out, day in, day out. Then suddenly, if you get a happy story, you are keen to play it up. And I think we are more conscious of that now than maybe some of the papers in England who haven't been through this particular trauma. We are now on the look-out for happier stories and we are not afraid to chase them up and to give them the treatment they deserve. But we do get a response from our readers, they

* [...] Author's comment

do get fed up with reading about the troubles and they quite often ring us up and tell us about that. So we like happy stories too. (79)

As we have already seen in earlier chapters, since 1969, the social and political factors that first gave rise to the violence in the North have increasingly been submerged under, and dominated by, the issue of violence itself. As the army came into daily conflict with the IRA during the early 1970s, the British media increasingly focused its attention and devoted its coverage to the armed conflict taking place on the streets of Belfast and Derry. The earlier sympathy shown by the media to the demands of the civil rights movement quickly dissipated as the violence on the streets became more pronounced and more overtly political. Criticism of social and political malpractices, and of those who presided over them, which had been a feature of earlier coverage, was quickly replaced by a concerted attack on those in opposition to the army. As order, rather than political reform, became the primary objective of the British government, the media abandoned its attempts to investigate the underlying cause of violence and concentrated instead on its symptoms. (80)

As research into the British media's coverage of Northern Ireland has frequently found, since the early 1970s, political violence and its aftermath has provided the daily and almost exclusive content of news coverage. Philip Elliott, for example, found that violence and its aftermath⁽⁸¹⁾ accounted for nearly two-thirds of the coverage accorded to Northern Ireland in the British media; and, perhaps more significantly, that this coverage was of a factual and decontextualised nature. During the periods examined in his study, Elliott found that the British media rarely, if ever, went beyond the immediate symptoms and consequences of violence in its coverage of the North, nor sought to locate this violence within any meaningful social or political

context: "For most of the media, the reporting of Northern Ireland was mainly a process of recording the violence, building on this basic minimum of who, what, where".⁽⁸²⁾ As Elliott was to conclude, this style of reporting, concentrating as it did on the documentation of known and uncontroversial facts about given events, hindered rather than assisted a meaningful understanding of why the violence was taking place:

The style of reporting which poses as value free, the simple recording of facts about the world, is thus heavily value laden. Explicitly, pressure and controls are imposed to restrict news to the known facts of the incident. Implicitly, however, this does not just limit the information available. It ensures that the conflict is seen in a particular light because of the information left out. It is a style of journalism which makes violence less rather than more explicable.⁽⁸³⁾

A factor which has undoubtedly contributed to this style of reporting, and one which has had a significant impact on the type of coverage accorded to Irish political violence in the British media, is the proximity of Northern Ireland to the British state. When a nation state is involved in armed conflict either against "terrorists" within its own national boundaries, or against another nation state, then the political space in which its national media are able to handle the conflict is invariably reduced. The historical relationship between the British media and the British state during times of national crisis, as the recent war in the Falklands clearly illustrated, has tended to be one of support rather than criticism.⁽⁸⁴⁾ Governmental pressure on the media, often based on appeals to the national interest and state security, has more often than not been sufficient to ensure the media's support, albeit at times reluctantly and often at the cost of considerable tension between the media and the state.

During the first weeks and months of the crisis in the North, due to the absence of direct British involvement, the conditions under which

journalists reported the conflict were relatively relaxed. Once the British state became directly involved, as one Irish journalist explained, things were quickly to change:

For British and foreign journalists it was a very romantic story: here were people wanting British rights being oppressed by these really ugly, nasty people called Unionists. And they were led by very likeable people like Gerry Fitt and Bernadette Devlin; a very romantic, mini-skirted girl. It was a big story. There was no violence, or the violence was understandable in the context of the late '60s: you know, students on the streets, radicalism, the Labour Party in power and all that sort of thing. It was when the British Army went in, therefore the British state being directly involved ... that's when the British press started to get confused about it. That broad liberalism was not adequate to deal with this new situation of the Catholic working class defending their areas through the IRA, and then increasingly the IRA going on the offensive and saying we are going to bring down the Northern Ireland state. The state was under attack and most British journalists, of course, identified with their own state, especially a British state which was seen ... as a pretty democratic state: the Labour Party in power, British civil rights, British standards, all these things. They could understand why people in Northern Ireland wanted them. When it became a nationalist struggle overtly against the British Army by an armed guerrilla terrorist organisation, whatever you want to call it, then the British journalists either got ... well they got two things: they got terribly confused and that confusion led them to line up with the British state, the British Army, what-have-you, and become much less critical of the organs of government in Northern Ireland. (85)

The problem facing the British media following the entry of the army in 1969 and the assumption of direct political responsibility by the state in 1972, was how to find a style of reporting which allowed it to report events in the Six Counties and at the same time avoid the accusation of taking sides or giving publicity to the "terrorists". As television reporter Peter Taylor explained, the proximity of Northern Ireland confronted journalists with a series of unique problems even before they began to mention political violence:

At the most basic level, where is the conflict taking place? Is it Ulster? Northern Ireland? The North of Ireland? Or the Six Counties? ... And once you have sorted out the names, what's actually taking place?

Is it a conflict? Is it a war? A rebellion? A revolution? A criminal conspiracy? Or a liberation struggle? ... Lastly, and probably most important, how do we describe those involved? Are they terrorists? Criminals? The mafia? Murderers? Guerrillas? Or freedom fighters? It depends on your perception of the conflict, and who you happen to be working for at the time ... Such semantic subtleties apply to scarcely any other conflict we report, be it El Salvador or Africa. (86)

In seeking to resolve these problems, there can be little doubt that Northern Ireland's geographical and political proximity to Britain, coupled with the fact that political violence was being used against the representatives of the British state, would be most important, if not altogether decisive factors. As Schlesinger et al have argued:

Geographical distance is heavily overlaid with ideological criteria. Thus, television presentations are likely to be at their most "open" to oppositional accounts when an insurgency takes place within non-democratic states in which legitimate channels of dissent are either restricted or non-existent and in which state repression is a prominent feature of the system of rule. In such cases, where violence against the state may be seen as justified as a tactic of last resort, the label "terrorist" is likely to be replaced with one which accords legitimacy, such as "guerrilla" or "freedom fighter". In other words, attitudes towards insurgencies are inextricably tied to attitudes towards the regimes in which they take place. (87)

Decisions as to the relative legitimacy of political violence, and the legitimacy or otherwise of the regime against which it is directed, are without doubt an important determinant in the way journalists approach the issue of "terrorism". As a news editor on a quality paper explained:

I take your point that distance tends to lend enchantment and we do use different value judgements if the terrorist is operating in El Salvador. We do also use different value judgements depending on our view of the regime under attack. For example, I would say for the Baader Meinhof one would probably tend to say "terrorist" more readily than one would with, say, a black in South Africa, because one would feel that Baader Meinhof was attacking a slightly less awful regime than the black in South Africa. But they are all value judgements that all of us make and sometimes, obviously, we do forget to stop and think about them.

Working in Northern Ireland you can't really avoid thinking about them because if you sloppily use a term somebody will pick you up: you called us terrorists, what do you mean? You said murder, what do you mean? (88)

Journalists working in Northern Ireland are acutely aware of the fact that how they choose to label those using political violence and their acts is an issue of crucial importance, and one which may have a considerable influence over how their readers assess the legitimacy or otherwise of those in opposition to the British state. One Irish journalist posed the problem of using the term "terrorism" in the context of Northern Ireland by pointing to the ambiguities and contradictions of the label itself:

I personally tend to try and avoid the word terrorism because in my day-to-day work as a journalist I meet the paramilitaries on both sides; in one day I could go to the headquarters of the IRA, the INLA, the UDA and the UVF and have often done so and talked to them one after another. I find them quite reasonable people to talk to. Obviously their ideas are fanatical, otherwise they wouldn't be killing people, but they are genuinely held ideas and if they do engage in acts of violence, they are able to justify it to themselves. They don't see themselves as terrorists. In my mind, to-day's terrorist is tomorrow's statesman. I mean the people who, not so much to-day, but for example a decade ago, were leaders of the Irish government in Dublin were all former IRA men. Even more recently I notice that the British press, and television and radio in particular, no longer refer to the PLO as terrorists, they call them fighters. What is the difference between a PLO and an IRA volunteer or a UVF activist? They are all using terror tactics because they believe in the cause they are fighting for. They can't all be right; they can't all win, but each of them believes they are right and each of them thinks they will win. I think that not enough British pressmen look at it in that way, or maybe they look at it in that way ' they certainly don't write it that way. (89)

All journalists are aware of the possible consequences of using one term over another in their reporting of the daily conflict in the North, and many claim to select the labels they use only after considerable thought. As a journalist who covered the conflict for a quality paper in the mid-1970s explained:

The word terrorist I used advisedly and only after long arguments with lots of people, including a lot of Provos who would argue, and did argue, that terror was a legitimate weapon to use against an intractable government, but at the same time didn't want to be labelled "terrorists". I used the term terrorist because in the end the position I took was that a terrorist was someone who used terror as a political weapon and I don't think it is necessarily a pejorative term ... (90)

Another journalist on a quality paper commented:

I mean I was very aware of this because my whole experience in journalism has been in situations like that ... In South Africa, when I was there, there was this terrible controversy because SAPA, the national press agency, used to call the ANC guerrillas and they were denounced in parliament and there was this hell of a controversy. When I came to Northern Ireland I saw it very much in the same way; I'm an outsider and I don't see any difference at all between the conflict here and the conflict in Sri Lanka or the conflict in South Africa. As to how I handled it, I'm not sure. I used to try and avoid the word murder, I used killing. Terrorist? I tended, I think, though there might have been a few times when I would slip, but I tended if I was quoting someone else to use terrorist if they used that terminology, but otherwise not. Derry was always a problem because Derry defines everything. I used to use Londonderry first then Derry thereafter. The Maize and the Kesh? Well, I used the Maize because I felt that as it was built by the government they could call it what they liked. (91)

Generally speaking, however, the question as to what was "terrorism" and who was a "terrorist" was a relatively straightforward one for many journalists: a "terrorist" was anyone who used violence as a political weapon and who rejected democratic means of bringing about change. Such people, according to a journalist on a popular paper, were condemned as "terrorists" and "murderers" in the press because:

they choose to operate outside the law, that's the way the British press and the British establishment tends to take them. They are not working within the acceptable framework of democracy and they are killing people. And we choose to label them murderers simply because that is what they are doing - they are taking people's lives. (92)

Another journalist on a popular paper insisted that in a democratic

society like Northern Ireland, the use of violence to bring about political change could never be justified:

I mean, put it this way, if you want to go into such psychological depths, if someone hasn't got a job, and this has always been a high unemployment area, is that person morally obliged to go out and kill someone or blow somebody up? By all means march and demonstrate, but there must be something wrong with that person if his only reaction is to go out and kill somebody just because he hasn't got a job or he doesn't believe in what is going on. (93)

When it was pointed out that the British press, including his own paper, while daily condemning the use of violence in Northern Ireland as "terrorism", rarely used the term in its reporting of political violence in countries like El Salvador, the same journalist responded by stressing the different nature of the regime under attack:

All one has to do is examine the lifestyles of the inhabitants. I mean even the most dedicated IRA gunman, provided he is not in gaol, has all his unemployment money; he has all the privileges of an unemployed motorcycle worker in England, he has all these things. These people in El Salvador and Nicaragua, they are living in a country where the land is owned by ten landlords. This is comparing mediaevalism with the 20th century; there is no comparison between their existence; some of them don't even have unemployment money at all, they are dependent upon a banana crop or a marijuana crop or something transient ... I have never been to Central America, I have only read books and watched television on it, but there is absolutely no comparison whatever. Why aren't the unemployed in Manchester and Birmingham running around killing the police and saying: unless you improve our unemployment money we will kill you, blow you to bits?

A similar argument was advanced by a news editor on a quality paper who argued that the paper and journalists in general:

regard violence differently when it is used as a weapon against what we would regard as relatively civilised governments. And most of us, the British, tend to think of our government, even in Northern Ireland where it is a good deal less civilised than it is over here, as being a relatively civilised government. This is not to say I think they are necessarily right, certainly in the Northern Ireland context, because I think there are times in Northern Ireland when the British government verges on the distinctly uncivilised, but our corporate mind over here

would see our government as a good deal more civilised than, say, the South African government, and therefore it is much less a legitimate target for political violence. (95)

This assumption that the use of political violence as a means of securing political change is unnecessary, and thus illegitimate, in the context of British society with its traditions of democracy, is one that has informed much of the coverage of Irish political violence in the British media. As research into the British media has frequently found, having designated those in opposition to the British state as "terrorists", newspapers and television have tended to devote more space to condemning and documenting their violence and not enough to investigating the background, context and political structures that underpin it. And indeed the very use of the term itself appears to relieve the media of the need to do so. As one journalist on a popular paper was to comment:

... all English papers are guilty of this, they only report the violence and not really the reasons for it and the reasons behind it. But you can't disguise the fact that there is a genuine patriotic struggle going on over here, whether you agree with it or not. In another country far away from Britain, British newspapers would report in a very different way ... But if any newspaper was to do that here they'd be accused of treason because this is Britain - well, it's still part of Britain whether you like it or not, and one would be siding with the enemy. (96)

Not all journalists agreed with the criticism that the British media has tended to ignore the social and political dimensions of the Irish conflict. As one journalist on a quality paper was to comment, without any apparent sense of irony:

Well, in 15 years the background to the crisis in Northern Ireland has been spelled out endlessly in the press at home and abroad, so if anyone is not aware of the background to the Northern Ireland crisis by this time, they've either not been reading their newspapers, watching their televisions, or listening to their radios. (97)

Another journalist, while accepting that more could be done to investigate the political causes of violence, argued that this was not always feasible given the limitations of time and space:

... we do tend to forget to look at the aims of the Provos; we try to do it, and we ought to do it, and certainly a lot of papers don't do it; they do accept the view of the Provos as being mindless killers and Godfathers, and all that crap. I don't think people should have been shocked by reactions to the hunger strike; there were those of us who plugged away from March of '76 saying it's going to happen. Maybe we weren't read; or maybe the story got cut down to three paragraphs; or maybe it went out in the Irish edition and not this edition. You can only do so much on any given night, and you have got to accept that your readership can cope with that and have the knowledge of its own to which you can add. You can't keep on telling them day in, day out, that here is a nasty situation and that the Provos don't necessarily have wrong on their side and that the aspiration of the SDLP is not dissimilar. I mean you can't keep on reiterating that in the space available in a daily newspaper. (98)

A journalist on a popular paper when asked if he thought the British press had given sufficient coverage to the political aims of the IRA replied:

Probably not, probably not. But certainly in some of the " heavies " there have been attempts ... When they [Sinn Fein*] put up for election last year, when Gerry Adams was running, everyone went up to interview him. I went; I did pieces, I did a constituency survey. I tried to explain how they operated, tried to explain the series of advice centres they had set up and all that kind of thing. So I hoped that when, for instance, Mr. Adams won the seat, it didn't come as a shock to my readers. I had said that they were working hard and it would be surprising if they didn't win. (99)

The real problem, he went on to argue, came after he had sent his copy in to the office:

What does tend to happen though is that it tends to get linked with the violence. For instance, his speech to the Ardesh last November, was very closely argued, explaining what the Party was doing, where it was going and, of course there was the defence of the Irish people to take up arms. Now of course, obviously you have to put that in, you have

* [...] Author's comment

to put that in the story. The headline, however, tends to be in many papers: IRA violence to continue. Which is inevitable by the way journalism and news values operate. But there have been attempts to try and explain the thinking behind Provisional Sinn Fein; it may not have had enough, but I think most "heavies" will try and do it. (100)

Among other journalists, and this is particularly true of journalists working for the Irish press, dissatisfaction over the coverage accorded to the political dimension of the conflict in the North is more pronounced. One Irish journalist was particularly scathing about what he regarded as the lack of interest and the lack of understanding shown by British journalists:

I just get the impression that if they could be shot of the problem, they would. I don't even think that reporters like coming here. The BBC would send a young reporter here to blood them: it's a relatively busy office. You get them here and they have four or five pints on a Friday night and they start pontificating about how they would solve the problem. But the one thing that does frustrate me is that there is such a glaring lack of knowledge; such a poor grasp of the situation here; nobody seems to care ... It is such a complex situation one has to unravel it to get through it. It is rather like an onion: you have to peel off all the various skins to get to the core. Nobody is prepared to do that; they are just prepared to slice it and take one half or the other half - but the onion has to be unpeeled skin by skin. (101)

Another Irish journalist, who described British journalism as "lazy and sloppy", complained that:

... even leaving aside the political implications, they very seldom ever go out and look for a human interest story on Northern Ireland for their Irish editions. I mean we run Irish editions of, say, the Daily Mirror, but there is very few human interest stories. If there is nothing happening on the security front or, as is happening at the moment, we have the Libyan Embassy siege, the British pressmen simply go to the pub and don't bother. They wait until there is some major security spectacular which keeps their office happy. (102)

Perhaps the most damning indictment of the coverage accorded to Northern Ireland by the British press came from a journalist who covered the conflict for a quality paper until 1984:

The most formidable thing, I think, is the failure to understand, the failure to recognise Catholic perceptions and public perceptions. The question that to me the British press should be constantly asking itself and asking the public, is why these guys take these risks. I mean the risk of death among IRA men in Ireland is incredibly high. It must be as high, I suppose higher, than the mortality rate among Argentinian fighter pilots in the Falklands. I mean really, it would be interesting to find out what sort of casualty rate it is: how long you can expect to be on active service without being hit. I would have guessed it was probably no more than three operations, perhaps two operations. Why do they take these risks? Why did ten guys starve themselves to death about whether or not the government paid for their clothes? Why did these people go through with it? Why are there people sitting happily in gaol? Going in with their eyes open into situations where they can either be killed ... why do they kill? Why are they so bitter that they can blow up a police van, that they can blow up the Ceremonial Guard? There is no attempt whatever to answer these questions. (103)

Slipping off the page: political violence as news

At the time I was in El Salvador, the hostilities at hand were referred to by those journalists still in the country as the "number four war", after Beirut, Iran-Iraq, and the aftermath of the Falklands. So many reporters had in fact abandoned the Hotel Camio Real in San Salvador (gone home for a while or gone to whatever hotels they frequented in Guatamala and Panama and Tegucigalpa) that the dining room had discontinued its breakfast buffet, a fact often remarked upon: no breakfast buffet mean no action, little bang bang, a period of editorial indifference in which stories were filed and held, and film rarely made the network news. "Get an NBC crew up from the Falklands, we might get the buffet back," they would say, and, "If it hots up a little we could have the midnight movies". It seemed that when the networks arrived in force they brought movies down and showed them at midnight on their video recorders, Apocalypse Now, and Woody Allen's Bananas. (104)

One of the main consequences of the British media's reporting of Northern Ireland almost exclusively in terms of its violence, is that as this violence tailed off during the early 1970s, there has been a corresponding decline in the space and prominence accorded to the conflict by the print and broadcasting media. Reading a British newspaper in 1986, and especially a popular one, it is often difficult to remember that there is still a conflict taking place in the Six

Counties; that many of the social and political factors that first gave rise to the civil rights movement remain unresolved; that the two communities are to-day, if anything, more polarised than at any other time in the past; that individuals from both communities are still being maimed and killed in a part of the United Kingdom. In 1986, Northern Ireland is an issue that only rarely trespasses on to the front pages of the British press.

This section examines some of the factors that have contributed to Northern Ireland's slow demise as a major news item in the British press, and assesses some of the main consequences of this decline for the way journalists approach the reporting of political violence and on the type of coverage this violence is accorded in the papers they work for.

Fading out: Northern Ireland as news

... all newspapers know that when they cover Northern Ireland they are doing it out of duty rather than because they think it is going to bring readers. We cover it, and this week I'm going to be doing a profile of Douglas Hurd. But again it is a kind of feeling that we ought to cover it rather than because anyone is going to wake up on Sunday morning and say: gosh, what can I read about Northern Ireland to-day?⁽¹⁰⁵⁾

If it is possible to speak of news issues having a "golden age", then Northern Ireland's spanned the years from 1968 to 1973. During this period the conflict rarely strayed from the front pages of the press, and provided one of the most consistent leading stories for broadcasting news. Northern Ireland's attraction as a news issue during this relatively brief period of just over five years was hardly surprising: what started as a localised protest over social and political discrimination quickly developed into a violent inter-communal conflict which at times verged on open civil war. Almost as quickly, it was transformed into an open military conflict between sections of

the nationalist community and the British Army. During the course of these rapid developments the conflict was to provide the British media with some of the biggest and longest running stories for years. A list of the stories that were to capture the headlines during this period is almost endless: the battle of the Bogside followed by the entry of the army; the emergence of the Provisional IRA and the commencement of its bombing campaign; Bloody Sunday; internment it was events like these that were to make Northern Ireland one of the hottest news stories in decades.

As the violence, which had maintained Fleet Street's interest since 1969, became routine and less frequent after 1973, interest in the conflict started to cool. At the popular end of the market, interest in the Six Counties had started to wane even before the violence had reached its peak. One Belfast based journalist on a popular paper noticed a slackening of interest within his own paper as early as 1971:

... there was tremendous coverage up until 1971, then all of a sudden people in Britain seemed to get choked by it. Someone had discovered that it didn't sell papers, and there was an immediate appraisal: they just said, this is bad news, let's cut it down; there is too much of it, it is going on every day. And we suddenly found, about 1971, that there was a dramatic slackening of interest, and in fact it hadn't even reached its peak. And we were getting less and less in; we were maybe getting a page one splash up to then. It was then being relegated to paragraphs, and I think it was Fleet Street saying, it's gone on for a couple of years and we are tired of it. That was a shock here I think. There was a lot of interest up until 1971 and then suddenly there was a cut back and people were saying, it's bad news, we don't want to hear about it. (106)

Even in the quality press, political violence and its aftermath were no longer attracting the coverage they had done only a year previously. Simon Winchester, who covered the conflict for the Guardian until the early 1970s, found that by 1971:

the editors tended to want to know how long it would be before the total dead reached a certain arbitrary figure, rather than the tragic circumstances of each individual

death; funerals that rated a page in 1970 rated less than a couple of lines at the base of the page three years later. (107)

As events in the North slipped down the news schedule in the early 1970s, Fleet Street allocated less and less resources to the story. Journalists were moved on to other stories; offices in Belfast and Derry were reduced; some papers ceased to maintain a correspondent permanently in the North and came to rely more heavily on "stringers" (freelance journalists) and occasional visits for their coverage; and the quality press increasingly relied on the efforts of a solitary reporter with the occasional assistance from "stringers". And while the Europa Hotel, Belfast's main watering hole for British journalists, may not have discontinued its breakfast buffet, journalists no longer congregated at the bar in the numbers they once had.

The declining levels of violence were also to have an impact on the Northern Irish press. The Belfast Telegraph, the North's biggest selling local paper, responded to the decreasing violence by reducing and restructuring its work rota. During the early 1970s, the paper had operated a 24-hour shift system in order to cater for the massive demand for copy. As a deputy news editor on the paper explained, by the mid-1970s, the level of violence had declined to such an extent that it was no longer possible to justify a permanent night shift:

Well, we don't have a night shift now, we have a news editor whose job it is to keep in touch; well, it's normally the police we have to monitor, but we also listen to Downtown Radio broadcasts. But we don't think it is necessary to keep a night staff on. We used to have a night staff in 1969 and the early 1970s when there were street riots. But I mean if somebody comes out and shoots someone tonight, that's it; it's over; we can pick it up the next morning or follow it up the next morning and that's ample time to do it. It is not worth putting a night staff on because six nights out of seven the staff will be sitting doing nothing. (108)

By the late 1970s, the Northern Ireland story had become so routine and predictable, and the patterns of reporting it so familiar, that even major events, like the 1981 hunger strike, could be handled without the need to deploy extra staff. As the same journalist went on to explain:

During the hunger strike, we had people on stand-by for the first couple of deaths; but there again, after a couple of deaths during the hunger strike - it's an awful thing to say - but that became routine too. We had that down to a fine art. Some of the hunger strikers died at five in the morning, and I think there was a fairly sound medical reason for that: the body's system is at its lowest even for a healthy person who is sleeping, their body is at its lowest and weakest. So a lot of these guys, who were physically ill, seemed to pop off at four or five in the morning when their system was run down: Bobby Sands died in the wee small hours. As I say, after we got Sands and a couple of others, we got that under a routine as well and that didn't require cover. (109)

How, then, do we explain Northern Ireland's demise as a major news story? What made political violence front page news in 1970 and not in 1973 and 1974?

The first, and perhaps the most important, factor underlying the marginalisation of Northern Ireland as a news issue in the British press was the inevitable decline in its news value due to repetition. For any event/issue to be able to fend off competition from other stories in the selection process, it must constantly regenerate its news value by lending itself to new forms of presentation and by offering journalists new angles which they can exploit, and which they hope will be of interest to their readers. Indeed, journalists, when talking about news selection, constantly evoke the interests of their readers as being the primary determinant in shaping the news agenda. The priorities of this agenda, they are prone to argue, are determined according to whether a story is perceived as being "interesting", "important" or "relevant" to the audience their papers serve. By the

mid-1970s, many journalists argue, political violence in the North had received so much coverage that it no longer breached public expectations, nor retained its capacity to shock. Put at its bluntest, the conflict in the North had been "over-reported"; bombings, shootings and their aftermath had, with constant repetition, become predictable, mundane and boring for British readers. When it came to events in the North, one journalist on a quality Sunday paper explained:

There is no public interest here at all; none at all, except among members of the Irish community and a few people interested in politics anyway. We know this; people don't read articles on Northern Ireland. We have what are called page traffic surveys by which people are asked - and all newspapers have these - did you see that article? Did you read it? Did you enjoy it? ... and so on, and Northern Ireland is just off the scale. (110)

Thus, by reducing the space and prominence accorded to events in the North, journalists argue, news editors were simply responding to the demands of their audience. To suggest news coverage should be shaped by considerations other than what the audience wants, and is prepared to pay for, a popular journalist argued, would be to misconstrue the nature of the press:

Newspapers are not the public watchdog that people seem to think they are: newspapers are very commercial businesses indeed. They have done their best to provide this information for the folks abroad, and they have discovered that the folks abroad are basically not interested. The newspapers discovered that they are flogging a story with no interest to the readers, and they drop it and replace it with something that is of interest to the readers and will sell newspapers. I mean these newly emerging tabloids would rather carry a picture of a naked girl than carry a thousand words trying to explain why we are in such an awful mess here, and why the British government is spending one million pounds a day of taxpayers' money. They would rather look at a naked girl than read that; they don't care. (111)

Some journalists go even further, arguing that not only is the British public bored with Northern Ireland, but that its mere presence on the front page is enough to stop them buying a particular newspaper.

As one popular journalist explained:

... certainly the British public must be sick, sore and tired of reading about Northern Ireland. It doesn't sell newspapers. If you are walking down a street in London and you see a billboard which says "Ulster horror", you are not going to see people rush over to buy this paper because in their minds it means yet another horror, yet another Ulster horror - they've had it. Go back to the First World War, the first battles of the First World War seemed horrendous. Take Le Marne: so many thousands killed. In the end the public became inured to it; and the lists, in the end they gave up publishing those lists of the dead because it was happening too quickly for them. (112)

Assumptions such as these about "what the public wants" are widespread among journalists. They are not, however, without their problems. As Schlesinger has pointed out, audience led explanations for news selection are problematical in the sense that they are rarely based on the findings of detailed market research. When journalists talk about "giving the public what they want", the logic is often one of justification as well as explanation:

When it comes to thinking about the kind of news relevant to "the audience", newsmen exercise their news judgement rather than going out and seeking specific information about the composition, wants or tastes of those with whom they are communicating. In this context making a news judgement is thinking about the audience because the presumption is that the professional's selections are those which meet the desires of those who are being addressed. (113)

If audience led explanations for news selections are at best little more than speculation on the part of the journalist, at worst they are a self-fulfilling prophecy: having deemed a story as "boring" or "uninteresting", the likelihood is that the journalist will devote his time and resources to other stories. As one Irish journalist complained:

... if they [British journalists*] did a bit more work with their stories, and got up and went out and got big stories - and the big stories are there - then perhaps they could encourage their news desk to use more of them. Again, I don't know who started it first; whether it

* [...] Author's comment

was the news desk that said, we don't want any more stories unless they are spectacular, or whether journalists just stopped giving them them. (114)

In seeking to explain the decline in public interest in Northern Ireland, many journalists refer to some variant or other of "McLurg's Law". Named after a former news editor in the BBC, "McLurg's Law" lays down the relative newsworthiness of events. According to this "Law", the news value of a given event or issue diminishes or increases in relation to its proximity to news organisations and their audiences. Newsworthiness is measured according to its impact on the audience: the closer to home, the greater the impact and thus the greater the news value. "McLurg's Law" is frequently invoked by journalists as a means of explaining the disproportionate attention given to acts of violence that take place in England even when they are less "costly" in human terms than similar acts in Northern Ireland. For example, one journalist, commenting on the massive coverage given to the Harrod's bombing in comparison to the paltry coverage often accorded bigger and more lethal explosions in the North, said:

I agree with that coverage because it is not happening every day. They don't blow up Harrods every day. It is expected here and it is unexpected in London; it is closer to home and it has a bigger population - there are more people interested in it. No I don't argue against it at all, I think you have got to do that. (115)

The same journalist, in an almost classical formulation of the "Law", explained its consequences for news selection in the following terms:

For instance, if a UDR man is killed he will not, even though it is a regiment of the British Army, a UDR man's death will not carry the same weight in an English paper as a serving soldier over here. See, you are back to the old argument: a raft capsized on the Ganges yesterday and 2,000 Indians perished - end. And there are no names. Whereas, if it happened on the Great Ouse: a father and his two children were drowned in the Great Ouse yesterday; his loving wife, etc., etc. And you would get a column or something on it. And there is no way you can change that; it's a matter of interest.

I mean nobody is going to sit down and read a list of Chinese or Indian people who drown on a raft; a Mr. Patel. Another Mr. Patel. A Ram Jam Singh ... (116)

A deputy news editor on a Belfast paper made a similar point:

It's a wee bit like sitting in here and a bomb goes off somewhere up country. If it is just a straightforward bomb we won't get too excited about it. But if a bomb goes off outside our door it is treated differently, and that's just because it's handy. And that's human nature. Look out of the window and there it's there; you seem to do more with it. I mean the day they [the IRA*] left a tanker. We had a tanker left outside our building and we were evacuated; they had a bomb sitting on top of all this petrol. And when we finally got back into the building that afternoon, we had a huge headline "The Great Escape" in the biggest type you could get. I daresay if that had happened somewhere up country our reporter on the scene would have got excited and would have phoned us copy, but the excitement might just have stopped when it reached the office because nobody in the office had actually seen it. And that must be true of someone sitting in the mainland watching violence on television: until you are actually caught up with it you can't appreciate it. (117)

Given that journalists as a rule are dealing with events/issues of which their audience have little if any first-hand experience, this argument could be extended to cover much of the daily content of most newspapers.

Another factor which has undoubtedly contributed to the marginalisation of Northern Ireland as a news issue is the continuing intractability of the conflict itself. Since the imposition of Direct Rule in March, 1972, Northern Ireland has consistently failed to provide either the British government or the British media with a "happy ending" to a conflict they would undoubtedly like to see the back of. As Northern Ireland trundled from one "solution" to another (the Assembly, 1973, the Convention, 1975, "Rolling Devolution, 1982, and the Forum, 1985), Fleet Street's interest in the Six Counties evaporated. To all intents and purposes, Northern Ireland had become an open-ended story. As one journalist on a popular paper complained:

*[...] Author's comment

The one thing with this situation is that there is no end in sight; the old cliché, there is no light at the end of the tunnel, nothing to strive for. I mean the First World War was horrible, but it was four years and there were phrases like "the final push". And there was a final push, and it did come to an end. It was only a temporal thing. World War Two, six years we were involved with that, but it must have flashed past compared to this. (118)

The bi-partisan approach of successive British governments on the issue of Northern Ireland and the absence of any "meaningful" party political debate over its future, have combined to make Northern Ireland a highly unattractive story for the British media. As one journalist on a quality Sunday paper explained, the decline in political violence since the early 1970s, coupled with the political stalemate over its future, now means that many newspapers report events in the North more out of a sense of duty than because it is seen as a good story:

At the moment it's done, and I think you'll find this is true of all newspapers, and if they tell you the opposite, they are bullshitting, it's done out of a sense of duty. It's important, and everybody realises that, and therefore it has to be covered and it has to be covered with a degree of skill, commitment and analysis. But it is done in the absolute knowledge that it won't sell newspapers ... For whatever reason, the IRA is much less violent these days and that's had a considerable influence - there is much less to write about. There is also very little politics going on here: the British seem to have settled down to simply governing directly by having ministers in charge of drains in Ballymena and deciding whether the playground in County Antrim can be unlocked on a Sunday. Therefore there is no politics there to speak. (119)

It is hardly surprising that during the mid-1970s, as the scale and frequency of political violence declined, the British press lost interest in the conflict and moved on to other stories.

Inflating the cost: political violence as news

I don't like going to funerals: I try to avoid them as best I can. The trouble here is that there is a name one week and another name the next week - and you tend to forget. Within the last month we have had an assistant prison governor shot in front of his little daughter and his wife. Go into the pub and ask someone what his name

was and they will have forgotten, because we have had another one last Saturday. And the IRA know this. And if there is some classical horror some gothic they have committed, they don't apologise for that, they commit another ... (120)

As we have already seen in Chapter 6, as early as 1972, political violence in Northern Ireland had been "normalised" to such an extent that the killing of individuals, even members of the security forces, rarely made the English editions of many newspapers, let alone their front pages. In the daily competition for space, as one journalist on a quality paper explained, events in the North were increasingly displaced in favour of other stories:

There is quite a lot of changing, a lot of stories will be cut or moved depending upon pressure for space on the night. For instance, if something big happens in London, obviously Northern Ireland will be cut down. (121)

In the popular press, this tendency was even more pronounced with many newspapers reserving their coverage of the North almost exclusively for their Irish editions. As one popular journalist was to complain:

Lots of stories we write for the Irish editions never get into the English edition because the English bosses decided that the English people, or the Welsh or Scottish people wouldn't be interested. It has to be a very big story indeed to get any show in the English editions. Routine bombings and shootings very rarely appear nowadays in the English editions. (122)

In the view of one deputy news editor, British media interest in the North is now only revived when something spectacular happens - and even then only temporarily:

It is all right for us of course because we live in this bloody place and we are publishing every day. It is our bread and butter. But Northern Ireland to-day is competing with all sorts of national issues. It is competing with the miners' strike; it is competing with Cruise Missiles; it is competing with Maggie Thatcher and her own particular style of government. I mean, for the people in mainland Britain now, what are the big issues? The miners' strike, Cruise, ... Northern Ireland comes way down the list. Some day something big will happen here, they'll shoot a

Secretary of State, and it will shoot back up the league again to the top. And for the next week you'll get all sorts of background, but as soon as it dies away, it will fall down the league again. But I mean that is no different from any other big story, because eventually, I mean looking at the news bulletins at night now, the miners' strike is starting to go down as well: down the schedules, down and down every night. After a while there will be a bit of a rumpus on the picket-line and it will be big news again. (123)

The argument that "routine" acts of violence have been repeated so often that they are no longer newsworthy, is one that is universally accepted by journalists working in Northern Ireland. In the view of many, the scale of violence now needed to make their English editions has risen constantly since the early 1970s. To-day, many journalists now only find their news desk interested in stories about violence when it is on a massive scale. According to one popular journalist, to get a good spread in his paper for a violence-related story:

what you need now is multi-horror: something like Le Mon, burning to death, children are killed, they [the IRA] know that makes copy. A bomb under a UDR man's car doesn't get in at all now. I mean even in the Irish edition it will only make a couple of paragraphs because it is all too frequent. If there is human drama there, a woman loses her husband or loses husband and daughter, this sort of thing. If you want to get horror on the front page, you have got to make it a new horror, a different horror. (124)

The argument that violence is only news when it presents itself in a new or unusual way, was also advanced by an Irish journalist:

I don't think it is good copy any more unless it's something spectacular that happens. I mean you could get two or three people killed in one day in various sectarian killings, or a soldier gets shot or someone like that, and none of it will rate very much in the British press. And then you will get some other story - like the school teacher daughter of a magistrate coming home from mass who is shot dead by the IRA - that can make the front page, it can make headlines in the BBC news. Really you've only got one life lost whereas you could have three lives lost elsewhere and it wouldn't make the same. It is just the outlook of the British press; they are looking for the human element, something with which they can sell those stories to the public. (125)

One popular journalist listed the kinds of incidents it now took to make the English edition of his own paper as being:

The shooting dead of a magistrate's daughter coming home from mass; the shooting of the deputy governor of the Maize Prison in front of his wife and family so soon after 38 republicans had escaped; 10 or 20 soldiers are blown up by the IRA. It has to be a story on a massive scale or very emotional scale. (126)

The continuing inflation of the violence needed to make the English editions of the British press is not limited solely to the popular press, although there it is more pronounced, as a journalist on a quality paper explained, it is a feature common to all English newspapers:

In many ways what seems to be happening, and I'm not just talking about my own paper but generally, is that it has to be more astonishing to get in. When I think back on the stories that have really been big: Ballykelly, four killed in a UDR explosion; McConnell, the Maize governor; Mary Travers; Edgar Graham ... they're the big ones - spectacular, horrendous ... But the other side of the argument is that if you have been coming here since 1969 there is nothing new in that. (127)

As we have already seen in Chapter 3, the argument that as the news value of political violence declines with repetition and familiarity, the "terrorists" have been forced to seek other means of securing the headlines, occupies a central position within orthodox thinking on the relationship between the media and political violence. Despite the problematical nature of this assumption, the assertion that the imperatives of the news process have had a profound effect on the patterns of violence in Northern Ireland is one shared by many journalists. Indeed, the most frequent assertion generated by this school of thought, that, in response to the media's dwindling interest in their campaign, the "terrorists" have become more innovative and ruthless in their use of violence, is one echoed by many journalists when talking about the media's coverage of "terrorism". As one journalist was to put it: "The terrorists, if they want to make

headlines, they have got to dream up a new angle".⁽¹²⁸⁾ Irish "terrorists", many journalists argue, are so familiar with the workings of the media that they are able to identify changing trends in reporting and are quick to change their tactics should they detect the media's interest waning. As one Irish journalist explained:

I think journalists are more selective now in the type of material they use, particularly the cross-channel journalists, and that in turn has led the participants in this struggle being more selective in the type of atrocities ... they become involved in. An ordinary bomb blows up or is defused, doesn't make the headlines it made ten years ago or even six years ago. Terrorists now tend to go for the spectacular incidents: shooting a judge; shooting a magistrate; shooting a politician; shooting someone in the public eye. Because they know their spectacular incidents will in turn attract spectacular headlines in the cross-channel papers.⁽¹²⁹⁾

The assassination of Airey Neave in March, 1979, the same journalist went on to argue, was a prime example of how the "terrorists" have modified their tactics in order to maintain maximum media attention:

I mean the terrorists will up the ante as soon as they realise the media are losing interest, and that is why you are getting VIPs bumped off ... that is why you get crimes like Airey Neave, to attract media interest ... And they [the terrorists*] know all these things, they are not done willy-nilly; they know the mileage they are going to get out of it. They are getting mileage out of Airey Neave to this day; people are still talking of the INLA which killed Airey Neave. You see they are experts at it now. They have been at it a long time and they know the type of atrocity ... will attract media attention not only on the day it happens but for a long time after.⁽¹³⁰⁾

Whatever criticisms one might like to level at the contention that a decline in news value has influenced either the scale or the nature of political violence in Northern Ireland, and there are many, the general argument that routine acts of violence in particular, and Northern Ireland in general, no longer command the attention of large sections of the British press is beyond question. And the consequence of Fleet

*[...] Author's comment

Street's dwindling in the North have been felt by almost every journalist covering the story for an English paper. The days when every national newspaper would maintain a large staff in the North are long gone. To-day, the Daily Mirror has the largest staff of all the national newspapers, followed closely by the Daily Mail. The Daily Express, Daily Star, Daily Telegraph, Times and Guardian all rely on the efforts of a solitary reporter with occasional back-up from "stringers". The Financial Times and the Sun, on the other hand, maintain no permanent correspondent in the North.

The reduction in staffing levels since the mid-1970s have invariably placed constraints on how many journalists are able to cover the story. Deprived of the organisational resources that were available for the story in the late '60s and early '70s, many journalists, and especially those working for the quality press, now find themselves hard pushed to report the conflict in the depth or detail they would like. As one quality journalist explained:

One of the problems with the British press coverage of Northern Ireland is that it is done on a very small budget. The Guardian has got one man, one staff to cover the whole of Ireland - but fortunately they have a very good "stringer" in Dublin. Now when big news is breaking, like last night for instance, with the RUC bombing and the soldier being shot, you are really pushed. You don't have time to do the sort of reporting ... you don't have time to do the sort of digging which journalists should be into in Northern Ireland ... If there is a big story you can't cover it in the way say a daily paper like the Belfast Telegraph can cover it, or even the Irish Times which is relatively small staffed, or in the way that a British paper can cover a bomb that goes off in London. I mean you would have someone here at the desk making checks with the police, you might have two or three people down at the scene. You can't do that if you are a one-man operation. (131)

Given that this often makes it impossible to cover every incident in detail, journalists, by necessity, have been forced to prioritise their resources in order to make the most efficient use of their time and energy. In ordering their priorities journalists inevitably take

into account the particular requirements of their newspapers: will the desk be interested in it? How much space is it likely to be accorded? Equipped with the knowledge that routine acts of violence are no longer good copy, it is not surprising that they are now low on the priority lists of many journalists. As one popular journalist was to explain:

It would have to be pretty big to drag us out of Belfast these days. Quite often though I tend to go out on these jobs purely for contact purposes, and I can often find myself being the only newspaper reporter there with just a BBC crew and a local television crew. Lots of reporters don't tend to go now. It takes a while, if it's out in South Armagh it takes an hour to get there and an hour to get back, and you are messing around. If it's after lunch it's the pressure of copy, (132)

A similar point was made by a journalist on an Irish quality paper:

I mean it's very cynical, if it's just a UDR man shot on the border, you don't go down and cover it because it is quite normal; it's one or two a week, right? So you just take the police statement, you phone the UDR probably, you take the Provo statement, you might phone a couple of local people to see what's happening, and then you write it from the office. Anything that's in any way dubious we go out to. I mean for example, during the shoot-to-kill strategy I think we were the only newspaper that sent a reporter down to every one, and came back with something more than leading with a police statement. (133)

Many journalists, in an attempt to rationalise scarce resources, have come to rely heavily on both the local media and the information services operated by the RUC, both to monitor daily events and in many instances to provide the details on which their stories will be written. Radio and television are a constant and regular source of up-to-date information, and all journalists will try to be close to one or the other for their regular news bulletins. Over time, many newspapers have also developed their own special arrangements for being cued in to potential news stories. As one journalist explained:

Normal procedure is we use the Belfast Telegraph a great deal because they are much more clued in to what is happening here. All the popular papers do; we each have our own special arrangements. Their news desk will ring and tip us off if they have heard of anything. The police

are also quite good, they will ring us up themselves from time to time. Once we do hear of anything, either on the radio or through the Belfast Telegraph, instantly I would check with the police to find what it is and where it is. They usually have very sketchy details, so we try to get some guidance from them as to whether it is worth going if it is some distance from Belfast. (134)

Consequently, in many cases the report of a routine act of violence will have been pieced together from a variety of sources, with the closest a journalist getting to the incident being a phone call to the local police. As one journalist on a quality paper explained, this should not automatically be construed as bad or lazy journalism; in many instances being at the scene of an incident is often more frustrating than productive:

The one incident that brought it home to me was the shooting of Bernadette McAliskey, which was down near Coalisland ... I leapt into my car and drove down there, and I arrived and was stopped by a roadblock which must have been at least a mile away from the house - and there was a hill between us and the house so we couldn't see anything at all. I sat there for two hours waiting for a press spokesman from the police to come down and tell us what happened. In the end, I just thought, well, there is no telephone around here, this is ridiculous, if I don't get access soon I'm going to be too late for my deadline. So I jumped into my car and drove back to Belfast. I walked into the house, switched on the television and I was taken on a guided tour of the house by the television cameras. It suddenly came home to me that one had to be a bit ruthless, and one had, to some extent, to change one's priorities and one's approach to the job. I mean normally one is trained as a journalist to imagine that the bigger the bomb and the more people that are killed, the more important it is that you should be there. But then I came to realise that with that sort of story I had to be more efficient in terms of using my manpower. It was far more efficient to do it from television and newspapers like the Belfast Telegraph, when it comes out in the evening, and a few strategic phonecalls. (135)

While the reliance on other sources for many journalists is nothing more than a practical response to the daily pressures of time and limited resources (and one which may create time for other and more important stories), it is an approach which is not without its problems.

For a journalist who is particularly lazy, or for the journalist working for a paper which expects little more than routine coverage, the temptation to rely exclusively on these sources must be great. Tales of journalists never getting out on stories abound in journalistic circles. As one Irish journalist was to comment:

Quite a lot of journalists either lift stories out of the Irish News or the Newsletter in the morning, or the Belfast Telegraph in the afternoon, or they listen to Downtown Radio or watch BBC television. Now all journalists do that, but other journalists would try to advance on the stories, they would use them as a source of news not as the actual news story itself. I've seen journalists sitting in a bar, hearing a news bulletin that such a thing had happened, and obviously following the police or military line on it, just simply lifting up the phone, phoning up their news desk in London and just giving them exactly the same wording. Now that happens quite regularly. (136)

A further problem with this style of newsgathering is that it not only magnifies the role of official information sources, but also the dependence of many journalists on those sources. Over the years, such practices have become so entrenched, and the short cut to a story so well trodden, that even for the journalist recently posted to the North, conforming to them is often no more than a matter of routine. As a journalist on a popular paper, first posted to the North in 1983, explained:

... we go to the RUC, or we go to the army, or we go to the Northern Ireland Office because they are the well laid out forms of communication. This has been going on for many years and that is the line of communication I followed when I came here. (137)

Dependency upon such sources for the routine information, and in some cases, the only information, with which they write their stories, not only increases the risk of taking the official view but also the likelihood of mistakes. The same is true, as one journalist pointed out, of relying too heavily on the local media. Because of

understaffing, he explained:

there is a very heavy reliance on the radio and the Belfast Telegraph, and this can be distorting in the sense that the prejudices of the local media, and the perceptions of the local media are passed on to the British media and to the British reading public. (138)

The same journalist recounted one particular incident when this dependency on the local media resulted in what may have been a security forces' leak gaining wide coverage in the British media:

During the hunger strike there was a story carried by the police I think, anyway a story went out that a butcher in West Belfast had been shot dead. And the story put about was that it was because he'd refused to close his butcher's shop for the funeral of one of the hunger strikers. I happened to have a 'filer' (somebody over helping me) and he went off under his own initiative and went down and interviewed people in the adjoining shops. And it was quite untrue, it was a sectarian killing. I am not sure what the original source of the story was, though I suspect it was the police, anyway it was picked up by the local media, picked up by the British media, and released there. And I don't think it was ever queried except by the piece by us, and I don't think that was repeated anywhere else. But I mean it changes your perceptions enormously if the IRA is capable of killing a butcher, one of their own Catholics, for failing to close their shop in respect for a hunger striker - it presents a totally different picture. (139)

The practice of sharing "common" information sources coupled with the inability of many journalists to do the checking and cross-checking that is necessary in a situation where there are often conflicting interpretations even on the most basic facts of an incident, have invariably had their impact on the range and nature of the information being made available to large sections of the British public. Rather than reflecting the range and diversity of views and interpretations that are essential if the reader is to reach a rational and informed judgement on the stories presented for their consumption, these routines and practices have contributed to a uniformity of coverage. The widespread nature of these practices among British journalists in the

North has significantly reduced consumer choice with many papers not only carrying the same stories, but, as often as not, identical quotes, identical interpretations, and identical mistakes as their competitors.

Insofar as the coverage accorded to Northern Ireland in general is concerned, the dwindling interest in the conflict now shown by many papers and the decreasing demand for violence-related copy have also had their impact. The spasmodic coverage now given to events in the North and the policy of news segregation whereby this coverage is increasingly reserved for the Irish editions, have actively reinforced the view being pushed by the British state and its security forces that "normality" is slowly being restored to the North. (140)

The Propaganda War

There are two wars going on in Northern Ireland: one is the physical war and the other is the propaganda war. And one nurses and sustains the other. At times one will assume a greater significance than the other, but essentially propaganda will be used by the paramilitary organisations to justify their actions, and indeed, in some instances, to pre-justify them: to create the ambience or environment in which a subsequent military action will be taken. (RUC Press Officer) (141)

We have no control over the incidents which are instigated by terrorists, and we have no control over how these incidents are witnessed and reported by journalists. So, to consider that there is a way of controlling the propaganda war, if you like, is as ill-advised and as wrong as to think that there is a way of controlling ... the acts perpetrated by the terrorists. (Army Press Officer) (142)

As we have already seen in previous chapters, the coverage accorded to Northern Ireland by the British media has been shaped by a process of external political attack leading to tighter internal control. In Chapter 3, I described how the intellectual backing for this attack was provided by counter-insurgency experts and conservative academics who, on the basis of some highly questionable assumptions about the relationship between the media and social action, purported to have

established a link between "terrorism" as a political and military strategy and the routine imperatives of the news media. The widespread support given in particular to the assumption that "terrorism" as a strategy was aimed at winning the propaganda war rather than the physical war, was to bring the role of the media in Northern Ireland into sharp public focus. As a consequence, the Northern Ireland posting was to become one of the most sensitive positions in Fleet Street. The following section examines the impact of the media/"terrorism" debate on journalists working in the North and looks at how they have sought to resolve the practical problems and professional dilemmas the debate has brought in its wake.

Renewing the attack

For much of the 1980s, the debate over the relationship between the media and Irish political violence has remained relatively dormant, and criticism over media coverage of the conflict, though never far below the surface, has tended to be less vocal than it was during the early 1970s. That the heat should have gone out of the debate in recent years is hardly surprising. As I have argued above, the media's response to the attacks of the early 1970s was to avoid the reporting of anything that could be construed as being sympathetic to the "terrorists" or their cause. However, the recent decision of the BBC's Board of Governors to prevent a transmission of the Real Lives: "At the edge of the Union" documentary featuring a profile of IRA spokesman Martin McGuinness, despite unprecedented opposition from their own senior management and widespread criticism at home and abroad, and the subsequent decision to show the film with "some amendments", shows just how sensitive the British media still are to the accusation of giving succour to Irish "terrorists".

In many respects, the attack on the BBC during the summer of 1985

followed a well-worn path: a proposed interview with an IRA representative is used by sections of the popular press and certain politicians as a stick with which to beat the broadcasters. In many respects, the public debate generated by the programme, much of it conducted in the pages of the press, was also to take a familiar and well-rehearsed form. In its editorial of the 6th August, the Daily Express typified Fleet Street's reaction to the proposed interview when it condemned the film as a "party political broadcast on behalf of the IRA" which "above all reflected the BBC's ambivalence to the IRA". In its editorial of the 8th August, the day of the strike in protest at the banning, the paper, parodying a television news bulletin, stated: "First, the headlines. Broadcasting journalists have held their one-day strike action on behalf of the IRA". The editorial went on to question the adequacy of the BBC's internal guidelines which, it argued, were designed to prevent such programmes being made: "So much for the Corporation's internal guidelines, designed presumably to see that programme-makers do not seek to put 'sanitised' pictures of terrorists on to our screens". On the 9th August, the Express turned its attack on to Alasdair Milne. Milne, it argued, was "blissfully unaware" that his staff were planning a prime time plug for the IRA, and advertising the fact in full colour". The editorial pages of the Sun were also given over to a concerted attack on the programme. In its editorial of the 5th August, the paper criticised the BBC's Board of Managers for challenging the Board of Governors' decision to ban the film. The Board of Governors, in the paper's opinion, had "stopped the Corporation from the outrageous action of giving a free platform to terrorism". As for the protest strike by journalists, the paper went on, "Had the journalists an ounce of responsibility, they would have approved of the ban". The Sun's editorial of the 8th August also launched an attack on those journalists who had taken part in the strike. The BBC journalist

Vincent Hanna, who had organised the strike, was described by the paper as a "would-be Castro of the air waves".

The film was to fare little better in the quality press. In an editorial on the 4th August, the Sunday Times was concerned with the lack of vigilance within the BBC which had allowed the film to reach the stage of transmission without top level consultation:

The television documentary on Ulster which the BBC banned under government duress is a flawed programme. But it did not deserve to be censored. If the senior editors of the BBC had done their jobs, most of the flaws could have been removed and the BBC governors might have reacted more favourably when they viewed it. Instead the film was completed for broadcast without any serious discussion of its content or intentions among the BBC's top brass. In the post-TWA hijack climate, with the broadcasters under severe scrutiny from politicians and public for the way they deal with terrorists, it is an amazing dereliction of duty by the BBC's senior management that a programme featuring a leading IRA terrorist could reach such an advanced stage (including a colour feature in the Radio Times) without anyone at the top in London paying much attention until they read about it in the Sunday Times. (143)

While it was the paper's considered view that the programme itself was a "model of balance" compared with other programmes recently broadcast, it went on to attack what it saw as the BBC's soft line on the IRA:

It is not, for example, fair to contrast a known IRA terrorist with blood on his hands (Martin McGuinness) with a diehard loyalist (Gregory Campbell) who says all manner of alarming things but is not exactly suspected of murdering and maiming. This unfairness is compounded by playing Campbell's threats to wage war in the streets if the British army withdraws alongside McGuinness's coy answers to queries of his violent past. The effect is to make the man threatening future violence more sinister than the IRA terrorist who already has a track-record which includes Bloody Friday, bombing the heart out of his home town of Derry and killing British soldiers ... the result is that the documentary never exposes just how evil this man sitting with his wife and children really is. These are serious flaws which could have been rectified with re-editing. (144)

Whatever the long term implications of the Real Lives episode and the protest strike by broadcasting journalists are, in the short term the row has once again created a climate in which the media's reporting of "terrorism" is again an issue of considerable sensitivity.⁽¹⁴⁵⁾

For journalists the political row generated by the programme has again raised a familiar, and on the surface, apparently insoluble dilemma: how do they reconcile on the one hand their duty to inform and the public's right to know with, on the other hand, the accusation that, by reporting the views and activities of the "terrorists", they may be aiding their campaign.

To report or not to report?

The central assumption underlying the debate over the relationship between the media and "terrorism", that a primary motivation of the "terrorists" is to secure publicity for their cause and thereby recruit new members and attract funds, is one shared by the majority of journalists in the North. As one journalist on a popular paper was to comment:

Well, there are two wars going on side by side: one is the street war, the gun and bomb war, the other is the propaganda war. The propaganda war is not so important, in my opinion, to the IRA in Ireland, but it is very important to them abroad, especially in the Middle East, parts of Germany, parts of France, parts of Spain from where they get their guns, and absolutely vital in America, where they get the funds to buy those guns.⁽¹⁴⁶⁾

Moreover, as the same journalist went on to explain, the assertion that the "terrorists", and in particular the IRA, have a well-developed infrastructure which sustains their propaganda efforts, is one that attracts considerable support among journalists in the North:

The propaganda operation run by the IRA is brilliant. And I don't know who runs it, but their own newspaper, An Phoblacht, is only one of the many publications scattered throughout the UK. They even have little newspapers in parts of London where the Irish population

lives ... And of course in America they have massive magazines and newspapers all selling quite legally. These are all run by very professional gentlemen aimed at their own people. This is why their propaganda is so weak in Ireland; their papers only go to their own people and therefore they can't sway anyone into the ranks. But in America (because the Americans are mugs; they'll buy anything standing in a bar) these are distributed everywhere, and some of their propaganda there works. (147)

In the view of another journalist on the same paper, the fact that journalists had rarely if ever been the target of violence bore testimony to the significance accorded to the media by groups like the IRA: (148)

The IRA would be the first to admit that propaganda is as important to them as it is to the RUC. No journalist has ever been killed here, even though they [the IRA] object to the way the British press reports events over here, because they need them; they need the Daily Mail and they need the Sun as much as they need the Republican News. (149)

This is not to suggest that journalists see propaganda as stemming solely from the "terrorists". On the contrary, all journalists, and particularly those who covered the conflict during the early years, are acutely aware of the efforts made by the army to manipulate the media in order to secure their propaganda goals. As a journalist who has covered the North since the late 1950s was to explain, the army had been quick to exploit their strategic position as an information source. That they had been so successful, he suggested, could be attributed to the relative inexperience of British journalists who:

were beaten by the necessity of getting stories into their papers, and at the time they hadn't any fall back contacts and they couldn't go much beyond the army ... And these chaps didn't know any locals really, so they were totally dependent upon the army and the army version. This led, I'm sorry to say, to a lot of colourful stories which bore no resemblance to what had happened. It was only when the truth of these stories emerged, say in a court case, that a lot of chaps began to realise just how much they had been misled by the army. In fact some years ago, one army press officer was demoted and transferred, and I think probably sacked for leaking stories to a newspaperman, a London

Fleet Street chappie, and these stories had literally been concocted and bore no resemblance to the truth at all. (150)

However, while journalists recognise that official sources are as interested in getting their propaganda across as the "terrorists" are often assumed to be, it is the paramilitaries, and particularly the IRA, who are usually credited with being the most sophisticated and committed of the propagandists. In the view of a journalist on a quality paper:

The most ruthless propagandists in Northern Ireland are the spokesmen for the paramilitaries who will turn and twist simple facts to suit their own ends. The British army and the police are rank amateurs compared with the twisting and turning of narrow-minded, insular, ruthless, deadly people who kill and mutilate Irish people. These people are past masters at the manipulation and interpretation of events which they themselves have orchestrated. (151)

While all the paramilitaries are assumed to be equal in their desire for publicity, when it comes to the successful use of propaganda, they are far from equal. As one journalist was to explain:

The loyalists are only beginning to react to IRA propaganda, and they aren't very good at it. They also have their own magazines and their own newspapers, but it doesn't have the same professionalism. It isn't as well written and as well slanted as the IRA publications which are so beautifully written that half the time you'd think the IRA was right and everybody else was wrong. The loyalist paramilitaries and loyalist organisations are slowly but surely catching up, but it has taken them ten years to realise the value of propaganda and they have almost lost their own cause. (152)

At a personal level, journalists tend to have little sympathy for the paramilitaries, whose violence they are quick to condemn. Indeed, one journalist summed up the attitude of many of his colleagues when he said: "That is one prejudice I would admit to: I am very prejudiced against the paramilitaries and I don't care who they are". (153)

Nevertheless, at a professional level, most reject the argument that those involved in the use of political violence should be denied access

to the media. The often assumed corollary of the argument that "terrorism" feeds off publicity, that if deprived of publicity it would largely cease to be a problem, is one that finds little support among journalists in the North. As one journalist on a paper noted for its vitriolic opposition to the IRA explained, such a simplistic assumption ignores the deep-rooted nature of the conflict:

Well, for many years these men weren't written about at all but they never went away. They weren't a great force and they didn't have many guns, indeed, when the real shooting broke out in 1969, they weren't available, they weren't to be had. But nevertheless, the hard core of the IRA were still there. Nobody had written about them, nobody talked about them, but they didn't go away and never will go away of course. These men are not something built up in the last ten years by newspapers and newspapermen desperate for information; these men have been operating now since the early 1900s.

Even those journalists who had some sympathy for the argument that censorship could help in the fight against "terrorism" tend to accept that giving access to the views of those in opposition to the state was a necessary, if at times unfortunate, feature of the press in a democratic society. As one journalist on a popular paper was to put it:

Well, I would say that if you had total censorship you would definitely deprive the IRA of one of their main wheels or machinery, which is publicity ... I mean it works in Russia. If there was a minor revolution in Tiflis or somewhere, you might not hear about it for a month, by which time it has vitiated ... It has lost all its impact by then. Then you would say, well, that's the sort of thing you'd expect there, and it wouldn't make many headlines. So total censorship would achieve a purpose, but that's not the way this state works, is it? That's one of the things you've got to suffer. (155)

Thus, as professionals, most journalists defend the view that those in opposition to the state, even when using undemocratic and violent means, should be given access to the media on the grounds of the public's right to know and the media's duty to inform. Indeed, in

defending the "terrorists'" right of access, most journalists go even further and argue that the reporter has a positive duty to seek out the views of the "terrorists":

I think reporters still have a duty to report what is going on. I think they also have a duty to go behind the story. They must go behind it and they must be prepared to talk to the paramilitaries. It is not enough to simply dismiss them and give just a one-sided version of events, give the government's side of events or give the security forces' side of events. We have got to know what drives these men on, what drives these killers on. Why are they so cold-blooded that they can go out and kill men, women and children and ignore the appeals from their church leaders, from government leaders, even from their own street corners from their people, and choose to continue this cold-blooded campaign. I think reporters have a job, a necessity of trying to reach their minds, of trying to find out what they are thinking and what they are prepared to settle for ... the only people which seem able to reach these people are the press. So we are the main conduit into their thinking and into what they are going to do next. (156)

A deputy news editor on a Belfast paper defended the duty of the press to inform even if this duty clashed with the expressed wishes of its readership:

This is the thing we get into most trouble about. If we run a story to-night quoting paramilitary sources, especially after the Travers murder and the shooting of that guy the other night, we will get people on the phone saying, we don't want to read about what these people are saying, they are only a bunch of killers. Why are you giving publicity to a bunch of killers? What we always say to these people is: listen, if these people were removed from this society would there be any trouble? No. And I will say life is not that simple; they are very much a part of this conflict so it is very important that you and I and everybody else know exactly what makes them tick. You have got to know why they are doing this. (157)

For some journalists the real problem stems not from the fact that the "terrorists" might be given too much publicity in the press, but that they might not be given enough. Without a constant ventilation of the aims and perspectives of the paramilitaries, one journalist argued, the ability of the public to construct a meaningful

understanding of the conflict would be impaired:

I mean how often have we heard that there is no support for them, I'm talking of Provisional Sinn Fein, there is no support for them, no support for the IRA? Then see what happens, people come out and vote for them. So suddenly, if you haven't been explaining why, that perhaps there is support for them, your readers are going to be left in a vacuum ... I do think it is important. I mean you cannot understand the problem without analysing, reporting, and talking to Provisional Sinn Fein to find out why, and what it is they want. (158)

A journalist on an Irish quality paper put the point more forcefully:

I mean that's one of the problems isn't it, that they [the IRA*] have never been represented which is why the British don't understand what's going on - because it is not informed by its papers. I don't mind if they put their own line on things but at least get the information out. After the hunger strike everything changed ... there was no possibility of any middle ground, and the Provos were growing and Sinn Fein were growing. And that didn't appear in the British press. (159)

However, while all journalists defend the right of the press to interview spokesmen for the paramilitaries, few support the view that they should be allowed to express their views freely. In this respect the right of access is a highly qualified one. Thus it was one journalist's view that:

If you are going to put a paramilitary on television or radio, or interview him for a newspaper, he must be cross-examined. He mustn't put across a paramilitary point of view without [the journalist*] being hyper-critical of their organisation. In that case, I think they should be exposed to the media. (160)

The argument that groups like the IRA and INLA should be given access to the media, but only under tightly controlled situations, and only on the understanding that what they say should never go unchallenged, was also forwarded by another popular journalist, who, while agreeing that "terrorist" voices should be given expression in the media, added:

*[...] Author's comment

I think they should be heard because, if you have any intelligence at all, you read the papers, you can see through it, you can understand it. I don't think they should be stifled as long as you have counter-voices on the same programme or a good interviewer. It's a different matter if it is, say, Radio Wales or something like that, where an IRA leader comes on and makes a propaganda speech and they say: right, here come the advertisements; that's the end. I mean, that's a different matter altogether. But nearly every one of these programmes where these people have been allowed to speak, they have always countered their propaganda - someone tears them apart, or should do. Though sometimes they have picked quite weak people who aren't conversed in the situation at all and they turn out to be very poor at presenting a riposte to the allegations. (161)

What is revealing about these and similar statements is that, implicit within them is the notion that what groups like the IRA and INLA have to say is always mere propaganda rather than legitimate and valid comment and, moreover, that what they have to say is at worst distortion and half-truth and, at best, highly suspicious. Furthermore, the assumption that journalists should always be a hostile witness to what such groups have to say is scarcely conducive to eliciting the most reasoned and perceptive information for their audiences. Moreover, as we shall see below, it is an approach which is rarely, if ever, accorded to the statements or representatives of the state.

The central problem from the perspective of journalists working in the North is not whether or not the "terrorists" should have access to the press, but how, given their duty to inform, and given a conflict in which everyone from the highest government minister to the lowliest paramilitary spokesman on the Falls Road or the Shankill is out to manipulate the media for the purpose of propaganda, it is possible to avoid being used for that end.

"Sorting the wheat from the chaff"

Journalists working in Northern Ireland are highly sensitive to the fact that all sides to the conflict have their "axes to grind", and

that as a consequence many tend to view the environment in which they work as hostile territory in which no-one's word can automatically be trusted. Maintaining one's "objectivity" under such conditions, as one journalist was to point out, is often difficult:

you are manipulated and used by both sides to such a degree that you begin to lose your bearings after a while. I think that is why it is quite important to keep bringing out different reporters, otherwise you can get terribly caught up in the whole system.(162)

while another journalist who covered the conflict during the late 1960s and early '70s said:

No journalist can be objective. You can try, and I used to agonise horribly about, had I been fair to the police, for example. I mean I wrote about what were called 'police riots' at the time, and people would show you a smashed window and the police would deny it all. After all, these people are their enemies and they do regard the police as an arm of repression, so they would say that, wouldn't they? And this was a thing that I was completely new to and I was in complete agony. We were the only paper that gave them [allegations against the security forces] credence really. We reported claims of army brutality and torture without dismissing them out of hand or ignoring them as most papers did. We didn't say: these are true, but we did say: these are cases for which there is a strong body of objective evidence. But it did mean that one was always the source of some resentment to the authorities, which occasionally was a bit of a problem.(163)

The realisation that no side to the conflict can automatically be relied upon to tell the truth makes the task of evaluating the claims and counter-claims that are a frequent feature of the conflict they report a difficult task. As one Irish journalist explained:

Well, it took a few years to learn this new skill of reporting a conflict like this where there were actually people who were only too willing to use you and your paper, and use publicity, to twist and distort publicity for their own ends. It is a question of sorting out the wheat from the chaff and knowing when someone is taking advantage of you just for the sake of it. And that is the time when you have got to be very careful. But it is very hard to do; there is a very, very thin line between fact and fantasy in this country.(164)

Just how difficult it often is was illustrated by one journalist by way of a hypothetical, though in reality common enough, incident:

Say the army claimed that a youth had been shot dead while carrying a rifle. Supposing it happened at 9 o'clock at night, then you had to phone that over simply saying that the army claimed that a 15-year old youth had been shot and that the army claimed he had been carrying a rifle. Then you would go to his parents who would say: no, he wasn't carrying a rifle, he was never in the IRA in his life, he was a good boy; he only went out to look. So you would say that local residents disagree. Now where is the truth in that? It is all incredibly difficult and there is no way of finding out. (165)

In the light of these problems, many journalists have had to tailor their own expectations of their ability to provide an "objective" account of events in the North. Many see the "truth" as a difficult entity to apprehend at the best of times and, in the case of Northern Ireland, an almost impossible one. Indeed, many, when talking of their role in reporting the conflict, accept that the best they can hope for is to "get close to the truth" or to get "something like the truth". As one journalist was to put it: "The truth here is very cloudy, very hard to find, and you have to strike a balance and find what you think is the truth". (166)

The problem faced by journalists in evaluating the relative veracity of conflicting accounts is compounded in Northern Ireland by the fact that they are rarely, if ever, on the spot when an incident takes place. In the absence of directly witnessing an incident, journalists are, by necessity, forced to rely on the interpretations of those involved. And, as we have seen in Chapter Six, in many cases the only information available to journalists is the uncorroborated word of the army or police. It is here that the problems begin. While in other contexts the police, and the information they provide, is often taken on trust by journalists, in Northern Ireland, recent history has shown that the veracity of army and police statements cannot be taken for

granted. As the then Northern Ireland Controller of the BBC, Richard Francis, points out, any notion that those representing the forces of "law and order" in the Six Counties have a monopoly over the truth is problematical:

We work in an environment in which propaganda plays a large part, but propaganda doesn't stem only from paramilitary and illegal organisations - neither are they always wrong. It stems too from government, political parties and the security forces, and it is up to all journalists to weigh propaganda as an inescapable ingredient of the situation which they have to describe. Of course propaganda itself is not an evil; it's the cause for which it speaks which has to be evaluated. Sometimes, not often ... the Army's initial version of events turns out to be further away from the truth than that of the Provos. (167)

How then have journalists sought to resolve the practical problems of ensuring "objectivity" and "impartiality" as they go about the daily task of newsgathering in the North? How do journalists on a practical level evaluate the claims, counter-claims and conflicting interpretations that constitute a daily and, indeed, unavoidable feature of the conflict they report? If, as many journalists believe, the conflict in the North is as much a war of words as it is of bombs and bullets, how do they sort out the "wheat from the chaff"? And if, as Richard Francis suggests, in the reporting of Northern Ireland, it is not the propaganda but the cause for which it speaks that has to be evaluated, how do journalists weigh and assess the legitimacy or otherwise of these causes?

"Striking a balance"

All journalists, conscious of the fact that no side to the Irish conflict has an automatic monopoly of truth, and aware of their own professional code of practice, are quick to stress the need for "impartiality" and professional detachment in the reporting of Northern Ireland. The only practical means of ensuring "impartiality" in the

face of conflicting accounts, many argue, is to treat all sides equally.

As one journalist on a quality Sunday paper was to explain:

Now when you have two people who you know are likely to fib, and have very good reasons for fibbing, then how do you find the truth in that? And it was very rarely that objective evidence came along, which it now and then did: like you would see something yourself, or another reporter would see it, or someone for whatever reason you would trust, or someone giving you information that would be against his side of the conflict, which one tended to trust more than information that fitted in with their view of the conflict. It was terribly difficult, and one just had to do one's best to make it plain where the information came from and never assert anything as true unless you knew quite surely it was.(168)

In practice, the only means of ensuring that all sides are treated "equally", many journalists argue, is through the meticulous application of "balance". As one journalist explained, at its most basic, "balance" simply means ensuring that all those who have an interest in a story are allowed their say:

Well, I think that a journalist in Northern Ireland should do what journalists in Kent are doing or journalists elsewhere in the UK or all over the world: you should do what you are taught to do, be objective and write balanced reports. I think that is the most important thing, balanced reports: give everybody a say. It is not enough to call you something; you have every right to reply to that. It is not enough for the Secretary of State to call Gerry Adams an apologist for murderers; Gerry Adams has a right to say why he disagrees with that - or he may even agree with it.(169)

Another journalist described his own approach as being to strike a balance between the views of both sides:

You put two views together and try and balance it. Sometimes it doesn't work, sometimes it doesn't get in, but that is my way of approaching it and that is the way I would approach it in England. You try to get two sides to a story; you don't usually take spoonfeeding from the authorities - I was never taught to be a journalist like that and I don't intend to be one.(170)

Through the application of "balance", journalists argue, the information is channelled directly to the audience who are left to

make the final decision as to the relative merits of each case. The journalist in this respect simply acts as a conduit along which the information, without interference, is transmitted to the audience.

In evaluating and assessing the relative veracity of conflicting accounts, many journalists are also inclined to talk of having an intuitive "feeling" for the truth. In much the same way as journalists often talk of having a "nose for a good story", some also talk of having a "nose", "feeling" or "sense" for the truth. As one journalist was to put it: "you get a feeling for people when they're bullshitting. It's not reliable but it's better than anything else you've got".⁽¹⁷¹⁾ Another journalist described how a mixture of "balance" and his own intuition often enabled him to arrive at something close to the truth:

I'm very aware that there are two sides to it - the authorities' side and the republicans' side. I'm aware of that, very conscious of it, very careful about it, and sometimes very suspicious about certain things that emanate from both sides ... Say the RUC put out a statement about what happened and maybe Sinn Fein put out another version, I tend to read them both. And just reading also what eye-witnesses have said, because eye-witnesses may embellish, they may forget certain things, but often in a funny kind of a way, you do finally emerge with a version which fits in with what is factually known from both sides.⁽¹⁷²⁾

Thus, in the day-to-day reporting of the conflict in the North, "impartiality" finds its practical expression in the balancing of competing definitions and interpretations, the interviewing of representatives from all sides, and the presentation of rival claims to the truth. The more disputatious or controversial the incident, then the more "balanced" the journalist's handling of its various participants needs to be. Journalists are also sensitive to the fact that "impartiality" does not end with the simple "balancing" of conflicting accounts. Aware of the fact that how they handle the statements emanating from the various participants may, albeit subtly, influence their readers' perception of their relative veracity, many

journalists also claim to be meticulous in their choice of labels. This is particularly significant when the reporter is dealing with accounts of incidents without the aid of direct observation. If the reader is to reach his own decision as to which side is telling the truth, one journalist was to comment, particular care was demanded when using such loaded terms as "said", "claimed" and "alleged". If lacking any concrete evidence, he argued:

you don't say, for instance, local residents 'claimed' and the police 'said'; you say police 'said' and local residents 'said'. Or if you are a bit dubious about both sides, you say the police 'claimed' and local residents 'claimed'. So you at least try to give the impression that there is a grey area. (173)

As the same journalist went on to explain, the problems arise when they are operating at some distance from the incident:

I mean there was shooting down in Pomeroy; it was last autumn, where an old woman was shot during a bank robbery and it turned out that the police had shot her. And the police had put out this clatter of odd statements ... But we didn't send anybody down there ... and I had to do it by the phone and it wasn't very satisfactory at all. I was very unhappy with the story because I didn't know, I just didn't know what weight to put on which person. And I do think all these things like the words 'said' and 'claimed' are very important. (174)

Another journalist who covered the conflict until the early 1970s said he was often "shocked" at:

seeing what were obviously army claims, and sometimes dodgy at that, appearing in other newspapers as fact. I must have done it myself, but one tried to avoid it. But of course the temptation to announce something as fact is always very great. I remember reading a Daily Mirror story that the IRA had got rocket launchers. The Mirror had given over its whole front page to the story. But it wasn't said at any point that the army 'claimed' the IRA had rocket launchers, it was the IRA 'had' these launchers. But certainly 'X claimed' something is less dramatic and exciting than citing something is true. Stating as fact makes a more gripping and interesting read as far as the journalists on the pops are concerned than to report it as a claim. (175)

As has been pointed out elsewhere, the related concepts of "impartiality" and "balance" perform a dual function within contemporary journalism. On one level, they represent practical devices by which journalists seek to satisfy the demand for professional detachment in the reporting of controversial issues while, at another level, they provide journalists with a ready means of defending this detachment in the face of external criticism.⁽¹⁷⁶⁾ Indeed, a practical manifestation of "impartiality" for many journalists, and the ultimate expression of their professional detachment, is when their reports attract criticism from all sides. As one journalist put it: "That's healthy. That's good. If everybody criticises a journalist, then a journalist is doing a good job".⁽¹⁷⁷⁾ This argument, that if all sides criticise a journalist, then he must, by definition, be impartial, was also advanced by another journalist:

If we are criticised by both sides, we are obviously fairly well down the middle - which is the best thing. We are vilified by the Republican movement over here as we are by the Orange movement. The Protestant people in Northern Ireland hate British newspapers because they say we are glorifying the violence ... The Republican movement hates us equally for siding with the British establishment against the Republicans. But that applies across the board to everyone and, as I said, if that's the case, we must be doing about the right job because we are down the middle if we are hated by both sides.⁽¹⁷⁸⁾

while in the view of a journalist on a Fleet Street quality paper:

the biggest compliment a journalist can have is to be criticised by several people for the same story. If each of these critics represents a different point of view and each criticises the same article, that's a compliment; it shows dispassion.⁽¹⁷⁹⁾

Nevertheless, contrary to the way many journalists talk about it, "balance" is a highly problematical concept. The "golden rule" of many journalists, that when in doubt, present both sides of the issue and delegate the responsibility for deciding which is closer to the truth to the reader, may be a convenient defence against accusations of

bias, but it is an approach fraught with problems. First, it ignores the fact that, if anything, the reader, when faced with two conflicting accounts of the same issue or event, is likely to be even less well equipped to evaluate the relative veracity of these accounts. Secondly, it assumes that all "voices" to the Northern Ireland conflict carry equal weight and equal credibility. In the context of Northern Ireland where the source of a statement may be as important in the eyes of many, including some editors, as its relative truth or falsity, such assumptions are highly problematical. As Philip Elliott has pointed out:

Faced with a bald account of the facts, or rival versions of the facts laid side by side, with no elaboration of the meaning and significance of the incident, how else can the public be expected to judge than by its preconceptions? (180)

In the case of Northern Ireland, these preconceptions are likely to have been influenced as much by the information they have received about the conflict in the media as anything else. They are also likely to have been influenced by the dominant ideological and cultural view of the participants to the conflict, and the legitimacy or otherwise of their aims and methods. At a basic level, those seen to be operating in the interests of "law and order" may be assumed to have a greater propensity towards the truth than those seen to be operating against it. The constant accusation in the media and elsewhere, that the "terrorists" and their supporters, real or imagined, are constantly seeking to discredit the security forces and the British authorities, is unlikely to have increased the credibility of those in opposition to the state in the Six Counties. A third criticism that can be levelled at the concept of "balance" as understood and practised by many journalists, is that it not only suggests that the reality of any given situation is to be found somewhere in the middle of the two conflicting accounts on offer, but also that the complexity of views and perspectives circulating in the

North can be boiled down to two positions.

If the concept of "balance" is problematical, then the ultimate end of its application, professional detachment and "impartiality", are concepts fraught with even more problems. As Charles Taylor has pointed out, the concept of "neutrality" or "impartiality" to be meaningfully employed requires a background of value commitment; and this background, while defining and enjoining neutrality in some contexts, forbids it in others, i.e. those where the background values are themselves attacked".⁽¹⁸¹⁾ In the context of Northern Ireland, the framework of values within which broadcasting and the press operate is one in which the abhorrence of "terrorism" in general, and of Irish "terrorism" in particular, is a central and unwavering value. As we have already seen in the press response to the banning of the Real Lives: "At the Edge of the Union" documentary, the "terrorist" and the IRA in particular, have few, if any, friends among the leader writers of the British press. Indeed, since the early 1970s, the press as a whole, and the popular press in particular, have been at pains to demonstrate to the public that, while the broadcasters may be ambivalent towards the "terrorists", they are not, never have been, and have little intention of being, impartial between the authorities and the IRA.

Despite their own claims to professional "impartiality" it would be surprising indeed if many journalists did not share similar values to those daily espoused in the newspapers for which they work, and those at play in the wider society in which they operate, even if those values are critically held and conformed to for the immediate purpose of getting their stories into the paper.

Talking to journalists in Northern Ireland, there can be little doubt that many are as opposed to the paramilitary groups and their methods as their newspapers. And, while the extent to which their own

personal prejudices are allowed rein in their reporting of the conflict is difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain, there can be little doubt that their attitude to such groups as the IRA and INLA, and the information they supply, is one of hostility. For example, one journalist, while accepting that such groups were an important factor in the conflict, and that their views need to be heard, added:

But I certainly will not be used as a publicity machine for gangs of thugs, psychopaths and fascists. I'm speaking not just of the IRA, I'm talking about loyalist terrorists as well. I will not be used personally as a tool by these people. (182)

while another journalist, rejecting the notion that either he or his paper were biased against the paramilitaries, added, without apparent irony, that:

if a known gunman who has slain and mutilated people is shot by the army or the police, there is obvious rejoicing. I mean these are people who, don't forget, carried out the Birmingham bombs and the London bombs ... (183)

Yet another journalist, when asked whether he thought there had ever been an attempt to "blacken" the name of the IRA in the British press, replied:

It blackens its own name; I mean its deeds speak for themselves. As far as the British public is concerned ... once it started murdering and killing in England, it couldn't stoop any lower. The IRA can't blacken its name any further. And I don't think there is a deliberate attempt any more to smear the terrorists. I think that's all long gone; we just leave them to get on with what they are doing. (184)

One undoubted consequence of these and similar attitudes towards the paramilitary groups is that their credibility as an information source is considerably less than that of official sources. As one journalist explained, those who operate outside of the law and who show such little compunction about killing and maiming are unlikely to be concerned about the accuracy of their statements:

I find that some newspapers could be unconsciously tendentious against the army or the RUC because they have no fear of them. They could come out and criticise them - the army did this, the police did that ... outrageous - but they would be afraid to say that about the IRA because they knew something could be done against them. They could be under threat from the IRA because these are people who would stop at nothing to hit back; whereas they [journalists*] knew, thanks to MPs in parliament, thanks to our parliamentary system, they knew ... you always had redress, you could always complain [about similar threats from the security forces*] to your MP. You could always kick up a hell of a stink. But if you upset someone in particular in the hierarchy of terrorism, you ran a bit of a risk. It's very easy to criticise any establishment organisation where they can't do anything about it because you have the power of appeal and complaint through the parliamentary system. (187)

A similar point was also made by another journalist who, when asked how reliable he thought IRA statements were, replied:

Well, I mean they have to be unimpeachable; you can't check out IRA quotes in the same way possibly as you could other people. I mean the IRA say they killed someone and that's that. (188)

The standard of proof required of statements emanating from paramilitary sources is undoubtedly higher than many journalists expect from official sources. As one journalist, commenting on the information provided by the paramilitaries, was to put it:

Of course it's their version and only their version of events - it's too one-sided for me in which case I won't write it. And if I do pass it on to the office, I'll say I don't think we should use this because it smacks too much of terrorist-type propaganda. So we have to act as censors to a large extent. (189)

Conscious of their own claims to professional detachment and "impartiality", journalists have a tendency to view the conflict in the North from a professional rather than personal perspective. And, despite the personal opposition to the "men of violence" expressed by many, most are quick to dispel any notion that this ever finds its way into their reports. Indeed, the argument that the press has a positive

*[...] Author's comment

duty to side with the forces of "law and order" in their struggle against "terrorism" is rejected out of hand by most reporters - and it would be surprising if this were otherwise. For one journalist, however, the issue of whose side the reporter should lean to was a moral rather than a professional one:

Well, it's like being ... a correspondent on the day the British Army liberated Belsen: are you going to walk in there and say: now I'm going to be fair here. Well now maybe these people starved themselves to death; maybe the camp guards gave them food and they wouldn't eat it. You can't take every issue and say, to be fair we'll split it down the middle, because in many issues there is only a tiny fragment of truth on one side and 99 per cent of truth and justice on the other. So you can't cut things down the middle ... I mean in some instances you just use your own moral judgement in these matters. You certainly can't cut it down the middle and say: I'm going to give two pages of the paper to a certain organisation that has murdered a lot of people and give the same to the duly elected government who doesn't want anybody killed. I think my example of Belsen speaks for itself. (186)

The hostility shown towards the paramilitary groups and the caution and suspicion accorded to the information they provide, stands in sharp contrast to the attitude often shown towards official sources of information. As we have seen above, the attitude of many journalists, and one that is shared if not indeed actively encouraged by news editors, is to take the information provided by such sources on trust unless there are very strong grounds for doing otherwise. One quality journalist, for example, described his own paper's attitude to such sources as being one of almost complete trust: "I think there is a natural ... feeling that what authority says must be right", (189) while a news editor on another quality paper admitted that, in contrast to the treatment often accorded to the IRA, when it came to official sources like the army and the police, "you would be sensitive about criticising them without being right". (190)

However, in seeking to explain the preferential treatment accorded

to official sources in the press, it would be unwise to lay too much stress on the personal attitude of journalists either individually or collectively. As I have argued above, the ability of the state and its representatives to secure a prominent position for their views and perspectives is rooted in the structured preference given to such sources within the news process itself. And, as one journalist was quick to point out, even without the personal support of journalists, the strategic position enjoyed by such sources is unlikely to be seriously threatened:

I don't think newspapers in this country could function without the RUC press office. Even their biggest critics would agree with that. Even those papers that have called for the disbandment of the RUC, their own reporters would tell you that their paper couldn't function without them. Because every paper, no matter if it is a diehard Republican paper, lifts the phone every hour and rings the police and asks them if there is anything doing. (191)

Conclusion

They [the Irish*] are absolutely obsessed by their situation. And this is going to sound terribly intolerant, but I have got more intolerant since I've come back here, but they are so obsessed by their situation, and in a way love it and like being trapped in it, that they are actually full of curdled resentment that other people don't find it as wonderfully fascinating as they do. That sounds very harsh, and one does appreciate that they are living there and in awful conditions in many respects. But to an extent it is clear that, over the past 15 years, which is as long as it's been since the army went in, that a lot of people have their interest in it going on as it does now. Security and social security, the second biggest industry in the province with people employed in huge numbers, they are getting an enormous amount of private wealth in Northern Ireland - particularly among the middle classes. Policemen are doing quite well out of it because they are paid extremely well. It suits the army to an extent because it serves as a training ground. It suits the politicians. All the politicians in Northern Ireland are, without exception, creatures of the troubles ... People like Molyneux, Paisley, all the ones on the Catholic side, all the Alliance and most of the Unionists, and certainly the ones that are active over there, are in positions of influence and authority ... purely because of the troubles ... Because the situation has gone on for such an incredibly long time, it's 17 years since Fitt was first bopped on the head, because of that people have grown used to it and have grown to need it in a peculiar way -

*[...] Author's comment

they incite and encourage it. The need to change things and settle it has vanished; there's no need to, it can go on like this for ever. It has come to suit people quite well. (192)

The record of the British press and British journalists on the issue of Northern Ireland has been a far from satisfactory one. One of the most important issues of the past two decades has attracted a style of coverage which has, at best, been simplistic and ahistorical, while at worst, trivial and sensationalised. In the main, British journalists at all stages of the news process have collectively abdicated their responsibility to stand by their professional code of practice and bring to the attention of the British public the social and political complexity of a conflict which, in one way or another, affects them all. Those involved in processing the news provided by journalists in particular, shoulder a large proportion of the blame for the reporting failure on Northern Ireland. The decisions they have made and continue to make on a daily basis about both the nature and the scale of the coverage accorded to the conflict, together with the control they have been able to exercise over their subordinates in the news chain, have been contributory factors in this failure. Convenient as it may be, the standard defence against such an accusation, that it has all been done before and that the public have had their fill, is hardly convincing. An editorial policy that restricts and reduces a complex and constantly evolving social and political conflict to an ever-dwindling casualty list, can hardly be expected to whet the appetite of potential readers or maintain the interest of existing ones.

Journalists, though for different reasons, must also shoulder the burden of responsibility. The tendency of journalists, in seeking to mitigate their responsibility for the coverage given to the story, to portray themselves as the innocent victims of their paper's editorial line, or as powerless hostages to the vagaries of public interest in

the North, is not without substance. There is little doubt that the parameters in which they report events in the North are shaped by decisions taken largely beyond their control. This is particularly true of those journalists presently working on the story who, in the face of dwindling resources and dwindling editorial interest, have considerably less space than their predecessors to provide the depth of coverage demanded by the Irish conflict. Nevertheless, journalists, many of whom are quick to lay claim to their Fourth Estate heritage, have also played their role in the information failure on Northern Ireland. All too often, either out of concern for their careers, or simply for an easy life, they have failed to take issue with the coverage put out under their names. The defence that they would like to be investigative journalists if only allowed the freedom, may have more substance, but in the light of their lack of protest over the past fifteen years, it is hardly a convincing one.

Like most generalisations, the above comments obviously oversimplify a much more complex story, and there have, of course, been some notable exceptions. The work of the Sunday Times' "Insight" team, and the reports of individual journalists like Robert Fisk and Simon Winchester, for example, are still held up by many journalists presently working in the North as examples of investigative journalism at its best, though more often in nostalgia than as a reflection of present standards. Unfortunately, for every journalist like Fisk and Winchester, there have been all too many who have shown themselves willing to toe the line laid down by their editors and news desks - some albeit with less vigour than others.

Contrary to the impression often given by the British media and many politicians, the conflict in the Six Counties is a dynamic rather than a stagnant phenomenon. Since 1968, it has constantly, if at times subtly, entered into new and different phases. Since the late 1970s,

the conflict has progressed through a number of new phases: Ulsterisation and its attempt to domesticate the conflict and restrict it within a framework of law and order and criminality; the 1981 hunger strike and the deepening alienation of the nationalist community that it produced; the electoral strategy of Sinn Fein and the response of loyalists and Unionists to this strategy; and more recently, the growing militancy of the loyalist community even against their "natural allies". Yet the significance of these issues has, with few exceptions, still to attract any meaningful analysis in large sections of the British press. Instead, happy to follow in the wake of successive governments, many Fleet Street papers have been content to blame the continuing tragedy on the vagaries of the Irish themselves while devoting most of their energies to denouncing the "men of violence". If the approach of successive British governments to the issue of Northern Ireland has been characterised by their failure to grasp the nettle, the approach of the British media has been to constantly deprive the public of the information necessary for it to construct a meaningful and continuing understanding of the conflict taking place on their doorstep.

If the coverage given over to Northern Ireland by the British press to date has rarely reached the standards one could expect from a newspaper industry that is wont to call itself "the best in the world", hopes for some future improvement are slight. The recent outcry over the BBC's attempts to ban the Real Lives documentary, unusual as it was, is unlikely to have any lasting impact on the way the British press reports Northern Ireland. The routines and patterns of reporting that have evolved over the past fifteen years have taken on a permanency that is unlikely to be eroded in the future.

Notes

- (1) Alasdair Milne "We have to constantly realign our relationship with the audience."
The Listener, Vol. 106, No. 2735, 1981.
- (2) For a general background to the rise of the civil rights movement and the events leading up to the October march see for example: Kelley, K., The Longest War: Northern Ireland and the IRA, Zed Press, London, 1981. Buckland, P., A History of Northern Ireland, Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1981.
- (3) Kelley, K. The Longest War: Northern Ireland and the IRA, Zed Press, London, 1981, p 104.
- (4) Examples of this response can be found in Bell, Martin, "Reporting Ulster", The Listener, Vol. 88, No. 2271, 5th October, 1972. See also the debate between Philip Elliott and John Whale: The Listener, 15th October and 26th November, 1970.
- (5) Interview with journalist by author, 26th February, 1985.
- (6) Interview with journalist by author, 28th February, 1985.
- (7) See Chapter 2.
- (8) Galtung, J., and Rudge, M. "Structuring and selecting news", in Cohen, S., Young, J., The Manufacture of News: Deviance, Social Problems and the Mass Media, (2nd edition), Constable, London, 1981.
- (9) Interview with journalist by author, 19th April, 1984.

- (10) Interview with journalist by author,
13th April, 1984.
- (11) Interview with journalist by author,
12th April, 1984.
- (12) Ibid.
- (13) Ibid.
- (14) Ibid.
- (15) Interview with journalist by author,
12th April, 1984.
- (16) Ibid.
- (17) McCann, E. "The British Press and Northern Ireland",
The Northern Ireland Socialist Research
Centre, London, 1971, p 3.
- (18) Interview with journalist by author,
18th April, 1984.
- (19) Northern Ireland, one journalist
suggested, was in many respects no
different from any overseas posting; in
a foreign country journalists tended to
cling to the values and accents they
were familiar with and understood. She
likened the journalist in Northern
Ireland to the British holiday-maker
abroad searching out fish and chips.
- (20) Interview with journalist by author,
12th April, 1984.
- (21) Interview with journalist by author,
17th April, 1984.
- (22) McCann, E. Op. cit., 1971, p 3.

- (23) John Chartres for example, who covered Northern Ireland for the Times until the early 1970s, as well as covering almost every colonial campaign during the 1950s and 1960s, was also an officer in the Territorial Army.
- (24) Interview with journalist by author, 13th April, 1984.
- (25) Ibid.
- (26) Simon Hoggart, now with the Observer, and Simon Winchester both went on to take up such coveted foreign postings.
- (27) Interview with journalist by author, 29th February, 1985.
- (28) Interview with journalist by author, 15th April, 1984.
- (29) Interview with journalist by author, 15th April, 1984.
- (30) Ibid.
- (31) Ibid.
- (32) Interview with journalist by author, 15th April, 1984.
- (33) Interview with journalist by author, 10th April, 1984.
- (34) Interview with journalist by author, 13th April, 1984.
- (35) Ibid.
- (36) McCann, E. Op. cit., 1971, p 27.
- (37) Interview with journalist by author, 28th February, 1985.

- (38) Interview with journalist by author,
17th April, 1984.
- (39) Interview with journalist by author,
15th April, 1984.
- (40) Galtang, J. and Rudge, M. "Structuring and selecting news", in Cohen and Young (eds.), The Manufacture of News: Deviance, Social Problems and the Mass Media, Constable, London, 1973.
- (41) Interview with journalist by author,
15th April, 1985.
- (42) Ibid.
- (43) Tunstall, J. Journalists at Work, Communication and Society Series, Constable, London, 1971.
- (44) Interview with journalist by author,
28th February, 1985.
- (45) Interview with journalist by author,
17th April, 1984.
- (46) Interview with journalist by author,
28th February, 1985.
- (47) Interview with journalist by author,
15th April, 1984.
- (48) Interview with journalist by author,
28th February, 1984.
- (49) Ibid.
- (50) Interview with journalist by author,
16th April, 1984.
- (51) Interview with journalist by author,
15th April, 1984.
- (52) Ibid.

- (53) Tunstall, J. Op. cit., 1971, pp 144-147.
- (54) Interview with journalist by author, 28th February, 1985.
- (55) Interview with journalist by author, 12th April, 1984.
- (56) Interview with journalist by author, 15th April, 1984.
- (57) Interview with journalist by author, 15th April, 1984.
- (58) Ibid.
- (59) Quoted in McCann, op. cit., 1971, pp 26-27.
- (60) Interview with journalist by author, 28th February, 1985.
- (61) Interview with journalist by author, 15th April, 1984.
- (62) Ibid.
- (63) Interview with journalist by author, 15th April, 1984.
- (64) Interview with journalist by author, 15th April, 1984.
- (65) Ibid.
- (66) See for example: "Guardian Man Quits in Protest", The British Media and Ireland, Truth: the first casualty, The Campaign for Free Speech on Ireland, London, 1979.
- (67) Quoted in McCann, op. cit., 1971, p 26.
- (68) Interview with journalist by author, 15th April, 1984.

- (69) Ibid.
- (70) Ibid.
- (71) Ibid.
- (72) Interview with journalist by author,
19th April, 1984.
- (73) "We're being repressed", The British
Media and Ireland, Truth: the first
casualty, The Campaign for Free Speech
on Ireland, London, 1979.
- (74) Interview with journalist by author,
19th April, 1984.
- (75) Kirkaldy, J. "Northern Ireland and Fleet Street:
Misreporting a Continuing Tragedy", in
Terrorism in Ireland, Yonah Alexander
(ed.), 1983, p 174.
- (76) Interview with journalist by author,
18th April, 1984.
- (77) Interview with journalist by author,
12th April, 1984.
- (78) Ibid.
- (79) Interview with journalist by author,
17th April, 1984.
- (80) See McCann, op. cit., 1971.
- (81) Elliott, P. Reporting Northern Ireland, Ethnicity
and the Media, Paris, UNESCO, 1978.
- (82) Ibid., Chap. 1, p 40.
- (83) Ibid., Chap. 5, p 15.
- (84) See for example: Gotcha: The Media, the
Government and the Falklands Crisis,
Robert Harris, Faber & Faber,
London, 1983.

- (85) Interview with journalist by author,
14th April, 1984.
- (86) Quoted in Curtis, L., op. cit., 1984,
pp 133-134.
- (87) Schlesinger, P. et al. Televising "Terrorism": Political
violence in popular culture,
Comedia, London, 1983, p 57.
- (88) Interview with journalist by author,
28th February, 1985.
- (89) Interview with journalist by author,
19th April, 1984.
- (90) Interview with journalist by author,
28th February, 1985.
- (91) Interview with journalist by author,
29th February, 1985.
- (92) Interview with journalist by author,
15th April, 1984.
- (93) Interview with journalist by author,
12th April, 1984.
- (94) Ibid.
- (95) Interview with journalist by author,
28th February, 1985.
- (96) Interview with journalist by author,
15th April, 1984.
- (97) Interview with journalist by author,
16th April, 1984.
- (98) Interview with journalist by author,
28th February, 1985.
- (99) Interview with journalist by author,
15th April, 1984.

- (100) Ibid.
- (101) Interview with journalist by author,
13th April, 1984.
- (102) Interview with journalist by author,
19th April, 1984.
- (103) Interview with journalist by author,
28th February, 1985.
- (104) Didion, J. Salvador, Chatto & Windus, The Hogarth
Press, London, 1983, p 47.
- (105) Interview with journalist by author,
26th February, 1985.
- (106) Interview with journalist by author,
12th April, 1984.
- (107) Winchester, S. In Holy Terror, Faber & Faber,
London, 1974, p 94.
- (108) Interview with journalist by author,
17th April, 1984.
- (109) Ibid.
- (110) Interview with journalist by author,
26th February, 1985.
- (111) Interview with journalist by author,
12th April, 1984.
- (112) Interview with journalist by author,
12th April, 1984.
- (113) Schlesinger, P. Putting Reality Together, Constable,
London, 1978, p 116.
- (114) Interview with journalist by author,
19th April, 1984.
- (115) Interview with journalist by author,
12th April, 1984.

- (116) Ibid.
- (117) Interview with journalist by author,
17th April, 1984.
- (118) Interview with journalist by author,
12th April, 1984.
- (119) Interview with journalist by author,
26th February, 1985.
- (120) Interview with journalist by author,
12th April, 1984.
- (121) Interview with journalist by author,
15th April, 1984.
- (122) Interview with journalist by author,
12th April, 1984.
- (123) Interview with journalist by author,
17th April, 1984.
- (124) Interview with journalist by author,
12th April, 1984.
- (125) Interview with journalist by author,
19th April, 1984.
- (126) Interview with journalist by author,
12th April, 1984.
- (127) Interview with journalist by author,
15th April, 1984.
- (128) Interview with journalist by author,
12th April, 1984.
- (129) Interview with journalist by author,
17th April, 1984.
- (130) Ibid.
- (131) Interview with journalist by author,
28th February, 1985.

- (132) Interview with journalist by author, 15th April, 1984.
- (133) Interview with journalist by author, 14th April, 1984.
- (134) Interview with journalist by author, 15th April, 1984.
- (135) Interview with journalist by author, 28th February, 1985.
- (136) Interview with journalist by author, 19th April, 1984.
- (137) Interview with journalist by author, 15th April, 1984.
- (138) Interview with journalist by author, 28th February, 1985.
- (139) Ibid.
- (140) On the consequence of "Ulsterisation" for newsgathering practices in general see Chapter 6.
- (141) Interview with RUC Press Officer by author, 19th April, 1984.
- (142) Interview with Army Press Officer by author, 19th April, 1984.
- (143) Sunday Times, 5th August, 1985.
- (144) Ibid.
- (145) The conditions for the attack on the programme had been set in the previous weeks and months following a speech given to the American Bar Association by Prime Minister Thatcher in which she called for greater media responsibility in the reporting of national and trans-national "terrorists". Prior to

this the Beirut hostage siege had generated considerable criticism over the media's reporting of "terrorist" incidents.

- (146) Interview with journalist by author, 12th April, 1984.
- (147) Interview with journalist by author, 15th April, 1984.
- (148) Subsequent to this interview Jim Campbell of the Sunday World was shot and seriously injured on the doorstep of his home by Loyalist gunmen. For an account of the incident see: "Shoot the journalist", Index on Censorship, Vol. 14, No. 5, October, 1985.
- (149) Interview with journalist by author, 15th April, 1984.
- (150) Interview with journalist by author, 16th April, 1984.
- (151) Interview with journalist by author, 17th April, 1984.
- (152) Interview with journalist by author, 17th April, 1984.
- (153) Interview with journalist by author, 16th April, 1984.
- (154) Interview with journalist by author, 12th April, 1984.
- (155) Ibid.
- (156) Interview with journalist by author, 17th April, 1984.
- (157) Ibid.

- (158) Interview with journalist by author,
15th April, 1984.
- (159) Interview with journalist by author,
12th April, 1984.
- (160) Interview with journalist by author,
12th April, 1984.
- (161) Ibid.
- (162) Interview with journalist by author,
15th April, 1984.
- (163) Interview with journalist by author,
26th February, 1985.
- (164) Interview with journalist by author,
17th April, 1984.
- (165) Interview with journalist by author,
26th February, 1984.
- (166) Interview with journalist by author,
15th April, 1984.
- (167) Quoted in Curtis, L. op. cit., 1984,
pp 74-75.
- (168) Interview with journalist by author,
26th February, 1985.
- (169) Interview with journalist by author,
17th April, 1984.
- (170) Interview with journalist by author,
15th April, 1984.
- (171) Interview with journalist by author,
26th February, 1985.
- (172) Interview with journalist by author,
15th April, 1984.

- (173) Interview with journalist by author, 14th April, 1984.
- (174) Ibid.
- (175) Interview with journalist by author, 26th February, 1985.
- (176) Tuchman, G. "Objectivity as a strategic ritual: an examination of newsmen's notions of objectivity", American Journal of Sociology, Vol. lxxxxvii, pp 660-675.
- (177) Interview with journalist by author, 15th April, 1984.
- (178) Interview with journalist by author, 15th April, 1984.
- (179) Interview with journalist by author, 16th April, 1984.
- (180) Elliott, P. Op. cit., 1976, chap. 5, p 15.
- (181) Schlesinger, P. Op. cit., 1978, p 164.
- (182) Interview with journalist by author, 16th April, 1984.
- (183) Interview with journalist by author, 12th April, 1984.
- (184) Interview with journalist by author, 15th April, 1984.
- (185) Interview with journalist by author, 12th April, 1984.
- (186) Interview with journalist by author, 12th April, 1985.
- (187) Ibid.

- (188) Interview with journalist by author,
15th April, 1984.
- (189) Interview with journalist by author,
15th April, 1984.
- (190) Interview with journalist by author,
15th April, 1984.
- (191) Interview with journalist by author,
17th April, 1984.
- (192) Interview with journalist by author,
28th February, 1985.

CONCLUSION

Since 1969, successive Conservative and Labour administrations have sought to bring an end to the conflict in Northern Ireland. They have patently failed. As the present phase of the conflict proceeds into its eighteenth year, many of the social and political factors that first gave rise to it lie unresolved, and a peaceful solution to a conflict that has now accounted for over 2,500 lives appears no nearer. The policies of the present government, like those of its predecessors, have done little to heal the divisions between the two communities in the North and, despite the presence of 32,500 "security" personnel and an extensive apparatus of repression, the violence continues.

The conflict in Northern Ireland remains, by any measurement, an issue of pressing political concern. Yet, for the British public, on whose continuing political and financial support the British military and political presence in the North depends, the continuing crisis in the Six Counties is an issue which generates little interest or concern, a point clearly illustrated by the findings of a recent MORI poll on British attitudes to the Northern Ireland question in the run-up to the 1987 election.⁽¹⁾ The poll, commissioned by the Daily Express with a sample base of 1,103, revealed that for large sections of the British public, the continuing violence on the streets of Belfast and Derry is an issue of only marginal importance. When asked where, in a list of problems facing Britain, they would place the Irish question, none gave it priority. Indeed, of the 1,103 people questioned by MORI, a mere 3 per cent gave it some urgency - slightly ahead of strikes, the Common Market and taxation.

Furthermore, despite the fact that for almost two decades now, the whole apparatus of the British media has been brought to bear on the issue of Northern Ireland, the poll also revealed a striking lack of

sensitivity on the part of the public as to the underlying nature and causes of the conflict. When asked to explain the continuing violence in the North, a substantial 45 per cent laid the blame at the door of religion. No other single factor reached double figures. The border, and all that it signifies to both communities, lies at the very heart of the Irish conflict, yet a mere 2 per cent identified this as a causal factor in the conflict. Similarly, only 4 and 6 per cent respectively identified the continuing presence of the British army or the activities of the paramilitary groups that oppose it as significant factors in the conflict.

The British public's lack of awareness on the subject of Northern Ireland undermines its ability to participate in a rational and informed discussion as to how the situation in the North can be best resolved. And, in view of the arguments laid out in the previous chapters, the responsibility for this lack of awareness must, in part, be laid at the door of those whose professional duty it has been to clarify, explain and report it. If, as is now generally acknowledged, the British media's coverage of Northern Ireland prior to 1968 was spasmodic, superficial and did little to forewarn the British public of the impending crisis in the North, then its coverage since then, though at times more substantial, has scarcely been any more illuminating.

The experience of reporting a violent political conflict on its own doorstep has profoundly challenged the liberal values of the British media and, in doing so, has seriously undermined the legitimacy of its claim to represent a vital organ of public enlightenment. In theory, where communities and governments are in conflict, but not in a state of war, the media should function as a Fourth Estate, distinct from the Executive, the Legislature and the Judiciary, defending each against the excesses of the other and upholding, in the process, the public interest.

In practice, where Northern Ireland is concerned, the British media have become committed to a perspective of the conflict which, since the early 1970s, has increasingly equated the interests of the public with those of the state. In the process, they have evolved a strategy for reporting events in the North which, though falling short of direct censorship, effectively denies the public the information and analysis it needs to arrive at a meaningful understanding of the conflict and makes it difficult for it to engage in an informed debate as to how that conflict can best be resolved.

As we have seen in some detail in previous chapters, the routine newsgathering practices which form the nuts and bolts of this strategy, and the news imperatives which have helped shape them, have their origins in the years immediately following the entry of the British army in 1969. Ever since then, the ability of the British state to legitimate its military and political role in the North has rested on its ability to convince domestic and international opinion that the troops were there as an impartial "peacekeeping force", charged with the task of holding the ring between two warring communities. During the early 1970s, growing nationalist opposition to the presence of the army, and the degree of repression needed to subdue and contain it, was to make this rationale increasingly difficult to maintain. As these events were to unfold during the course of the early 1970s Northern Ireland, and the British media's reporting of it, were to become two of the most sensitive issues in British politics.

As outlined above, the British media's response to the political pressures placed upon them by the authorities during this period was to demonstrate, in the clearest possible terms, the vulnerability of a theoretically "free" press when seeking to report a conflict involving, and in close proximity to, its own nation state. Increasingly under

attack over their role in the North, the press, and broadcasting in particular, struggled to find an operational framework which allowed them to report the deepening crisis without, at the same time, further disrupting their relationship with the powers that be. In effect, as we have seen in Chapter Six, British journalists worked out a "modus vivendi" with the army and its political masters which, by the mid-1970s, had effectively conferred on the authorities the right to determine the parameters within which the conflict was to be reported and thereby, to a large extent, allowed them to define and control the information made available to the public.

The net effect of this "modus vivendi", as it has evolved since 1969, has been to produce an approach to the reporting of Northern Ireland in which the informational needs of the public have been subordinated to the security interests of the state. Since the mid-1970s, the essential features of this approach have been as follows:

1. an almost exclusive concern with violence and its aftermath rather than the politically more sensitive factors that gave rise to it;
2. a reliance upon official sources of information;
3. a positive orientation towards the security forces and their role in the North;
4. a negative evaluation of political extremism and "terrorism" and of the IRA and other Republican groups in particular who are perceived as the principal obstacles to the restoration of law and order;
5. a concern to deny the "enemies of the state" the opportunity to propagandise their cause;
6. finally, a reliance upon the parliamentary system and the prevailing inter-party debate for definitions of the political issues at play.

This approach, and the routine news practices which underpin it, constitutes a serious barrier to understanding. Nevertheless, despite its obvious limitations, it is an approach that is unlikely to be reversed in the foreseeable future.

Reporting Northern Ireland: the lessons

The hallmark of a journalism committed to the truth, in the long term involves rather more than being accurate about facts and quotations, careful about spellings and attributions, necessary as such virtues are. As Philip Elliott has argued, "It involves a reflective, critical analysis of routine practices and their consequences through time".⁽²⁾ The history of British journalism on the subject of Northern Ireland is characterised, above all else, by a failure to embark on such a process. Nowhere, perhaps, is this failure more pronounced than in the reluctance of many journalists to question their continuing relationship with the information services operated by the army and the police. Writing in 1973, Simon Hoggart predicted that the goodwill that then existed between British journalists and the army press office "would be quickly dissipated by an incompetent or else deliberately misleading PR operation".⁽³⁾ This prediction has never been fulfilled. Since the early 1970s, evidence has continued to accumulate that the army, and more recently the police, have deliberately exploited their strategic position as a news source to manipulate and mislead journalists, usually to implicate the IRA in violence committed by loyalists, often to cover up their own involvement in illegal or questionable activities, and frequently to discredit their political opponents. Despite this evidence, however, British journalists in Northern Ireland are, if anything, more reliant upon, and less critical of, these sources to-day than at any other time in the past.

In seeking to understand the factors that have contributed to the

reporting failure on Northern Ireland, it would be unwise to focus our attention too closely or exclusively on the performance of individual journalists - even though many have failed to live up to the ethics of their profession. Journalists may perform a vital role in the news process but, by and large, as we have seen in the previous chapter, they have little if any influence or control over the process itself. Even those journalists who enjoy considerable freedom in the way they approach the day to day task of reporting events in the North have little influence over how, if at all, the stories they write will appear as news. Nor, more importantly, do journalists wield any real influence over the prevailing editorial line of their papers.

The diminishing news value of Northern Ireland and the dwindling resources presently allocated to the story by large sections of the British press also act as real constraints on the way journalists approach the reporting of the Irish conflict. The need to prioritize increasingly limited resources ensures that journalists, even the most diligent and committed of them, scarcely have the time to undertake the detailed and well-researched analyses of the wider political forces at play in the North - even if such analyses were to be accepted by their papers.

If the real losers to emerge from the Northern Ireland experience have been the British public, then the undoubted winners have been the British authorities, and in particular, the army. The British army and its political masters have learnt much from their experience in Northern Ireland. If not the biggest, then certainly the most important lesson learnt has been how to use and control a theoretically "free" press to their advantage in times of conflict. Northern Ireland has illustrated, in the clearest possible terms, how a military force, well versed in the mechanics of news production and news management,

can minimise the ability of journalists to provide an objective and impartial account of the military's role in armed conflict. Since 1969, the experience of the British army has continued to grow and the lessons learnt in Northern Ireland have been refined and developed. The recent Falklands conflict has served only to further increase the army's knowledge of how to deal with the media. In its wake, and learning from its mistakes, the army is currently in the process of developing new and stricter means of controlling the media in the advent of some future conflict.⁽⁴⁾ Whatever the outcome of these developments proves to be, it seems likely that the future ability of journalists to retain any semblance of autonomy in their reporting of future conflicts involving the British state will be greatly reduced. If the experience of Northern Ireland and the Falklands is any indication, it seems unlikely that there will be much opposition from the British press.

As the British media gradually reduce the resources they devote to the Northern Ireland story, newspapers and television have slowly reverted to the pattern of reporting characteristic of the pre-1968 period. The problem now, as then, is that this pattern of reporting contributes to an image of "normality" that is belied by the reality of the political situation in the North.

Notes

1. Daily Express, 10th February, 1987.
2. Hoggart, S. "The army PR men of Northern Ireland", New Society, 11th October, 1973.
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