

THE BRITISH PRESS AND NORTHERN IRELAND

A Case Study in the
Reporting of Violent Political Conflict

by

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The British Press and Northern Ireland

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Summary

The study presented here focuses on the treatment accorded to Northern Ireland by the British press since 1969. It argues that the press has failed to provide the public with an impartial or meaningful account of the conflict in the North, and explores some of the factors that have contributed to this failure.

Chapter One outlines the primary functions that have been ascribed to journalists and the press in democratic society, and provides a standard against which press performance may be judged. Chapter Two evaluates a range of commentaries on the British media's reporting of Northern Ireland from Partition to the present day. The study moves on to examine the debate over the media's representation of "terrorism" and assesses the consequences of this debate for the British media's reporting of Northern Ireland. Chapter Four provides an account of the research methods employed in the study and reflects on some of the practical problems encountered during the course of the fieldwork. Chapter Five presents the findings of a content analysis of the coverage accorded to civilian assassinations by seven British and two Northern Irish newspapers during a five week period in 1972. Chapter Six outlines the development of the information services operated by the army and the police, and describes how these forces have used their strategic position as a news source to gain the edge in the propaganda war. Picking up on some of the themes and issues raised in previous chapters, Chapter Seven focuses on those involved in the production of news and presents the findings of a series of interviews undertaken with journalists in Belfast and London. The final chapter summarises the principal findings of the study and reflects on the prospects of a reversal in the present approach to the reporting of Northern Ireland by the British press.

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It goes without saying that the completed study remains solely my responsibility.

INTRODUCTION

"A nation's understanding of any conflict its government has become involved in", David Brazil has argued, "is inevitably determined in the first instance by the information received from newspapers, radio and television". These news outlets, he continues, "form the basic working material also for the historian and the importance, or at least the significance, of the individual's reporting of the conflict soon emerges as crucial to the widespread conception of the rights and wrongs, the methods of the conflict in question".⁽¹⁾

The case of Northern Ireland is no exception. For almost two decades now the British state has been involved in the most protracted and violent conflict experienced by any European democracy since 1945. For the British public, the primary, if not the only, source of information about this conflict and their state's role in it, has been provided by the established media. Unable to witness or experience at first hand the conflict taking place less than fifty miles away across the Irish Sea, the British people are heavily reliant upon the broadcasting and print media not only to make them aware of events taking place in the Six Counties, but also to provide them with the contextual information needed if they are to fully comprehend the significance of those events.

The level of political awareness in Britain about the conflict in Northern Ireland, and the level of understanding about the social and political factors that give rise to it, is of major political significance. For, if the public is to play a meaningful role in guiding and shaping government policy on Northern Ireland, over which it has the ultimate veto, then this can only be on the basis of all the information requisite to that task.

Given the virtual monopoly that the press enjoys over the dissemination of information on matters beyond the direct experience of individuals, the responsibility this places on the press and journalists who work for it in their reporting of Northern Ireland is considerable. Nevertheless, it is a responsibility which, in public at least, British journalists have not only accepted, but have actively claimed. Over the course of several centuries, the British press has evolved a definition of itself as a vital organ of public enlightenment; it has taken upon itself a responsibility to provide its readers with all the information necessary for them to make basic and informed judgements on political policy in their capacity as voting citizens of a democracy. For journalists and newspapers to adequately perform such a role, they would need to rigorously seek out, and give voice to, the views and interpretations of all those whose actions have a bearing on the conflict; they would need to present systematically, comprehensively and impartially all the factors which underpin it, and, above all, they would need to clarify the options open to the policy makers and assess how well the course they are steering is working out. Anything less than this would be to deny the public the information it requires if it is to participate in a rational and informed discussion as to how the situation in the North can best be resolved.

Ordinary people have a vital interest in how well journalists and the press perform this role. Since the imposition of Direct Rule in 1972, successive Labour and Conservative administrations have ruled over the North in the name of the British people. Furthermore, through their taxes, the British people have shouldered the financial burden of the British military and political presence in the Six Counties. Thus, while the British public may not be directly responsible for the violence on the streets of Belfast and Derry, Britain collectively bears a degree of responsibility for the background against which this

violence takes place. In the light of these factors, it would be hard to *argue* that the British public does not, thus, have a right to be kept informed as to the nature and the impact of the policies being implemented in its name.

The primary objective of this study is to assess how well the British press, and those who work for it, have dispensed with their responsibility to provide an objective, comprehensive and impartial account of the Northern Ireland conflict since 1969.

Chapter contents

The way in which the social and political role of the press has been perceived, the expectations that readers have of newspapers, and the values, beliefs and functions by reference to which journalists both define and legitimate their role in the news process, have all undergone substantial modification since the arrival of the first newspapers in the early seventeenth century. Developments in newspapers technology, improvements in communications, and in particular the advent of the telegraph and shorthand, are just some of the factors that have helped shape the activity of journalism as we presently know it. Chapter One provides an historical overview of the changing nature of the press from its origins in the early seventeenth century to its apotheosis into the Fourth Estate in the late nineteenth century. Isolating as it does the primary functions that have been ascribed to journalists and the press in democratic society by liberal free press theorists, the primary purpose of this chapter is to provide a standard against which the performance of the British press in its reporting of Northern Ireland may be judged.

Chapter Two draws together and evaluates a range of existing commentaries on the role and performance of the British media in their reporting of Northern Ireland prior to and since 1968. Generally speaking, the material examined in this chapter emanates from three

principal sources, each with its own particular frame of reference, and each with its own particular view of the key issues raised by the British media's reporting of the Irish conflict: from academics of various critical leanings whose primary concern has been to evaluate the coverage given to Northern Ireland and the factors that help shape it; from counter-insurgency "experts" and conservative academics, whose primary concern has been to formulate information strategies designed to prevent newspapers and television from acting as channels for "terrorist" propaganda; and from journalists at various levels of the news process, whose primary concern has been with the practical and political problems of reporting an ongoing and violent conflict involving their own nation state. Taking each of these sources separately, Chapter Two assesses the contributions they have made to our understanding of how Northern Ireland has been reported by the British media.

Chapter Three broadens the focus of the study and addresses itself to the wider debate over the relationship between the media and "terrorism". Since the late 1960s, the debate over the media's representation of violence in general, and political violence in particular, has been elevated to a highly ideological plane. Drawing upon arguments about the social and political effects of media representations of violence and violent conflict, which at best constituted a series of tentative hypotheses rather than empirically validated facts, a small group of counter-insurgency "experts" have provided both the terms of reference and the intellectual backing for a concerted attack on the autonomy of broadcasting and the press. Chapter Three begins by examining the key assumptions underlying this debate, and the continuing controversy that surrounds them, before proceeding to assess its consequences for the British media's reporting of anti-state violence in general, and Irish political violence in particular.

Before proceeding to examine the coverage accorded to Northern Ireland by the British press and the factors that help shape it, Chapter Four provides an account of the methodological approaches employed in the study, and reflects on some of the practical problems encountered during the course of the fieldwork.

Chapter Five presents the findings of a content analysis of the coverage accorded to civilian assassinations by seven British and two Northern Irish newspapers during a five week period in 1972. It argues that, despite the number of civilian assassinations during the period studied, and the likely impact of these killings on the two communities, the British press generally failed to provide its readership with the information or the analysis necessary for it to arrive at a meaningful understanding of this particular form of inter-communal violence, or the social and political factors which underpin it.

Since 1969, the British army and the Royal Ulster Constabulary have been both major participants to the Irish conflict and, at the same time, major sources of information about it. Chapter Six examines how journalists have sought to resolve this potential conflict of interests, and assesses the consequences of this for the day to day reporting of political violence. It argues that since 1969 the relationship between journalists and the information services operated by the army and the RUC has evolved through three quite distinct phases which, it is suggested, correspond to, and indeed reflect, the changing military and political goals of the British state. It describes how, following an initial period of consolidation, the army was to set in train a sophisticated policy of news management and misinformation which was to give them a strategic edge in the propaganda war.

Picking up on some of the themes and issues raised in previous chapters, Chapter Seven focuses on those involved in the production of

news and presents the findings of a series of interviews undertaken with journalists in Belfast and London. The primary purpose of this chapter 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. Together with providing an historical overview of how reporting conditions have changed since 1969, Chapter Seven can be read as an answer to the following questions:

What are the staple sources of information for journalists working in Northern Ireland and how do these sources help shape what emerges as news?

How are such concepts as "news-value", "objectivity" and "impartiality" applied on a daily basis by journalists, and how does their application influence the selection and presentation of news?

What is the nature of the relationship between journalists and their news desk, and how does this relationship influence the journalists' approach to newsgathering?

How much autonomy do journalists enjoy on a daily basis to determine the selection and presentation of news about Northern Ireland and what are the effective limits to this autonomy?

Chapter Eight draws the threads together and reflects on the prospects for a reversal in the present approach to the reporting of Northern Ireland by the British media.

Notes

Brazil, D.

"War Reporting", The British Media and Ireland, Truth the First Casualty, Information on Ireland, London, 1979, p 4.

CHAPTER 1

Democracy and the Press: The Fourth Estate Thesis

The history of the British press from the late seventeenth century to the mid-nineteenth century, as recorded in a number of standard histories, is largely a story of glorious victories: over the licensing system, over the right to report parliament, over the freedom to report the affairs of state without fear of prosecution, and over the newspaper duties. These victories and their dates have provided many historians of the period with a series of chronological reference points by which to chart the emergence of a politically "free" and economically independent press. Nowhere was this conception of the historical development of the British press more vigorously expressed than in the writings of Henry Reeve. Writing in 1855, the year in which the tax that had been imposed on the British press for the best part of 150 years was finally repealed, Reeve described the press as the "greatest fact" of the age. In a style typical of much writing on the press in the nineteenth century, Reeve was to write:

In common with everything of signal strength, Journalism is a plant of slow and gradual growth. The Fourth Estate, like the Third Estate, has reached its present dimensions and its actual power from slight beginnings, by continuous accretions, and through a long course of systematic and unremitting encroachments. Of a far more modern date than the other estates of the realm, it has overshadowed and surpassed them all. It has created the want which it supplies. It has obtained paramount influence and authority partly by assuming them, but still more by deserving them. Of all puissances in the political world, it is at once the mightiest, the most irresponsible, the best administered, and the least misused. And, taken in its history, position, and relations, it is unquestionably the most grave, noticeable, formidable phenomenon - the "greatest fact" - of our times.

(1)

According to Reeve, the press of the mid-nineteenth century owed its influence to three factors: "to the special value of the functions

it exercises; to the remarkable talent with which it is habitually conducted; and to the generally high and pure character which it maintains". (2) In what was to be a classic statement on the role and social significance of the press, Reeve went on to outline what he considered to be the essential functions performed by the press in democratic society:

In the first place, it is a necessary portion, complement, and guardian of free institutions. In a country where the people - i.e. the great mass of the educated classes - govern, where they take the ceaseless and paramount interest in public affairs which is at once the inseparable symptom and the surest safeguard of political and civil liberty, where, in a word, they are the participating citizens, not passive subjects, of the state, - it is of the most essential consequence that they should be furnished from day to day with the materials for informing their minds and enlightening their judgement. If they are in any degree to control, to guide, to stimulate the administration, they must, as far as possible, become qualified to do so. They need, therefore, to be kept au courant of all transactions and events which bear upon the interests or credit of their country. (3)

Though it was to be a further six years before the final vestige of governmental control over the press - the Paper Duty - was to be repealed, the abolition of the tax on newspapers in 1855 was, for those who fought for its repeal, the end of a long and bitter struggle - the press had finally shaken off the heavy hand of government and was now, at least technically, free.

The newspaper of the mid-nineteenth century, so lauded by Reeve and many of his contemporaries, was without doubt the child of a slow and difficult birth. Ever since Caxton first brought the art of printing to England in 1476, the press has been viewed by the state and the ruling-classes as a dangerous instrument of subversion to be smashed if possible, controlled, intimidated and persecuted if not. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in particular, were to witness

a rapid extension in the state's control over the press as a succession of Tudor and Stuart monarchs built up a comprehensive and complex system of control and regulation in an effort to check public opinion at source.⁽⁴⁾ The principal instruments for controlling the press during this period were the Stationers' Company, which regulated the printing trade through a system of special "permits" or "patents"; the licensing system, which required that published works in certain specific areas such as religion and politics be submitted for prior examination by representatives of the state - usually the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of London; and the laws of treason and seditious libel.⁽⁵⁾

Though the system of control and regulation established during this period was to be both more repressive and more ruthlessly enforced than any subsequent system, as a means of controlling and limiting the spread and influence of printing it was to prove ineffective. Once the genie of printing was out of the bottle, even the most repressive legislation, ruthlessly backed up by the state, was incapable of putting it back. The social, political and religious forces which the system of control over the press was designed to contain could at best be stalled; they could not be stopped - least of all, as Curran has rightly pointed out, by a state so ill-equipped for the task:

Direct censorship of the printed word in Britain was never fully effective. Even during the period of the most systematic repression under the early Stuart monarchy when the offending authors could be publically whipped, their faces branded, their nostrils slit, and their ears chopped off (on alternative weeks allowing for recuperation), the absence of modern law enforcement agencies prevented the effective control of print the state lacked the sophisticated apparatus necessary to control production, monitor output, regulate distribution, stop the import of prohibited material and neutralize or destroy dissident elements in society - essential if coercive censorship were to be effective.

In the late seventeenth century the system for regulating the press which had been built up over the preceding 180 years was subjected to strains and stresses which it could scarcely withstand, and ultimately, under the combined pressure of religious, political and trade interests, it collapsed.

Controlling the Press Phase Two: The "Taxes on Knowledge"

In the period immediately following the demise of the licensing system in 1695, the future of the press looked secure. Stimulated by the absence of control, newspaper production expanded and, by the end of the opening decade of the eighteenth century, twenty papers of two or four pages were appearing weekly, twice-weekly, and in one case daily in London alone.⁽⁷⁾ This expansion, though at a much slower rate, was also being repeated in the provinces with the development of a weekly press. Two weekly papers were established in the period 1695-1701; eight in 1701-10; nine in 1711-20.⁽⁸⁾ When judged in terms of its content the press during this period, and in particular the daily press such as it was, took few, if any, liberties with its new-found freedom. The pioneer of daily journalism, the Daily Courant established in 1702, was scarcely a threat to the established order. Ignoring completely political events on its own doorstep, the Daily Courant, like many of the earlier newsbooks, confined itself to reprinting extracts from continental news-sheets. Home news, such as it was, was tailored almost exclusively to the needs and concerns of the commercial middle-classes: lists of imports and exports, dealings in stocks, lists of bankruptcies, together with a small body of commercial advertisements.⁽⁹⁾

The era of freedom ushered in by the collapse of the licensing

system, however, was to prove shortlived; the growing popularity of newspapers, particularly among the working-class, was enough to reactivate old fears among the ruling-classes of the potentially subversive nature of the press.⁽¹⁰⁾ Fearful of what might happen if newspaper reading became general, and backed up by an increasingly overcrowded printing trade, Parliament again toyed with the idea of licensing.⁽¹¹⁾ Though attempts to resuscitate some form of direct control over the press were to prove unsuccessful, it was obvious that the climate of opinion within Parliament was again in favour of control.

It was against this background of expanding newspaper production and ruling-class fear that Parliament revealed its new strategy for controlling the press. In 1712, against a background of war, the first of a series of Stamp Acts (10 Anne, cap. 18) was introduced by Lord Bolingbroke. The Act, which was to set the pattern of governmental control over the press for the next 150 years, contained four provisions affecting the press: a tax on newspapers and pamphlets (initially levied at 1d. per sheet but progressively increased to 4d. a copy by 1815); a tax on advertisements (initially set at 1s. per advertisement carried but increased to the prohibitive level of 3s. 6d. by 1815); an excise duty on paper; and the requirement that all newspapers bear the name and address of the publisher (for ready identification) and be registered at the Stamp Office - failure to comply incurred a penalty of £20 together with the loss of all copyrights.⁽¹²⁾

The principal aim of this new strategy as it evolved from 1712 onwards, was not to destroy the press, for if properly controlled, newspapers could be used to secure support for government policies, but to neutralize its potential as an instrument of dissent. Simply

conceived as it was, the strategy of controlling the press through fiscal means rather than through direct censorship and control, had the advantage of killing several birds with the same stone: by artificially inflating the cost of newspapers the tax would place the price of the press beyond the means of the working-class and, by pushing up the cost of publishing and thereby making it difficult to operate newspapers at a profit, restrict newspaper ownership to the "respectable" middle- and upper-classes. This latter aim was further served by the establishment of a security system in 1819 which, in an attempt to exclude "pauper" management, required the payment of substantial security bonds - £300 in London and £200 in the provinces.

It was widely believed at the time that the increased costs imposed by the 1712 Act would lead to the financial collapse of the press. Writing in the Spectator in August, 1712, Joseph Addison predicted that the press would sink under the "Weight of the Stamp":

This is the Day on which many eminent Authors will probably Publish their Last Words. I am afraid that few of our Weekly Historians, who are Men that above all delight in War, will be able to subsist under the Weight of the Stamp, and an approaching Peace. A Sheet of Blank Paper that must have this new imprimatur clapt upon it, before it is qualified to Communicate anything to the Publick, will make its way in the World but very heavily. In short, the Necessity of carrying a Stamp, and the Improbability of notifying a Bloody Battle, will, I am afraid, both concur to the sinking of those thin Folios, which have every Day retailed to us the History of Europe for several years past. (13)

In the event, Addison's obituary was to prove somewhat premature. The tax did claim its victims, but the collapse anticipated by Addison was to be neither complete nor permanent. In London at least five papers were suspended due to the impost while a similar number were able to survive the Act by raising their retail price from 1d. to 1½d.

The effect of the tax on the provincial press was more severe with at least seven weekly papers closing.⁽¹⁵⁾

In the short term the 1712 Act served only to retard temporarily the circulation of those papers that survived its enactment; in the long term it did little to reverse the rising demand for newspapers:

The forces seeking expression through an expansion of the press were too strong. Trade was increasing and with it the size and power of the commercial classes. The development of industrialisation made necessary a more educated artisan class. Population rose: by the end of the century it was to be nine million compared with five and a quarter at the beginning. Everywhere the habit of newspaper reading was increasing. Within forty years the circulation figures anxiously noted by Queen Anne's Ministers had trebled. (16)

Even had the legislation been tightly drafted and rigorously enforced, and it was neither, it is unlikely that the 1712 Act would have succeeded in destroying the press. As it was, inadequate drafting left a number of loopholes which newspaper proprietors were quick to exploit, and within months of becoming law, the new strategy was already in a state of some disrepair. By failing to allow for papers of more than one sheet, the Act opened the way for the extended newspaper registered as a pamphlet and paying a lower duty.⁽¹⁷⁾ Newspaper proprietors were not slow in exploiting this loophole and by 1713 evasion of the duty was widespread.⁽¹⁸⁾ Moreover, though this defect in the Act was immediately apparent, no action was taken to remedy it until 1725 when a new Stamp Act (11 George 1, cap. 8. 1725) applied the existing legislation to all newspapers regardless of their length. Indeed, the ability of the publishers to identify and exploit inadequacies in the legislation was to be a consistent feature of the Newspaper Duties from 1712 onwards, necessitating the periodic closure of loopholes and the strengthening of law enforcement measures.⁽¹⁹⁾

As a strategy for controlling the spread and influence of the press, the "taxes on knowledge" were to prove even less effective than the systems of control which preceded it. Despite successive increases in the level of taxation, and the resulting increased price of the stamped press, the demand for newspapers continued to grow throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁽²⁰⁾ Moreover, as a means of neutralising the press as an instrument of political dissent, the strategy of using fiscal controls had one significant flaw: its success or failure depended upon the willingness of publishers to pay the duty. For those newspapers that complied to the law, the effect of the taxes was significant:

Only if denied the hope of economic independence could the press be intimidated and bribed, changed from a potentially dangerous instrument of public opinion into the servant of Government and factions: a tamed animal. Once tamed it became, as those bred for freedom often do in captivity, sour and mangy. As a consequence the history of the press throughout most of the eighteenth and early part of the nineteenth centuries is mainly that of a journalism corrupted by bribes and subsidies, usually partisan to the extreme, mostly ill-conducted, almost always easily intimidated and still more easily bought. ⁽²¹⁾

Deprived of economic independence, large sections of the stamped press became little more than the chattel of those wealthy enough to afford its services, and throughout much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries journalism became a synonym for corruption, dishonesty, and political intrigue.⁽²²⁾

The paradox of the "taxes on knowledge", however, was that, by closing off one potential source of political dissent by emasculating the stamped press, it stimulated the development of another far more subversive source - the radical unstamped press.⁽²³⁾ Produced, financed, distributed, and espousing the class interests of the

working-class, during the 1830s the radical press was to have a significant impact on working-class culture and politics. According to Curran, the radical press played an important part in promoting directly and indirectly the growth of working-class political and industrial organisations; eroded passive adherence to the existing social order; helped foster a sense of corporate class consciousness among the working-class; undermined normative support for the social order by challenging the legitimacy of the political and economic institutions on which it was based; and, by reflecting the perspectives of the vanguard of the working-class movement, profoundly influenced the attitudes and beliefs of large numbers of working-class people. (24)

Addressing a House of Commons debate on the Newspaper Duties in 1832, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, a central figure in the anti-tax movement, isolated the paradoxical effect of the taxes as being in itself sufficient to justify their abolition. Attacking those who opposed a reduction in the level of taxation, Bulwer-Lytton observed:

Did Honourable Members know the class of publications thus suffered to influence the opinions of their fellow countrymen? ... were they not aware that some of them struck at the very root of property, talked of the injustice of paying rent, insisted on the unanimous seizure of all lands in the kingdom, declared that there was no moral guilt in the violation of law, and even advocated assassination itself. Thus, then, it was clear that the stamp duty did not prevent the circulation of dangerous doctrines. It gave them, on the contrary, by the interest which the mere risk of prosecution always begets in the popular mind, a value, a weight, and a circulation, which they could not otherwise acquire. (25)

In Bulwer-Lytton's view, and it was one shared by many of the key figures in the middle-class opposition to the taxes, the high price of the "respectable" press was a major obstacle to winning the

working-class over to the virtues of capitalism. By supporting the "taxes on knowledge" Bulwer-Lytton complained, "you sell the poison for a penny, and the antidote at seven pence".⁽²⁶⁾ In the long term this, rather than any other argument, was to prove the most decisive factor in bringing about the end of the "taxes on knowledge".⁽²⁷⁾

The historical significance of the "taxes on knowledge" however, lies not in whether or not they were successful in their intended aim, but rather in the ideological legacy which those who fought against them were to bequeath contemporary press theory. For, during the course of the campaign which was to be waged against these taxes, a series of concepts first propounded by Puritan and non-conformist thinkers as a defence against religious intolerance, were to be revived and utilised by eighteenth and nineteenth century radicals in a concerted attack against governmental control over the press. During the course of this attack, a theory of the press was to be developed which even to-day, nearly two centuries later, remains the most cogent theory as to the role and social significance of the press in liberal democratic society, and remains one of the clearest statements as to the proper relationship between the press, the state and the people.

Stated briefly, the Fourth Estate, or free press theory, as it is more commonly known, posits a historical link between the development of a free press and the development and maintenance of a politically free society. According to advocates of this theory, the emergence of a press free from state control from the late nineteenth century onwards, formed part of a much wider process of political change in British society - the movement away from government by divine right or government by inheritance, to a form of government which derived its ultimate authority from the will of the people. The emergence of a

press free from state control, economically independent, and acting as a forum of public opinion, supporters of the theory have argued, did not simply reflect the movement towards greater individual freedom, social justice, and participant democracy; it was an indispensable and chronological corollary of it. According to Herd:

A free Press has made possible the realisation of the ideal of government by the people in this and other countries; a fearless, critical free Press is the one indispensable safeguard to ensure the survival of democracy in the present dangerous crisis of civilization. (28)

This conceptualisation of the role of the press in the development and maintenance of democratic society has been a dominant and recurring theme in many historical studies on the British press. According to this perspective, as well as servicing the economic system by bringing together the buyers and sellers of goods through the medium of advertising and providing entertainment, the rise of an independent press helped democratize British political institutions by exposing them to the full blast of public opinion; facilitated the emergence of a rational and informed electorate by acting as a channel for the flow of ideas and information; acted as both a "watchdog" over, and a check on, the abuse of governmental power by bringing to public attention instances of corruption, waste and incompetence; functioned as a counter-balance to concentrations of power brought about by economic inequality; and, by facilitating the flow of information between political institutions and the people, acted as an essential link between the state and its citizens.⁽²⁹⁾ The nineteenth century writer Frederick Grimke neatly encapsulated this theory when he wrote that the press:

is a component part of the machinery of free government. There would be an inconsistency, then, in arguing whether it should be free. It is the organ of public opinion, and the great office which it performs is to effect the redistribution of power throughout the community. It accomplishes this purpose by distributing knowledge and diffusing a common sympathy among the great mass of the population. (30)

Despite the criticisms that have been levelled against the Fourth Estate theory, and, as we shall see below, there have been many, the notion that the press has a unique and specific responsibility for the shaping of ideas and the formation of public policies, and exercises, or ought to exercise, a beneficent power separate from, and morally superior to, that of government has, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, been established as part of orthodox thinking on the role of the press in liberal democratic society. Indeed, so entrenched has this conception of the press become that, in the late twentieth century, it is rare to find an analysis of the British press which does not at some stage or other address itself to the political role of the press - even if it is only to observe that it is not performing this role as well as it might. (31)

Even the advent of television, which nightly attracts audiences for news bulletins greater than the total circulation of the national daily press put together, has done little to erode the dominant conception of the British press as a vital element in the dialogue of democracy:

Although it is fashionable to play down the influence of the press and be mesmerised instead by the millions that watch television, newspapers exert a huge influence on the debate of democracy. This influence radiates out from the quality press. The subjects it plays up in the news, the issues it selects, the comment it makes on public personalities, they all filter into the popular press and on television and shape our lives and the decisions which affect them. (32)

Nowhere is this concept of the press and its role in the democratic process more deeply entrenched than within the profession of journalism itself. Almost two centuries after they were first formulated, two of the central concepts of the Fourth Estate theory - the notion of journalists as the "watchdog" of government, and the public's right and need to be kept informed if they are meaningfully to participate in the decision-making process - continues to provide journalists with the clearest definition of their professional role and the central legitimation for that role. In 1971, Sir Charles Curran, former Director General of the BBC, echoing the words of Henry Reeve over a century earlier, described the role of the broadcaster in the following terms:

We have a responsibility ... to provide a rationally based and balanced service of news which will enable adult people to make basic judgments about political policy in their capacity as voting citizens of a democracy ... we have to add to this basic supply of news a service of contextual comment which will give understanding as well as information. The moral responsibility of the broadcaster here is not simply to keep the ring open for all opinion but to see that everybody has a chance to appear in it. (33)

The Fourth Estate theory not only provides us with a particular way of understanding the role of the press in democratic society, but perhaps equally as important, it also offers us a standard against which its performance of that role may be judged. This chapter examines the central principles of the theory as they have evolved from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to the present day. No attempt is made to provide a detailed account of the struggle that was waged against the "taxes on knowledge" since this material is already available in a number of standard histories.⁽³⁴⁾ Nor is any attempt made to examine or evaluate competing theories as to the role and social significance of the press in advanced capitalist society, as it

would not be possible to do justice to such theories within the scope of a single chapter. Instead, this, the first chapter in the thesis, has two main aims. First, to isolate the key theoretical principles which underpin the Fourth Estate theory, and by reference to which journalists seek to legitimate their claim to perform a vital function in the democratic process. And, secondly, by isolating these principles, provide a coherent theoretical standard against which the performance of the British press in its coverage of Northern Ireland may be judged.

Underlying assumptions

The democratic doctrine of freedom of speech and of the press, whether we regard it as a natural and inalienable right or not, rests upon certain assumptions. One of these is that men desire to know the truth and will be disposed to be guided by it. Another is that the sole method of arriving at the truth in the long run is by the free competition of opinion in the open market. Another is that, since men will invariably differ in their opinions, each man must be permitted to urge freely and even strenuously, his own opinion, provided he accords others the same right. And the final assumption is that from this mutual toleration and comparison of diverse opinions the one that seems most rational will emerge and be generally accepted. (35)

Though the struggle against the "taxes on knowledge" in the nineteenth century was conducted on many different fronts and by groups motivated and representing different class interests, the theory that was to emerge from this struggle was essentially a liberal construct. Not only was the struggle against governmental control over the press (which was simply one front in the wider struggle of the middle-classes against aristocratic authority and hierarchy) largely waged in the rhetoric of liberalism, but liberalism also provided the Fourth Estate theory with its intellectual, political and economic framework. Indeed, as Siebert among others has pointed out,

in order to understand the principles governing the role of the press in democratic society, one needs to understand the basic philosophy of liberalism as it developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. (36)

Stated briefly, the principles of liberal philosophy, as with any other philosophy, are based on the answers to questions about the nature of man, the nature of society and man's relation to it, and the nature of knowledge and truth.

The classical liberal model of society, as developed over the period 1650-1850, was a model, in its essentials, of the free play of individuals leading ultimately to social progress, harmony and equilibrium. Man, according to liberal philosophy, was a rational being capable of organising the world around him and making decisions which advanced his own interest. In the long run the aggregate of these individuals' decisions, each taken as rationally as possible in pursuit of individual self-interest, would, liberals argued, advance the general cause of civilization.

The liberal view of society and the state was also heavily influenced by the belief that man was naturally the sole proprietor of his own person, capacity and destiny. As Manning observes, in its earlier phases, from Locke to Mill, "liberalism treats the individual as prior to society as a historical and philosophical concept. Many liberals assert that society is not more than the sum total of its members whose rights or interests its institutions are properly concerned to protect". (37) This view, that man existed prior to society, was also to provide the key rallying cry in the wider liberal struggle against the old order of status, privilege and hierarchy - the claim to natural rights and the assertion that all men were inherently equal.

Although men "contracted" into society in order to remedy the defects of life outside it - the "state of nature" - they entered into this contract already possessed of certain fundamental or natural rights. Given that these rights were anterior to those given to them by society, society could neither take them away or abridge them. Within this perspective, the desirability of society and its institutions was evaluated in terms of the degree of freedom it allowed its citizens in their social, political and economic activities. As Siebert has observed:

Many adherents of liberalism cast a nostalgic eye at man in a state of nature where he was unencumbered by much of the paraphernalia of civilization. Although society undoubtedly can contribute much to the well-being of man, at the same time protections should be found against the tendency of society to take over the major role and become an end in itself. The philosophers of liberalism emphatically deny that the state is the highest expression of human endeavour, although they admit with some hesitancy that the state is a useful and even necessary instrument. The state exists as a method of providing the individual with a milieu in which he can realize his own potentialities. When it fails to further this end, it becomes a handicap which should be either abolished or drastically modified. Liberal philosophy does not accept the proposition that a society becomes a separate entity of greater importance than the individual members which comprise it. (38)

The liberal theory of the nature of knowledge and truth also gives paramount importance to the individual whose consciousness is viewed as the absolute origin of all knowledge.

The libertarian theory of knowledge and truth strongly resembles the theological doctrines of early Christianity. The power to reason was God-given just as the knowledge of good and evil was God-given. With such an inheritance from his Maker, man could achieve an awareness of the world around him through his own efforts. On this foundation, the libertarians built a superstructure which differed drastically from that developed by the philosophers of the Middle Ages. Man's inheritance became less important and his individual ability to solve the problems of the universe more obvious. Reason was to act upon the evidence of the senses, not as in earlier

times after all authority had been exhausted, but as the only way to find an authoritative explanation ... The conception that there is one basic unassailable and demonstrable explanation for natural phenomena as developed by mechanistic experimentation and observation became the model upon which libertarian philosophers proceeded to generalize in all areas of knowledge. Although the path to truth might lie through a morass of argument and dispute, that which lay at the end of the path was definite, provable and acceptable to rational men. (39)

It was these central assumptions about the social priority of the individual in social, political and economic matters, their ability to use their powers of reasoning in the pursuit of truth and self-interest, and the concept of natural rights, that were to provide the philosophical basis for the Fourth Estate theory.

Basic principles

The basic and original argument for a free press is the same as that for any freedom of expression of idea. And though it long predates John Milton, it was perhaps most eloquently and persuasively expressed by him. The immediate occasion for Milton's interest in the liberty of the press was the difficulties he faced with the Stationers' Company over his pamphlet on divorce. In Areopagitica, published in 1644, Milton laid out a case against preventive censorship which, though largely neglected at the time, was to influence the thinking of successive generations of liberals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Milton's opposition to censorship was based partly on the ground of free will, and partly on the ground that it retarded rather than advanced the cause of truth and progress. He argued first, that mistaken censorship might result in the irremediable loss of an element of truth, and that only continual debate could safeguard against this danger. Secondly, that with censorship men were more

likely to make mistakes, because truth could only be properly distinguished by comparison with evil:

what wisdom can there be to choose, what continence to forbear, without knowledge of evil? ... I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and seeks her adversary, but slinks out of the race, where that immortal garland is to be run, not without heat and dust. (40)

Thirdly, that as truth is always stronger than falsehood, censorship did it a disservice by denying it the opportunity of proving its strength in open competition:

And though all the winds of doctrine were let loose to play upon the earth, so truth be in the field, we do injuriously by licensing and prohibiting to misdoubt her strength ... who ever knew truth put to the worse, in free and open encounter? Her confuting is the best and surest suppressing ... For who knows not that truth is strong, next to the Almighty; she needs no policies, nor stratagems, nor licensing to make her victorious; those are the shifts and the defences that error uses against her power: give her but room, and do not bind her when she sleeps. (41)

Fourthly, that rather than procuring any good, preliminary censorship could in the long term prove harmful. The requirement that written works be submitted for prior examination would paralyse research and discourage writers. Finally, and at the core of Milton's argument, was his conviction that men must search for the truth because no truth could be regarded as sufficient for all time and it was not enough to hold a belief on the grounds of tradition or convention:

Truth is compared in scripture to a streaming fountain; if her waters flow not in a perpetual progression, they sicken into a muddy pool of conformity and tradition ... if [a man] believes things only because his master says so ... though his belief be true, yet the very truth he holds becomes his heresy. (42)

In seeking to deprive men of their right to choose between good and evil, truth and falsehood, preliminary censorship, Milton contended

also deprived them of their intellectual independence. For without the right to choose, and the right to make their own mistakes, men could never be truly independent:

Many there be that complain of divine Providence suffering Adam to transgress. Foolish tongues! when God gave him reason, he gave him freedom to choose, for reason is but choosing; he had else been an artificial Adam as he is in motions. (43)

As a principle relating to the proper relationship between the state and the press, the one advocated by Milton in the Areopagitica was relatively simple: no attempt should be made by the state to censor or prohibit written works in advance. Lacking as it does the prescriptive character associated with later free press theory, the Areopagitica falls far short of being a comprehensive statement on the liberty of the press. Nevertheless, it did bequeath to subsequent press theorists two central and interrelated concepts, which, to this day, continue to inform thinking about the nature and role of the press in democratic society: the "open market of ideas" and the "self-righting process".

The self-regulating market of ideas.

RAILMEN can take a lot of credit in this country for a free press. It is because the railways normally carry newspapers from end to end of the island overnight that newspapers enjoy the large sales which give them the economic strength which delivers them from government or party subsidy. That function gives railmen power - which certain Aslef members have been trying to exercise, in their anger at a story in last Friday's Sun about unconscientious engine drivers. But it gives them no rights. If newspapers needed an Aslef ticket before they travelled, control by a single authority would be substituted for our present comparative diversity.

Mr. Steven Forey, an Aslef branch secretary at King's Cross, says he believes in the freedom of the press except when it tells lies; what he sees as lies that is. But this is a subjective, one-sided approach to the truth which has nothing to do with press freedom. What one

man sees as a lie another regards as the truth. The diversity of the press provides the way out of this confusion. Impeding the spread of that diversity damages press freedom and does the cause of the train drivers no good whatsoever. (44)

The concept of a "free market in ideas", though of an earlier date, paralleled the liberal case for economic freedom. And during the first half of the nineteenth century, the movement for the repeal of the "taxes on knowledge" was integrated into the wider liberal campaign for free trade. According to classical liberal theory, economic freedom was embodied in the right of individual proprietors to pursue their economic interests free from external interference. For the state to interfere in the market to the advantage of one party or another, not only went against natural justice, it also retarded progress, restricted the diversity of products available to the consumer, and in the process restricted individual choice. According to this view, only the furnace of open competition in a free market could ensure that the consumer was the final arbiter in deciding the success or failure of a given product.

The principle of free and open competition in the market, opponents of the "taxes on knowledge" argued, was applicable to all markets whether they traded in minerals or ideas:

Let all with something to say be free to express themselves. The true and sound will survive; the false and unsound will be vanquished. Government should keep out of the battle and not weigh the odds in favour of one side or the other. And even though the false may gain a temporary victory, that which is true, by drawing to its defence additional forces, will through the self-righting process, ultimately survive. (45)

As Weiner, in his study of the War of the Unstamped⁽⁴⁶⁾ points out, during the 1830s and 1840s, the argument that news was a commodity

analogous to any other, and that the principle of free discussion was fully comprehensive only within a commercial context, was one advanced by many within the anti-tax movement:

To check inquiry and attempt to regulate the progress and direction of opinions, by prescription and penalties, is to disturb the order of nature, and is analogous, in its mischievous tendency, to the system of forcing the capital and industry of the community into channels, which they would never spontaneously seek, instead of suffering private interests to direct them to their most predictable employment. (47)

In drawing support for their argument that only free competition in the marketplace was capable of ensuring the dissemination of sound doctrines throughout the country, middle-class reformers increasingly pointed to the radical unstamped press which was a constant thorn in the side of government and which espoused increasingly pernicious doctrines. The success of these papers, it was argued, demonstrated that newspaper taxes rather than preventing subversion were actually encouraging it. By making it difficult to operate newspapers at a profit, it was argued, the taxes discouraged men of sound doctrines and a respect for authority from educating the lower classes. According to Collet Dobson Collet, a key figure in the parliamentary campaign:

The imposition of the Security System on all newspapers that did pay the Stamp Duty brought the professional critics of the Government into a sort of corporation, enjoying free postage for their taxed newspapers, but having a prospective rod held over them calculated to moderate any excessive zeal against the Government of the day. Those public-minded private men who were anxious to educate the people and to permit them to educate themselves were forbidden the only process by which their views could be carried out. This was rendered impossible by the Stamp Duty. A penny paper could not pay for a fourpenny stamp. The field of public instruction was therefore left open only to those who were poor enough to have little to lose by breaking the law. (48)

This argument that the Stamp Duty deprived the lower classes of newspapers of quality and moderation was to dominate the parliamentary debate of 1834 on a motion to repeal the taxes. Forwarding the motion, Bulwer-Lytton was to argue:

You either forbid to the poor by this tax, in a great measure all political knowledge, or you give to them, unanswered and unpurified, doctrines the most dangerous - you put the medicine under lock and key, and you leave the poison on the shelf; ... you create two publics; to the one public of educated men, in the upper and middle ranks, whom no newspaper could, on moral points, very dangerously mislead, you give the safe and rational papers; to the other public of men far more easily influenced - poor, ignorant, distressed - men for whom all the conclusions and disorders of society arise (for the crimes of the poor are the punishment of the rich) - to the other public, whom you ought to be most careful to sooth, to guide, and to enlighten, you give the heated invective of demagogues and fanatics. (49)

In supporting the motion another speaker also stressed the subversive nature of the radical unstamped press:

Could such individuals be safely intrusted with the teaching of the people of this country? Were their honest opinions likely to be in favour of order, of the institutions on which the particular form of Government in this country was founded, and of the institutions on which society itself depended? Yet the existing law gave a bounty to this class of writers, whilst it imposed a tax on the publications of men of respectability, station, and education, whose honest opinions were likely to be in favour of the institutions of this country. (50)

"Ignorance", the speaker went on to argue, might make the working-class "enemies of the Government, why not take steps as would make them its friends". (51)

If the taxes were abolished and the laws of supply and demand permitted to operate in a free and open market, then the present monopoly enjoyed by the radical unstamped press would be broken as they were forced to give way to their natural superiors: a cheap capitalist press espousing the virtues of law and order, property, and free

enterprise. The experience of the radical unstamped press in the period following the repeal of the taxes suggests that such arguments were not without an element of truth. (52)

In its most basic form the concept of a self-regulating free market of ideas defines press freedom in a negative rather than a positive sense: freedom is defined in terms of freedom from prior constraint. So long as there are no obstacles (financial, political or legal) to entering the marketplace of ideas, all who wanted to express an opinion could do so. Whether individual newspapers espoused the truth, or were politically neutral, was unimportant; if an individual or group could not find a newspaper to their liking, they could enter the market and produce their own. The result would be a myriad of opinions all competing for the public's attention. Those opinions which survived in the market by attracting sufficient buyers would most clearly reflect the demand for those opinions in the market. Those who fared badly were thus left with two options: respond to public demand, or go under. If the proprietor wished to make a profit (and according to liberal theory all individuals were by nature self-maximising), then he would have to respond to public demand. The market-based system, thus formulated, functioned not only to produce a diversity of opinions for public consumption, but also rendered the power of newspaper proprietors accountable to the public.

Since the mid-nineteenth century this view that only privately owned newspapers, independently financed by advertising revenue and conducted as a property right, was capable of ensuring a diversity of opinions independent from the state has been established as part of orthodox thinking on the press. And, as we shall see below, despite the economic transformation of the British press following the gradual abolition of the "taxes on knowledge" over the period 1833-61, it

remains a vital item of belief for free press theorists.

Democracy and the press

The doubt, the fear, the conscious ignorance, the consequent errors and exaggerated fancies of the governments of countries where the Press is gagged, constitute at once the inevitable consequence and the appropriate punishment of that foolish sin. There is panic because there is darkness; there is tyranny because there is terror. Here, thanks to our many-headed and unfettered Press, the authorities are amply informed, and they are informed in time. They have early warning when they are treading in paths which public sympathy will not go with them, and tending towards proceedings for which the popular voice would not grant absolution. In a country which has reached this stage of freedom and self-government on which England now stands, ministers must govern in conformity with the will of the effective body of the nation; and how can they ascertain this save through those great organs of utterance which sometimes form and sometimes express the general opinion, but can never be ignorant of it or out of harmony with it. (53)

If the liberal doctrine of free trade in conjunction with the Miltonian concept of a free market in ideas, gave the press its market-based rationale, then democratic theory, especially where it relates to public opinion and party government, provided it with an ideology and a social purpose. During the first half of the nineteenth century the claim advanced by liberal philosophers and free press theorists, that a press free from state control was not only a symbol of a politically free society but a necessary condition of such a society, was to provide press reformers with their most powerful argument against the "taxes on knowledge".

Nowhere was the importance of a free press stressed more vociferously than within the political philosophy of the Utilitarians. Indeed, so central is the role of a free press within Utilitarian theory that it is difficult to exaggerate its importance. For Bentham without a free press there could be neither good government nor

indirect legislation. In A Fragment of Government Bentham had asked, what is the difference between free and despotic government? It is not a question of more or less power, he answered, but of its use.

A free government depends:

on the responsibility of the governors; or the right which the subject has of having the reasons publicly assigned and canvassed of every act of power that is exerted over him - on the liberty of the press; or the security with which every man ... may make known his complaints and remonstrances to the whole community. (54)

Newspapers, Bentham was to write in 1773:

propagate to every corner of the Empire alarms for ... the people's security, circumstances of felicity for their joy and lessons for their instruction ... break down by degrees fragments from the bulky pile of Science to knead them into the mass of general intelligence ... display examples of Vice for their avoidance, and of Virtue for their imitation. The infallible preservatives against devotions and superstitious imposture - which making every part labour for the whole, joy for the whole, sorrow for the whole, contribute more than any regulations that can be devised to strengthen that social bond which collects the scattered citizens into members of one great family: which exercises the minds of men for the public service as the games in Greece and Rome did their bodies - which are sources of amusement to so many to whom misfortune have denied domestic comforts, and help them to support the fatigue of being. (55)

It is only when combined with that other central tenet of Utilitarianism, the concept of public opinion as a moral sanction against bad government, that the real significance of the press for the philosophical radicals of the eighteenth and nineteenth century is revealed. As Rosen, in his study⁽⁵⁶⁾ of Bentham points out, despite being a relatively new concept in political theory, the appeal to public opinion as a standard of legitimacy and the stimulation of public opinion as a political strategy was an acknowledged part of the programme of philosophical radicalism in Bentham's day. For Bentham,

who provided one of the first detailed discussions on the subject, public opinion was a vital element in the success of constitutional democracy. Commenting on the power and importance of public opinion in the Constitutional Code, he was to write:

To the pernicious exercise of the power of government it is the only check; to the beneficial, an indispensable supplement. Able rulers lead it; prudent rulers lead or follow it; foolish rulers disregard it. Even at the present stage in the career of civilization, its dictates coincide, on most points, with those of the greatest happiness principle; on some, however, it still deviates from them: but, as its deviations have all along been less and less numerous, and less wide, sooner or later they will cease to be discernible; aberration will vanish, coincidence will be complete.
(57)

Writing forty years later, John Stuart Mill thought that the case for a free press as a means of ensuring good government was so irrefutable that it no longer needed to be put:

The time, it is to be hoped, is gone by when any defence would be necessary of the "liberty of the press" as one of the securities against corrupt or tyrannical government. No argument, we may suppose, can now be needed against permitting a legislature or an executive, not identified in interest with the people, to proscribe opinions to them and determine what doctrines or what arguments they should be allowed to hear. This aspect of the question, besides, has been so often and so triumphantly enforced by preceding writers that it needs not to be specifically insisted on in this piece. (59)

For those who saw public opinion as the ultimate sanction against bad government, the power of the press knew no bounds. Addressing the House of Commons in 1810, Sheridan was to declare:

Give me the liberty of the press, and I will give the Minister a venal House of Peers, I will give him a corrupt and servile House of Commons, I will give him the full swing of the patronage of office, I will give him the whole host of ministerial influence, I will give him all the power that place

can confer upon him to purchase submission and
overawe resistance and yet, armed with the liberty
of the Press, I will go forth to meet him
undismayed ... (60)

The emphasis placed on the press as a check on bad government by
liberal reformers and philosophers during the early part of the
nineteenth century, is hardly surprising given the inadequacies of the
democratic system that prevailed in England. As Henry Reeve, one of
the most vociferous advocates of the free press, was to complain
in 1855:

The House of Commons is not, and perhaps never can
be made, a complete and perfect representative of all
classes, all interests, all shades of opinion.
Certainly it has not realised that bright ideal.
Non-electors are more numerous than electors.
Thousands of Englishmen of nearly every rank -
dwellers in towns that are not boroughs, dwellers in
in counties who are not freeholders nor large tenants,
residents in cities who are not householders - have
no members of Parliament to listen to them and to
speak for them. The holders of unusual opinions, or
of moderate or philosophic doctrines, votaries of
'coming' creeds, the members of minorities in a word,
are unrepresented in Parliament, unless by some
happy accident. The House of Commons, too, is even
more inadequate and insufficient than it is incomplete
and partial as a representation of the acting, thinking,
stirring, discussing crowds of political Englishmen.
It sits only half the year. It is overwhelmed with
details of business. It cannot suffice to give
utterance to half the thoughts that are bursting for
expression, or ask half the questions that the
country is bursting to have answered. (61)

Until the ideal of democracy was realised, Reeve went on to argue,
only a free press could ensure that those denied access to the
decision-making process could have their voices heard:

We all feel that we could not do without the vent for
expression which the Newspaper Press affords us. We
would explode were it not for such an immediate and
ample safety-valve. We could not possibly wait for
the slow expression, the inadequate and inaccurate
exposition of our sentiments and opinions which only
could be furnished to us by our senators in St. Stephens!
It is not too much to say that if by any accident

journalism were to become extinct, such a Parliamentary Reform as the wildest of us have never dreamed of, would become an instant and paramount necessity. Those who have no share in the choice of members, those who feel themselves inadequately represented or misrepresented, those who find in Parliament none who hold their peculiar doctrines or who are qualified to give them effective utterance - would all join to insist upon such an entire renovation and reconstitution of the representative assembly as would throw all previous 'organic changes' into the shade.
(62)

For the Utilitarian, however, the press was a multi-purposed instrument, and its contribution to the democratic process went far beyond its ability to function as a check on bad government. Indeed so important were the political functions claimed on behalf of the press by liberal reformers that without them representative democracy was destined to remain little more than a hollow fiction. "It is perfectly clear," wrote James Mill in advancing the case for a free press as a prerequisite of democratic government:

that all chance of the advantage to the people, from having the choice of their rulers, depends upon their making a good choice. If they make a bad choice - if they elect people either incapable, or disinclined, to use well the power entrusted to them, they incur the same evils to which they are doomed when they are deprived of the due control over those by whom their affairs are administered.

We may then ask, if there is any possible means by which the people can make a good choice, besides the liberty of the press? The very foundation of a good choice is knowledge. The fuller and more perfect the knowledge, the better the chance, where all sinister interest is absent, of a good choice. How can people receive the most perfect knowledge relative to the characters of those who present themselves for their choice, but by information conveyed freely, and without reserve, from one to another?
(63)

As an instrument for creating an informed and enlightened public opinion, and thus create the conditions necessary for self-government, the press was ideally suited. Located in the gap between electors and elected, it not only assisted the people to understand the policies of

government and thereby enable them to guide and stimulate the administration, but, by acting as a barometer of public opinion, it also functioned to link political representatives and their constituents in the period between elections. In doing so, it was argued, the press was more than simply a channel for information - it was an essential link between political institutions and the people. (64)

For Bentham the press was "not only the appropriate organ of the public opinion tribunal, but the only regularly and constantly acting one". (65) The press, W.T. Stead apostrophized in Government by Journalism, were the "great inspector, with a myriad eyes, who never sleeps, and whose daily reports are submitted, not to a functionary or a department, but to the whole people". (66) Newspapers, he argued, were the "phonograph of the world", the "ear and tongue of the people", and the "visible speech if not the voice of the democracy". (67) For Reeve no instrument was better suited to the task of political instruction, and its influence on political life was so great that it was difficult to exaggerate:

Journalism is now truly an estate of the realm; more powerful than any of the other estates; more powerful than all of them combined if it could ever be brought to act as a united and concentrated whole. Nor need we wonder at its sway. It furnishes the exclusive reading of hundreds of thousands. Not only does it supply the nation with nearly all the information on public topics which it possesses, but it supplies it with notions and opinions in addition. It furnishes not only the material on which our conclusions must be founded: it furnishes the conclusions themselves, cut and dried - coined, stamped and polished. It inquires, reflects, decides for us. For five pence or a penny (as the case may be) it does all the thinking of the nation: saves us the trouble of weighing and perpending, of comparing and deliberating; and presents us with ready-made opinions clearly and forcibly expressed. (68)

In calling for the abolition of the "taxes on knowledge", which

liberal reformers saw as the main obstacle to providing the people with the instruments of self-government, and thus as an obstacle to a "free market in politics", free press theorists were keen to stress the positive benefits that would accrue to society. The taxes, it was argued, rather than providing the people with a multitude of conflicting and mutually modifying organs, had created the vile monopoly of The Times.⁽⁶⁹⁾ Moreover, they had allowed falsehood and pernicious doctrines, in the shape of the unstamped press, to prevail over the sound political instruction which could be provided by a cheap capitalist press. The removal of the taxes would enable a myriad of voices to be presented to the people, each criticising the doctrines of the other, each allowing a diversity of political parties to put across their view of the world, and each accountable to the people via the laws of the market. The greater the diversity of voices competing in the market, the stronger would be the truth that would emerge, and the healthier the level of political debate.

Whether the eventual abolition of the taxes in 1861 reflected a victory for the arguments advanced by Fourth Estate theorists, or whether inadequacies in the system of fiscal control would have led to their ultimate demise in the long term, is a question of no real significance for, if the ideology constructed for the press in the campaign against governmental control had any real success, it was in elevating the status of the press from its nadir in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. To this point I have restricted my focus to the claims made on behalf of the press as an institution; the following section widens the scope and examines the impact of the arguments advanced by Fourth Estate theorists on the status of journalists.

From Wastrel to Watchdog

The first duty of the press is to obtain the earliest and most correct intelligence of the events of the time, and instantly, by disclosing them, to make them the common property of the nation. The statesman collects his information secretly and by secret means, he keeps back even the current intelligence of the day with ludicrous precautions until diplomacy is beaten in the race with publicity. The press lives by disclosure: whatever passes into its keeping becomes part of the knowledge and history of our times; it is daily and for ever appealing to the enlightened force of public opinion - anticipating, if possible, the march of events - standing upon the breach between the present and the future, and extending its survey to the horizon of the world. (70)

Throughout the course of the eighteenth and the early part of the nineteenth centuries, the status of the press was low. And, lacking the economic independence that increased circulations and advertising revenue was to bring from the mid 1850s onwards, it had always been highly susceptible to political subsidisation and corruption. Koss notes that prior to this economic development of the press from the mid 1850s onwards, newspapers had generally relied on three sources for their financial support: "Government stipends bestowed and received without shame", "commercial capital, usually collected by syndicates in the City", and thirdly, "subscriptions from politicians who stood either in opposition to the government or at its fringes". (71)

Though political subsidisation of the press existed prior to the "taxes on knowledge", the financial burden placed on the press by the imposts made political patronage a necessity for many papers. (72)

The practice of subsidising newspapers for the purpose of political gain was to reach its zenith during the long administration of Robert Walpole, who viewed newspapers as an important factor in gaining political support for his policies. Siebert, for example, notes that between 1730 and 1736 the proprietor and editor of the Free Briton

received direct subsidies from Walpole's treasury.⁽⁷³⁾

A Committee of Secrecy, appointed in 1742 to inquire into Walpole's conduct, revealed that Walpole paid out £50,000 of secret service money to pamphleteers and treasury newspapers in the last ten years of his administration alone.⁽⁷⁴⁾ According to Aspinall the short-lived Shelburne Ministry spent £1,084 on bribing the press in the nine months from 10th July, 1782, to 5th April, 1783, while the Coalition Ministry of Fox and North bribed newspapers of all sides in their effort to gain public support for unpopular Bills.⁽⁷⁵⁾ Though the practice of offering financial inducements to the press in order to secure favourable coverage was to diminish as the nineteenth century progressed, it was to die hard. As late as 1834 the Standard offered to sell its services to Peel when he became Prime Minister, while the Observer continued to accept secret service money up to as late as 1840. The press up to the second quarter of the nineteenth century, Williams comments:

took their money and did what they were told as though the long struggle for freedom throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had never taken place. Most of them were wholly worthy of the contempt in which all of them came to be held. The age got the press it deserved. (76)

If bribery and political corruption together with a range of other disreputable practices, such as the acceptance of suppression and contradiction fees noted by Aspinall⁽⁷⁷⁾ did little for the status of newspapers, it did even less for the status of those who produced them.
(78)

The status of journalism, the London Review declared in the early 1800s, was so low that men of birth and refinement would not consider it as an occupation for fear of being outcast from "good society". As a consequence, it went on:

The Newspaper Press is thus degraded from the rank of a liberal profession: the employment, and the class engaged in it, sink; and the conduct of our journals falls too much into the hands of men of obscure birth, imperfect education, blunt feelings and coarse manners, who are accustomed to a low position in society, and are contented to be excluded from a circle in which they have never been used to serve. (79)

According to Aspinall, in his study of the social status of British journalism at the beginning of the nineteenth century, "Even as late as the 1820s ... journalism was regarded as neither a dignified nor a reputable profession".⁽⁸⁰⁾ While O'Boyle, in his comparative study of the image of journalism in France, Germany, and England over the period 1815-1848, found that it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that British journalism attained a measure of respectability.⁽⁸¹⁾

The reasons for the low status of journalism until the 1840s and 1850s are not difficult to explain, and in many respects Williams was quite right when he suggested that "The age got the press it deserved". Aspinall, for example, suggests that:

In an age when the country was still for the most part governed by the aristocracy and its connections, it was natural that men who wrote for the people and sought to bring the pressure of public opinion to bear on Parliament and the Government by appealing to the opinions and the prejudices of the people, should be looked upon with suspicion and even hostility. (82)

In order to understand the status of journalism at a given time, as O'Boyle rightly points out, one needs to take account of the social, political and economic context in which it operates. For O'Boyle, of all these factors it is perhaps the economic one which best holds the explanation for the low status of English and European journalism until the mid-nineteenth century:

The economic system was determinative in that a certain kind of newspaper press could emerge only at a certain stage of industrial society. That is, only an economically advanced society could produce a newspaper press that supported itself completely from sales to a mass reading public and from paid advertisements. Without such an economic base the newspaper press was either ineffectual or had to rely on political subsidy. Likewise journalism as a full-time occupation with its own standards of performance and integrity, and at least a degree of social status could appear only when the newspaper press had become a profitable business enterprise.

(83)

Though the economic context in which the press operated for most of the 150 years covered by the "taxes on knowledge" may not have been the only factor to influence the status of journalism during this period, it was certainly one of the most significant.⁽⁸⁴⁾ As Elliott has noted, the financial rewards to be gained from journalism before the commercial development of the press in the latter half of the nineteenth century were so low, that only a few notable editors were able to support themselves simply by writing.⁽⁸⁵⁾ Apart from those at the very top of journalism (editors, sub-editors, and senior journalists on the London and provincial press), Lee observes, the living to be made from journalism for the rank and file was pathetically low. As late as 1913, he notes, 2,100 of the National Union of Journalists' 3,600 members were earning less than £160 a year, whilst the majority of the worst paid were not even members of the union.⁽⁸⁶⁾ While earnings may have varied according to the ability of the individual journalist to negotiate improved terms with his employers, or his ability to secure ancillary earnings (notably through the payment of suppression or contradiction fees), the pay and conditions for many rank and file journalists remained pathetically poor.⁽⁸⁷⁾ Many had no contracts, work was often erratic, many were driven to dishonesty or corruption to supplement their earnings. The insecurity of employment, and the low pay and poor conditions, Lee suggests, was undoubtedly a contributory cause of

the traditional and widespread addiction to alcohol among journalists.⁽⁸⁸⁾ Such conditions were unlikely to have attracted entrants of a high calibre, or to have elevated the status of journalism.

By the closing decade of the nineteenth century, the social status of the press and those who worked for it had changed almost beyond recognition. The press which, during the early 1800s had been little more than a byword for corruption and licentiousness, was accepted by many as the very oil on which the democracy operated; journalists, from being little more than rogues and demagogues, were now portrayed as the very guardians of democracy. How is this transformation best explained? What were the key factors in the transformation of journalism from its nadir in the first quarter of the nineteenth century to its zenith in the final quarter?

For free press theory the answer is simple, and it is located in the economic transformation of the press from the 1830s onwards. According to the free press theorists it was the economic independence brought about by the growth in advertising and sales revenues that enabled the press to free itself from the stigma of the early nineteenth century. O'Boyle, in support of this thesis, has argued that, during the first half of the nineteenth century, journalists were rescued from the political patronage of the aristocracy and the Old Corruption largely by the demands of commerce, and that journalism became less corrupt as it became more businesslike.⁽⁸⁹⁾ Whatever the long term implications of this commercial transformation were to be (and, as we shall see below, they have been many), the argument advanced by free press theory, that political independence and the elevated status it was to bring in its wake, was to be the child of economic independence, is not without an element of truth.

As the commercial development of the press, stimulated by the reduction and then abolition of the "taxes on knowledge" speeded up during the third quarter of the nineteenth century, newspapers became highly profitable enterprises. And, as early as the 1830s, newspaper profits were already serving to distance certain sections of the press from government and party patronage. Curran, for example, notes that as early as 1834, The Times, the paper with the biggest news team and the most advertising of the time, declared that henceforth it would desist from the practice of receiving early information from government, because such a practice was inconsistent with "the pride and independence of our journal", and that anyway its "own information was earlier and surer".⁽⁹⁰⁾

If the increase in profits brought about by advertising revenue⁽⁹¹⁾ and rising sales was to transform the press and give it a national significance it was previously to lack, then the impact of this commercial development on those who worked for it was to be no less profound. As a number of studies have clearly demonstrated, profits based on advertising revenue were also to transform the economic, social and professional condition of journalism, and give it many of the characteristics we associate with the profession to-day.⁽⁹²⁾

As the press became more profitable, then the salaries paid by leading newspapers increased, and journalism began to attract entrants of a much higher calibre.⁽⁹³⁾ Increased profits also helped finance the shift from casual and erratic employment to permanent and increasingly well-paid jobs in the commercial press. As a consequence journalism slowly became recognised as a full-time profession rather than as a means of earning additional income or as a stepping-stone to some other occupation. The increasing wealth of the press also served professional ethics. High salaries and secure employment led to the

development of professional loyalties among journalists and, as the rewards for honest reporting increased, then the selling of one's convictions to politicians became less necessary.

As the occupation of journalism became more defined and more respectable during the latter half of the nineteenth century, attempts were made to organise it along professional lines. The National Association of Journalists, which was essentially a proprietors' organisation, was founded in 1884 with the aims of improving facilities for journalists, protecting its reputation, and providing relief for distressed journalists. The Association became the Institute and in 1889 acquired a royal charter. At the turn of the century one also witnessed the organisation of working journalists independent of proprietors and in 1907 the National Union of Journalists was founded as the profession's first effective labour organisation.⁽⁹⁴⁾

The other, and equally as important factor that was to shape the character of journalism during the nineteenth century, was the technological benefits that the press was to accrue from the industrial revolution. Higher profits enabled newspaper proprietors to invest in more sophisticated and cost efficient technology. It was these technological developments that were to make the production of a cheap mass-produced press a reality. In 1814 The Times had sent shock waves through Fleet Street when it introduced the Koenig steam press which was capable of printing between 1,000 and 1,200 double sized sheets per hour: a rate of production unheard of in Fleet Street. By the 1870s, the web-rotary press enabled the leading newspapers to produce 10,000 copies an hour. By this time large numbers of smaller papers had progressed to at least steam-driven flat-bed presses.⁽⁹⁵⁾ Competition within the newspaper industry, as in other sectors of the economy, was to ensure that technological efficiency continued to increase.

If improvements in technology were to make a cheap press a reality, then improvements in communications were to provide it with the market for its product. The development and extension of the railway network, and an improved road network, enabled the press to take on an increasingly national character as newspapers slowly penetrated towns and villages throughout the country. As Lee notes, the railways were to play an important role in extending the spread of newspapers:

The railways had played a major part in determining the spread of the newspapers, for the older messengers, newsboys and pedlars had become few and far between. By the 1870s most rural areas were within reach of a train, or at least of a milk cart. Once the paper arrived in town it was often delivered by railway messengers to the house of the subscriber, but with the cheap papers it became more usual to deliver them to certain shops, tobacconists, greengrocers, stationers, booksellers and barbers ... (96)

The other two important developments to influence the character of journalism in the nineteenth century, and transform it into a highly skilled and specialised occupation, was the development of shorthand and the telegraph. Smith, in his study of the changing nature of the "truth" offered by journalism since the seventeenth century, has argued that the combination of a fast, accurate and efficient means of recording information brought about by shorthand and the breakdown in the geographical barriers to communication brought about by the telegraph, were to play an important role in shaping the definition and practice of journalism in the latter half of the nineteenth century. And they were to provide journalism with two of its most enduring concepts - "objectivity" and "impartiality". (97)

The notion that the role of journalists was to establish and report the "truth", or at the very least the "facts", in an objective manner, which remain to this day two of the most enduring features of journalism,

was a relatively late addition to the credo of journalism. Truth, and the ability to claim it, Smith argues, was a concept that had always been restricted by the technology of verification:

Journalism and philosophy were in the same predicament; some formal authority was essential in guiding the innocent towards the truth. Any statement fit to be believed required an official provenance and the say-so of the writer was clearly insufficient, since he had no means of checking his own statements. Only with a dual communication system, when the news flows along more than one channel at a time, can the journalist acquire his own specialism in the telling of accurate news. Journalism does not become professionalised, or even occupationalised, until it acquires the essential tool of double checking; until then it remains a mere appendage of printing or, in its grander forms, a sub-branch of diplomacy. (98)

Shorthand, in enabling journalists to report the news accurately, appeared to make the "truth" amenable to the rigours of scientific method. Deployed in a variety of forms from as early as the 1750s, but standardised with the arrival of Pitman's universally applicable system, shorthand was to transform the business of reporting into a kind of science.⁽⁹⁹⁾ In doing so it was to transform public expectations of what journalism could and should do:

Shorthand was the first of that long series of journalistic techniques which seemed to promise the reader the complete recovery of some semblance of reality. A fully competent shorthand reporter seemed to have acquired an almost supernatural power, and shorthand was invested with the same sort of social optimism as the microphone and the television camera in later times. By presenting the reader with the ipsissima verba of speech, it seemed at first that reporting was capable of providing a mirror to reality. (100)

The advent of the telegraph and the telegram, which were relatively common by the 1860s, also served to influence the character of journalism.⁽¹⁰¹⁾ Apart from breaking down the geographical barriers to communication by enabling journalists to file copy quickly and

accurately from all parts of the country, the telegraph was also to create a pressurised world within journalism. Before the advent of the telegraph, the speed at which news about social and political events was reported by the press was determined largely by the proximity of those events to the printing presses. The greater the distance, and this was particularly true in the reporting of foreign affairs, the greater the gap between events and the receipt of news about them.⁽¹⁰²⁾ The telegraph was to revolutionise the process of newsgathering and reporting by demolishing the logistical barriers to the reporting of geographically disparate events. As a consequence, it became possible for the public to read about what had happened yesterday, rather than someone's opinion of what had happened last week. As early as 1844 The Times, with the aid of the electric signalling system of the Great Western Railway, was able to announce the birth of a second son to Queen Victoria at Windsor a mere four hours after it had taken place.⁽¹⁰³⁾ Henceforth the idea that a daily newspaper should encompass the events of the "day" was slowly established as part of conventional thinking on the nature of the newspaper.⁽¹⁰⁴⁾

By the latter half of the nineteenth century the rehabilitation of journalists was virtually complete. And, casting his eye back over the previous half-century, Henry Reeve confidently announced the transformation:

The journalism of the beginning of the century would scarcely pass muster now. The truth is, that the men who now conduct the newspaper press are a wholly different class from those who were connected with it thirty or forty years ago. Since it attained a power and station which both gave it a dignity and imposed upon it the responsibilities of character; since it became recognised as one of the great governing powers of the realm; and since statesmen and authors of unquestioned eminence were known to have employed its columns as their channels of communication with the public, - it has been taken almost entirely out of the hands of mere hack-writers - literary workmen -

manufacturers 'to order' - and has been placed in those men of fixed opinions, of consummate knowledge and deliberate purpose, who sought connexion with it, as others sought a seat in Parliament or an officer under Government, for the sake of influencing their age and country, of promulgating their own sentiments, of recommending and enforcing the principles and measures on which their own hearts were set. (105)

Reeve was anything but alone in his view. For W.T. Stead, a constant and vigorous exponent of the Fourth Estate school of journalism, no praise was high enough for the journalists of the day. A journalist, he eulogized in 1886:

can not only exercise an almost absolute power of closure both upon individuals and upon causes, he has also the power of declaring urgency for subjects on which he is interested. He can excite interest, or allay it; he can provoke public impatience, or convince people that no one need worry themselves about the matter. Every day he can administer either a stimulant or a narcotic to the minds of his readers; and he can force questions to the front which, but for his timely aid, would have lain dormant for many a year. Of course, no journalist is omnipotent, and even the most powerful journalist cannot influence those who do not read his paper. But within the range of his circulation ... he may be more potent than any other man. (106)

If the newspaper, as many nineteenth century liberals saw it, was the voice of an educated democracy, then for Stead, its editor was its "uncrowned king"; the journalist its "missionary and apostle", its "prophet" and its "watchman". (107)

The whole apparatus of journalism that was to carry the newspaper industry through into the twentieth century was now substantially complete - journalism, for the advocates of the Fourth Estate theory, had truly arrived.

The Fall from Grace

Whether the press do, ever did, or indeed ever could, perform the role accorded to it in Fourth Estate theory, has, since the middle of

the twentieth century, attracted considerable criticism; criticism which has undermined many of the central claims made on behalf of the press, and which has left the theory itself looking decidedly threadbare. At the heart of the crisis now facing the Fourth Estate theory is the economic transformation of the newspaper industry since the turn of the century. Early theory did not envisage the enormous circulations, the financial influence of mass advertising, and the growing concentration of ownership which have all been dominant characteristics of the British press since the turn of the century. Though a lack of space precludes any detailed analysis of the growing crisis of legitimacy in free press theory, a few general observations should be sufficient to indicate just how serious this crisis is.

The attack on the Fourth Estate theory has not been restricted solely to recent developments in the press; some critics have questioned whether the theory, as conventionally formulated, ever corresponded to the development and practice of the British press. One of the foremost critics of the Fourth Estate theory as a valid interpretation of the historical development of the British press has been the historian James Curran who, in a number of convincing articles, has argued that the orthodox view of the emergence of a "free" press needs not only to be critically assessed but stood on its head. "The period around the middle of the nineteenth century", Curran argues, "did not inaugurate a new era of press freedom and liberty: it introduced a new system of press censorship more effective than anything that had gone before". (108) Market forces, Curran contends, succeeded where legal repression and taxation failed in establishing the press as an instrument of social control. Reversing the orthodox view of the historical development of the British press, Curran argues that the crucial element in this new system of control was the role occupied by

advertising which, rather than bringing about the liberation of the press, as it has so often been argued, merely transferred control from the state to the marketplace: advertising in effect became a new form of "taxation" - and, moreover, one that could not be evaded.⁽¹⁰⁹⁾

In attacking the historical validity of the Fourth Estate theory, Curran has not been alone. George Boyce has also cast a critical eye over the theory and, like Curran, also found it wanting. Dismissing the theory as a "political myth" designed to secure the political credibility of the press in the early nineteenth century, Boyce argues that the political role accorded to the press by such writers as Reeve and Stead was never, and indeed could never, be realised because it was based on a "mythical" view of the relations between the press, the government and the people. The argument that the press could operate as a Fourth Estate, Boyce suggests, is belied by evidence of the political incorporation of the press in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; the political commitments of journalists that made them actors rather than neutral spectators in the political process; and the development of the press as an entertainment industry.⁽¹¹⁰⁾

The tenacious hold that the Fourth Estate theory maintains over the debate on the role and social significance of the press in liberal democracy, is even more striking when one considers the changes that have taken place in the press, and particularly the popular mass circulation press, since the turn of the century. These changes, particularly in content and ownership, have undermined the legitimacy of the market-based press system so central to liberal theory, and the claims made on behalf of the press as an instrument of political communication.⁽¹¹¹⁾

The economic transformation of the press since the early 1800s, which I have noted above, is claimed to have rescued the press from

political patronage and corruption, has ironically served to demolish one of the most cherished and central tenets of liberal free press theory - that privately owned newspapers engaging in free competition in the market was the best, and indeed the only, means of ensuring that a diversity of newspapers, and therefore a diversity of competing opinions, would be available to the public.

The problem of market-based economic support for the press, though a central canon of liberal theory, was never squarely faced by free press theorists. Apart from the general argument that government control or subsidisation was undesirable in a free society, and that the free play of market forces was the surest safeguard of political independence, the problems inherent in allowing the market forces free rein in the newspaper industry were generally ignored. Yet, as Robbins, in his study of the impact of market forces on the British press since the early 1900s, observes, free market theory is based on a problematical, and indeed contradictory, idea:

On the one hand, we believe a multitude of views, popular and unpopular, should be available to the public, a multitude of products to the consumer. On the other, we believe the majority should rule, and in almost all cases laissez-faire should prevail. Majority rule and the free marketplace are contradictory ideas. (112)

Nowhere is the contradictory nature of market forces on the press more apparent than in their impact on newspaper competition and ownership. As Baistow observes, if the history of the British press from the mid-nineteenth century had to be summed up in one of its own alliterative, oversimplifying headlines, it would read something like "PRESS PARADOX: SUCCESS SPELLS CRISIS". (113)

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the national and provincial press, stimulated by the removal of the "taxes on knowledge"

and the growing demand for newspapers, expanded. Increasing advertising revenue from the press also provided the incentive for entrepreneurs to launch publications directed at markets that advertisers particularly wanted to reach and, as a consequence, the production of all kinds of publications flourished. Between 1886 and 1896 the number of magazines, many of them trade and professional journals, increased by 557 to 2,097. The number of local dailies grew from only 2 in 1850 to 196 in 1900. There was also a substantial expansion in the number of local weekly papers from less than 400 in 1856 to an estimated 2,072 in 1900. This expansion was also repeated in the national daily and Sunday market as a considerable number of new titles were established between 1880 and 1918.⁽¹¹⁴⁾ The growing number of publications was also accompanied by an enormous expansion in newspaper consumption as annual newspaper sales rose from 85 million in 1851 to 5,604 in 1920.⁽¹¹⁵⁾

This remarkable growth in newspaper production, however, was to prove shortlived. By the 1920s a series of trends which had been evident in the closing decades of the previous century slowly began to work themselves out.⁽¹¹⁶⁾ And it soon became clear that paradoxically, rather than producing diversity, free competition within the newspaper industry, as in other sections of the economy, was actually having the opposite effect. Since the early 1920s the effect of direct and indirect competition and the high cost of newspaper production was to increase the size of the market which a daily paper required to be financially viable. As a consequence, towns which in the nineteenth century had been able to support two or more dailies could, by the 'twenties, no longer do so.⁽¹¹⁷⁾ The expansion in the number of titles that had characterised the newspaper industry during the closing decades of the nineteenth century was reversed. From the early 1920s,

competition led to the rapid reduction of the number of titles available to the public, and an increasing concentration in the ownership of those that survived. Between 1921 and 1930 alone, no less than 24 daily and Sunday papers disappeared through closure and amalgamation. Between 1930 and 1939, a further 15 titles were lost as the circulation wars of the early 1930s took their toll. Ironically, and in direct contradiction to liberal free press theory, the only respite to this pattern of steady decline came during the period from 1939 to 1949, when government control over the distribution of newsprint kept the number of titles lost down to 2.⁽¹¹⁸⁾ As Robbins notes, the experience of governmental control made it clear that "control, rather than leading to the loss of papers, was a positive force in maintaining the existing diversity in the newspaper business".⁽¹¹⁹⁾ This respite, however, did little to reverse the trend - since 1947 a further 17 daily and Sunday nationals were to be lost.⁽¹²⁰⁾

A similar pattern of closure was also to be repeated in the provincial press which, during the closing decades of the nineteenth century, had enjoyed such a spectacular expansion.⁽¹²¹⁾ In 1921, 41 morning, 93 evening, and 135 daily (morning and evening) papers were published. By 1976 these figures had fallen to 20, 79 and 99 respectively.⁽¹²²⁾ The net effect of these closures has been to reduce local competition and ergo local choice. In 1921 16 provincial towns had a choice of a local morning paper; 27 a choice of a local evening paper; and 34 a choice of a local daily paper. By 1974 the respective figures were 2, 1 and 16.⁽¹²³⁾ The pattern has continued, and in 1986, with the closure of the Morning Telegraph, Sheffield became the latest in a long line of large provincial cities without a morning paper.

This decline in the number of national and provincial newspapers since the early 1920s has also been accompanied by significant changes

in the ownership of the press. During the nineteenth century, the newspaper industry was built upon the basis of the family business with ownership passing from father to son. Individual proprietorship was to continue to be the dominant form of ownership until the latter half of the century when it became usual to adopt at least the form of a joint-stock company. By the 1850s, however, "chains" of newspapers were to be found and, by the 1880s, "syndicates" and corporations.⁽¹²⁴⁾ These developments were to lay the foundations for the amalgamation and concentration that has been the defining characteristic of the newspaper industry throughout the course of the twentieth century.⁽¹²⁵⁾

The first Royal Commission on the Press, in keeping with liberal theory, had justified the market-based rationale of the press on the grounds that it guaranteed the autonomy of the press from vested interest. "Free enterprise", it declared, "is a prerequisite of a free press". "It is undoubtedly a great merit of the British press", it continued, "that it is completely independent of outside financial interests and that its policy is the policy of those who own and conduct it".⁽¹²⁶⁾ In the three decades following this report, the legitimacy of such a claim was to be seriously eroded as large sections of the British press were acquired by multinational corporations with interests in almost every section of the communications industry. By 1976, 49 per cent of national daily circulation, and 80 per cent of Sunday circulation, were controlled by just three corporations - Reed, Trafalgar House and News International. By 1980 the same three groups controlled 71 per cent of the national daily and 82 per cent of the national Sunday circulation.⁽¹²⁷⁾ This process of concentration and monopolisation was also being repeated in the provincial market as the regional chains, increasingly linked to the national press groups, consolidated their market position. By 1975, the leading five chains

between them controlled 58 per cent of the regional evening circulation and 69 per cent of the regional morning circulation.⁽¹²⁸⁾ As the last Royal Commission on the Press was forced to conclude: "rather than saying that the press has other business interests it would be truer to argue that the press has become a subsidiary of other industries".⁽¹²⁹⁾

If the economic transformation of the press since the middle of the nineteenth century has served to demolish the claim made on behalf of the market as the best safeguard of diversity and freedom, then the increase in the capital resources needed to launch a newspaper which attended this transformation, served to undermine another central tenet of liberal theory - the argument that the market of ideas was open to all. As I noted above, liberal free press theory is premised on the belief that so long as no impediments were placed on entry to the market all who wished to start their own newspaper could. Such an argument was, even before the repeal of the "taxes on knowledge", increasingly untenable.

Since the early 1800s the costs of launching and maintaining a daily national or provincial paper have risen steadily. In 1818, it was estimated that it would cost between £2,000 and £5,000 to launch a London daily. By the 1830s, these costs had escalated to between £30,000 and £50,000 for a London newspaper that could compete with The Times, and it was estimated that it would initially lose over a £100 per week until its sales had been consolidated. It is said that £100,000 was raised for the establishment of the Daily News in 1846, and that a similar sum was spent on it during its first ten years.⁽¹³⁰⁾ The maintenance or purchase of an established London daily could prove even more expensive. In 1842, £25,000 had been needed to prevent the Morning Post from falling into the hands of free-traders, but thereafter the sums were measured in the hundreds of thousands.⁽¹³¹⁾

The cost of establishing a provincial paper, though less than that of a London daily, was also to increase steadily during the latter half of the nineteenth century. In 1810, the Leicester Mercury was established on a capital of only £760. By the 1830s, it was estimated that a provincial newspaper could be launched and sustained for five years with about £4,000 or £5,000, henceforth the cost was to increase steadily.⁽¹³²⁾

During the twentieth century the capital resources required to enter and survive in the newspaper market have risen to such a level that, for those other than the rich and powerful, the notion of a free and open market is an illusion. Since the First World War, no provincial morning paper has been established in direct competition with another, and since the 1930s, no provincial evening paper has been established in competition with another. The record of new starts is scarcely any better in the national market. In the last 65 years only one national Sunday (The Sunday Telegraph) and three national dailies (The Daily Worker/Morning Star, Daily Star and Today) have been established.⁽¹³³⁾ As the third Royal Commission on the Press put it, "anyone is free to start a daily newspaper, but few can afford to even contemplate it".⁽¹³⁴⁾ The Commission estimated that it would cost between £2 and £3 million to establish even a local evening paper in a town where there was no competition. The freedom to publish was not only weighted in favour of capital but of incumbent capital. The huge initial losses, and the market power of established publications, served to place even more substantial obstacles in the path of market entry. The launch costs of Today, at the time of writing, the most recent addition to Fleet Street, were estimated to have been £20 million, and the costs of the proposed Independent are likely, again at the time of writing, to be the same.⁽¹³⁵⁾ Needless to say, such sums are way

beyond the purse of individuals. As the experience of the proposed News on Sunday, the left-of-centre tabloid due for launch in 1987, suggests, such sums are even beyond the capacity of the organised labour movement. (136)

The impact of new technology, such as that pioneered by Eddie Shah's Today, which many believed would usher in a new era of press diversity as operational costs fell, is unlikely to alter the situation significantly. As Patrick Wintour points out, the argument that "a thousand flowers are now set to bloom in glorious colour" as a consequence of new technology, is belied by the impact such technology is likely to have on the cost of new launches:

Generalisation is dangerous, but the extent to which technology as opposed to deunionisation cuts costs has to be kept in proportion. In a typical Fleet Street newspaper newsprint in the past has represented 30 per cent of total costs, all wages and salaries around 40 per cent and the remaining expenses just under 30 per cent. A leanly staffed electronic newspaper might be able to cut these labour costs by four fifths, but even this would represent only a 20 per cent cut in the total operating costs. (137)

Moreover, as Wintour points out, new technology is unlikely to reverse the trend toward monopoly ownership. "In the field of mass sale papers at least", he argues, "it may be that the old technology monopolists will simply transform themselves into the new technology monopolists". (138) The slow, but steady, incorporation of the Today paper, new technology and all, into the Tiny Rowland stable testifies to the financial obstacles facing a newly established paper.

It could of course be argued that while the reduction in newspaper titles and the financial obstacles to entering the market are undesirable, the existing level of diversity and competition more than satisfies the minimum requirement laid down by liberal free press theory. Classical

liberal theory requires no more than this. So long as the press as a whole provides a comprehensive news service, and so long as different newspapers offer a range of different views, the actual number of newspapers itself scarcely matters.⁽¹³⁹⁾ The principles of the system, and the role of the press as a vital organ of political communication, would therefore be satisfied, albeit barely, by the existence of two papers.

Convenient as this argument may be, it is scarcely supported by recent research into the changing content and role of the British press which, if anything, suggests that large sections of the British press have long since abandoned any pretensions to function as organs of political communication.

In an important study published in 1980, which examines the space allocated to news and current affairs in the national press over the past fifty years, survey evidence about what people read, together with an analysis of the economic factors that have helped shape editorial content during this period, Curran, Douglas and Whannel contest the conventional view of the press held by historians, sociologists and political theorists alike.⁽¹⁴⁰⁾ The argument that the press, and particularly the popular press, are best defined and understood in terms of their explicit political content, they argue, provides a totally misleading picture of what is published in newspapers and what people actually read.

During the inter-war years, the authors argue, there was an important change in the content and market orientation of an important section of the British press, largely brought about by the interplay of market forces. In an attempt to offset high fixed costs, and attract the advertising revenues essential if they were to survive in a highly competitive market, the popular press, it is argued, were forced to

adopt editorial strategies designed to maximise their circulations. To this end the popular publishers sought to universalise the appeal of their papers. In developing editorial strategies designed to recruit new readers, there were thus strong economic pressures on the popular press to move into the middle ground by building bigger but less differentiated audiences, through editorial policies that appealed equally to men and women, and that appealed to people of all social classes. (141)

The net effect of these editorial strategies was a shift away from news and current affairs to material, such as sport and human interest, which had a wider social appeal. As a consequence, the authors argue, the popular press have slowly evolved into organs whose primary function is to entertain rather than inform. Between 1946 and 1976, the proportion of space allocated to news and current affairs declined by at least half in their sample of seven newspapers, and in three papers by no less than two-thirds. In 1976 the public affairs content in all seven papers was dwarfed by human interest material, and at an average of 15 per cent, was indeed accorded less space than sport in all seven papers. (142) The consequence of these changes on the nature of the popular press has been significant:

Most of what is published and read in newspapers has very little to do with what they are generally considered to be significant for by historians, sociologists and policy makers concerned with the press. Less than one-eighth of popular newspapers in Britain is devoted to current affairs, and the average reader spends less than a fifth of his time when reading a popular national paper on current affairs content. (143)

Though the quality press have not been exempt from these pressures brought about by the need to attract advertising revenue in order to survive, the impact of these pressures was to be the reverse of that

experienced by their popular counterparts. Whereas economic forces on the popular press compelled it to universalise its appeal, the quality press found itself under advertising pressure not to expand into the mass market.⁽¹⁴⁴⁾ Attempts to go against these forces by trying to build less differentiated audiences, as the experience of The Times in the mid-1960s was clearly to prove, could be financially disastrous.⁽¹⁴⁵⁾

In the view of the authors, the changing nature of the British press since the turn of the century and, in particular, the domination of non-current affairs content in the popular press, calls for a reassessment of its social and political role. While rejecting the simple conclusion that the political role of the popular press has been replaced by that of entertainer, the authors argue that it is no longer valid to evaluate its ideological and political role in terms of its explicit political content.⁽¹⁴⁶⁾

Salvaging the wreck: an ideology for the times

Social responsibility theory accepts the role of the press in servicing the political system, in enlightening the public, in safeguarding the liberties of the individual; but it represents the opinion that the press has been deficient in performing those tasks. It accepts the role of the press in servicing the economic system, but it would not have this task take precedence over such other functions as promoting the democratic processes or enlightening the public. It accepts the role of the press in furnishing entertainment but with the proviso that the entertainment be "good" entertainment. It accepts the need for the press as an institution to remain financially self-supporting, but if necessary it would exempt certain individual media from having to earn their way in the market place.⁽¹⁴⁷⁾

The first Royal Commission on the Press in 1949 had examined the condition of the British press, and the philosophical principles which legitimated it, and declared both fit and healthy. "It is generally

agreed" the Commission noted "that the British Press is inferior to none in the world. It is free from corruption".⁽¹⁴⁸⁾ Such a conclusion was, to say the least, optimistic in the extreme. Even at the time of publication it was increasingly obvious, even to many of its supporters, that traditional free press theory was increasingly unconvincing in an age of monopoly ownership, restricted entry, and dwindling diversity and competition. As Jay W. Jensen, commenting on the increasing tension between a twentieth century press and the nineteenth century ideology that sought to legitimate it, was to observe in 1950:

It is clear that the philosophical foundations of the traditional concept of freedom of the press have been precipitously undermined by the revolution in contemporary thought. The static and timeless World-Machine of Newton has been wrecked by the idea of evolution and the dynamic concepts of modern physics. Locke's doctrine of natural rights has been subverted not only by Romantic philosophy but also by present-day social science. Classical laissez-faire economics has been repudiated by most contemporary economists, and in practice by almost every modern industrial nation. Moreover, the Miltonian doctrine of the "self-righting process" has lately become suspect.⁽¹⁴⁹⁾

Jensen was simply one in a growing body of press pundits, in both Britain and America, who called for a critical re-examination of the philosophical principles of traditional free press theory. The resulting process of ideological reinterpretation that was to gather pace from the early 1940s onwards (stimulated in part by the constant threat of government intervention) was conservative rather than radical in its intentions. Its primary intention was to provide a scheme for the self-regulation and independent monitoring of press performance rather than outside intervention. As Peterson points out, rather than dispensing with the central concepts of traditional theory, social responsibility theory, as the emerging construct became known, sought to establish a set of criteria, which, if satisfied, would ensure that

the press did not abuse its privileged position:

The theory has this major premise: Freedom carries concomitant obligations; and the press, which enjoys a privileged position under our government, is obliged to be responsible to society for carrying out certain essential functions of mass communication in contemporary society. To the extent that the press recognises its responsibilities and makes them the basis of operational policies, the libertarian system will satisfy the needs of society. To the extent that the press does not assume its responsibilities, some other agency must see that the essential functions of mass communications are carried out. (150)

Thus social responsibility theory, though conditionally embracing the philosophical core of traditional free press theory, sought to remedy existing defects in press performance by acknowledging a series of rights which society should have if their informational needs are to be met - with the added proviso that, should the press fail to satisfy the needs of the public, external intervention would be necessary. (151)

Stated in its clearest form, social responsibility theory provides us with a benchmark against which the performance of the press in contemporary liberal democratic society may be judged.

Requirements of press performance

The first systematic attempt to formulate a new ideology for the press was undertaken in America by Hutchin's Commission on Freedom of the Press, whose reports in the late 1940s did much to establish the idea of social responsibility theory. (152)

The Commission listed five key things or standards which contemporary society required from the press which, it noted, were drawn largely from requirements already embodied in the practice or claims of those who operate the press. First, that the press should provide "a truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day's

events in a context which gives them meaning". This requirement demands not only that in its reporting the press should separate fact from opinion, but also that it should present both sides of disputed issues. Secondly, that in order to ensure that newspapers did not abuse their privileged position by denying access to views or opinions they disapproved of, newspapers should consider themselves as "common carriers" of information and ideas in society and provide "a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism". Thirdly, that the press should strive to project a "representative picture of the constitutional groups in society". Fourthly, that the press should be responsible for the "presentation and clarification of the goals and values of society". The final requirement identified by the Commission was that the press should provide "full access to the day's intelligence", in order to provide the public with the range of information it required if it was to understand fully the key social and political issues of the day.⁽¹³³⁾

In order to secure and maintain these standards of press performance, the Commission called on professional journalists, the public and the government alike, to adopt a more positive orientation towards the press. It appealed to journalists to adopt a more "professional spirit" towards their practice and accept responsibility for the standards of the profession as a whole. It called for greater public awareness of the press and the power it enjoyed, and greater research into the media at a university and college level. The Commission also advocated the setting up of an independent agency to appraise press performance and report on it each year. Finally, it called on government to adopt new legal remedies to rectify identified abuses of press freedom and, where possible, to encourage new ventures in the communications industry.⁽¹⁵⁴⁾

In Britain, growing concern over the standards of the press, and

the mass circulation popular press in particular, was reflected in the appointment of no less than three Royal Commissions on the Press since 1945. As in America, this growing concern was to force a shift away from a strict adherence to the principles of traditional free press theory and towards a view of the press which sought to take account of its changing nature since the turn of the century. Though many of the proposals and reforms recommended by successive Royal Commissions have been criticised for being too little, too late, and ineffective into the bargain, they did reflect a move towards a version of social responsibility theory similar to that advocated in America.⁽¹⁵⁵⁾

Though the majority reports of all three Commissions have been opposed to any significant government intervention in the press industry (which placed them out of line with many of their European partners⁽¹⁵⁶⁾), all three reports did acknowledge the need for positive action in preventing a further concentration of ownership. The first Commission advocated a more rigorous use of the Monopolies Commission as a means of preserving existing diversity of ownership. The second Commission, in the light of further concentrations in the ownership of the national and provincial press, recommended that a Press Amalgamation Court be established to restrict a further development of press monopoly. This proposal was further strengthened in 1965, when it became necessary for all new acquisitions by large press groups, already having an average daily circulation of 500,000 or more, to obtain the assent of the Secretary of State.⁽¹⁵⁷⁾

The three Royal Commissions were also united in their view of what society could and should expect from its newspapers if they were to dispense with their privileged power in a socially responsible manner. "The democratic form of society", the 1947-49 Commission declared:

demands of its members an active and intelligent participation in the affairs of their community, whether local or national. It assumes that they are sufficiently well informed about the issues of the day to be able to form the broad judgements required by an election, and to maintain between elections the vigilance necessary in those whose governors are their servants ... Democratic society, therefore, needs a clear and truthful account of events, of their background and their cause; a forum for discussion and informed criticism; and a means whereby individuals and groups can express a point of view or advocate a cause. (158)

The Commission report also attacked any further reduction in the diversity of the press on similar grounds:

The number and variety of papers should be such that the press as a whole gives an opportunity for all important points of view to be effectively presented in terms of the varying standards of taste, political opinion and education among the principal groups of the population. (159)

As a means of ensuring that the press lived up to the standards expected from it by contemporary society, successive Commissions have pursued a policy of reforming the press from within by promoting a greater sense of public service and responsibility. Perhaps the most substantive step towards improving and promoting a higher standard of professionalism within the press was the recommendation that a General Council of the Press should be established under a press chairman and with:

objects ... to safeguard the freedom of the Press; to encourage the growth of a sense of public responsibility and public service amongst all engaged in the profession ...; and to further the efficiency of the profession and the well-being of those who practise it. (160)

Conclusion

The social and political role accorded to the press in liberal free press theory, despite the criticism that has been levelled against it for much of the twentieth century, continues to frame the debate over what we should expect from the press in liberal democratic society. And, despite criticism, it remains the most cogent statement as to the "proper" relationship between the press, government and the people. As such, it continues to provide society with a clear and widely accepted standard against which reporting of the key issues of the day can be judged.

For the purpose of this thesis, it provides a standard against which the performance of the British press, in its reporting of the continuing conflict in Northern Ireland, can and should be judged. If any issue demanded that the press function as a Fourth Estate and provide the public with an informed, impartial and meaningful account of events, Northern Ireland is such an issue. The press, despite its defects, constitutes a vital source of information by which people construct their understanding of the conflict in the Six Counties, its origins, and the range of potential solutions. In the creation of an informed public capable of making rational decisions about political policy, the press has always been quick to claim a central role. The remainder of this thesis assesses how well it has lived up to its responsibility.

Notes

- (1) Reeve, H. "The Newspaper Press", Edinburgh Review cii October, 1855, p 470.
- (2) Ibid., p 478.
- (3) Ibid., p 478.
- (4) For a detailed analysis of the system of regulation and control established during this period, see: Siebert, F.S., Freedom of the Press in England, 1476-1776. University of Illinois Press, 1952.
- (5) Ibid.
- (6) Curran, J. "Capitalism and Control of the Press 1800-1975", in Curran, J., Gurevitch, M., Woollacott, J. (eds.), Mass Communication and Society. Edward Arnold, London, 1977, p 198.
- (7) Harris, M. "The structure, ownership and control of the press, 1620-1780", in Boyce, G., et al (eds.), Newspaper history from the 17th century to the present day. Sage/Constable, London, 1978, pp 83-84.
- (8) Williams, R. The Long Revolution. Pelican, Harmondsworth, London, 1961, p 203.
- (9) Herd, H. The March of Journalism. George Allen & Unwin, London, 1952, pp 39-40.
- (10) Williams, F. Dangerous Estate Arrow Books, London, 1959, p 32.
- (11) Siebert, F.S. Op. cit., 1952, pp 260-263.
- (12) For a detailed analysis of the "taxes on knowledge", their effect on the press and the campaign that was waged against them see, for example: Weiner, J.H., The War of the Unstamped. Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1969;

- (12) (contd.) Siebert, F.S., op. cit., 1952, chap. 15;
Collett Dobson Collett, History of the Taxes
on Knowledge, (2 vols.),
T. Fisher Unwin, London, 1899.
- (13) Siebert, F.S. Op. cit., 1952, p 313.
- (14) Ibid., pp 312-315.
- (15) Harris, M. Op. cit., 1978, p 84.
- (16) Williams, F. Op. cit., 1959, p 33.
- (17) Harris, M. Op. cit., 1978, p 83.
- (18) For an elaboration of how publishers devised
ways around the Acts, see Siebert, F.S.
op. cit., 1952, chap. 15.
- (19) Curran, J. Op. cit., 1977, p 200.
- (20) Figures provided by Harris, M. op. cit.,
1978, p 88, on the basis of block stamp
returns show how, despite the successive
increase in the duty, newspaper purchases
continued to expand:
- | | <u>Stamps</u> | |
|--|---------------|---------|
| | 1750 | 7.3 m. |
| | 1760 | 9.4 m. |
| | 1775 | 12.6 m. |
- (21) Williams, F. Op. cit., 1959, p 34.
- (22) See for example: Aspinall, A., "The Social
Status of Journalists at the Beginning of
the Nineteenth Century", Review of English
Studies, xxx, 83, July, 1945.
- (23) For an analysis of the radical press, its
organisation and its ideas, see Weiner, J.H.,
op. cit., 1969.

- (24) Curran, J. "The press as an agency of social control: an historical analysis", in Boyce, G. et al, (eds.), op. cit., 1978.
- (25) Hansard, 13, 1832, cols. 619-48.
- (26) Hansard, 23, 1834, col. 1193.
- (27) Curran, J. Op. cit., 1978, pp 211-216.
- (28) Herd, H. Op. cit., 1952, p 327.
- (29) This assessment of the historical development of the British press, with various critical leanings, is to be found in a number of historical studies: Aspinall, A., Politics and the Press, 1780-1850. Home and Van Thal, 1949; Knight-Hunt, F.K., The Fourth Estate, David Bogue, London, 1850; Williams, F., op. cit., 1959.
- (30) Quoted in McQuail, D., Review of Sociological Writing on the Press, Royal Commission on the Press, Working Paper Number 2, 1976, p 11.
- (31) The latest assault of the Fourth Estate thesis being Baistow, T., Fourth Rate Estate: An Anatomy of Fleet Street, Comedia, London, 1986.
- (32) Quoted from the dustcover of Hirsch, F., Gordon, D., Newspaper Money: Fleet Street and the search for the affluent reader, Hutchinson, London, 1975.
- (33) Speech given to the Edinburgh Broadcasting Conference, 1971.
- (34) See note 13.
- (35) Quoted in Siebert, F.S., Peterson, T., Schramm, W., Four Theories of the Press, 1978.

- (36) Ibid., p 40.
- (37) Quoted in Abercrombie, N., Class, Structure and Knowledge, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1980, p 62.
- (38) Siebert, F.S. "The Libertarian Theory of the Press", Four Theories of the Press, University of Illinois Press. 1978. pp 40-41.
- (39) Ibid.. p 41.
- (40) Saillens, R.S. John Milton: Man, Poet, Polemist. Blackwell, Oxford, 1964, p 129.
- (41) Ibid., p 134.
- (42) Ibid., p 131.
- (43) Ibid., p 134.
- (44) Sunday Times, 24th February, 1982.
- (45) Siebert, F.S. Op. cit., 1978, p 45.
- (46) Wiener, J.H. The War of the Unstamped, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1969.
- (47) Ibid., pp 41-42.
- (48) Collett Dobson Collett History of the Taxes on Knowledge, T. Fisher Unwin, London, 1899, p 25, Vol. 1.
- (49) Hansard, 23, 1834, cols. 1196-7.
- (50) Ibid., col. 1216.
- (51) Ibid., cols. 1217-8.
- (52) Following the reduction of the Stamp Duty, the radical press were quickly to disappear from the market unable to compete.
- (53) Reeve, H. Op. cit., 1855, p 481.

- (54) Mack, M.P. Jeremy Bentham 1748-1792,
Heinemann, London, 1962, pp 315-6.
- (55) Ibid., p 316.
- (56) Rosen, F. Jeremy Bentham and Representative Democracy,
Clarden Press, Oxford, 1983.
- (57) Ibid., p 24.
- (58) Mill, J.S. "Liberty of the Press", in Essays on
government, jurisprudence, liberty of the
press and law of nations,
Kelly, New York, 1967, p 18.
- (59) Mill, J.S. On Liberty, Pelican, Harmondsworth,
London, 1974, p 75.
- (60) Quoted in Williams, F., op. cit.,
1959, pp 49-50.
- (61) Reeve, H. Op. cit., 1855, p 479.
- (62) Ibid., pp 479-80.
- (63) Mill, J.S. Op. cit., 1967, p 19.
- (64) The relatively uncomplicated notion of
public opinion which undermined such a view
is challenged by Angell, A., The Public Mind:
its disorder; its exploitations,
Noel Douglas, London, 1926.
- (65) Quoted in Boyce, G. "The Fourth Estate: the
reappraisal of a concept", in Boyce, G. et al
(eds.), Newspaper history from the 17th
century to the present day, Sage/ Constable,
London, 1978, p 21.
- (66) "Government by Journalism", Contemporary
Review, Vol. L, May, 1886, p 664.
- (67) Ibid., p 656.

- (68) Reeve, H. Op. cit., 1855, pp 477-478.
- (69) There can be little doubt that many of the opponents of the Stamp Duties saw them as protecting the position of the Times. See: History of The Times, 1785-1841: The Thunderer in the Making, the Office of The Times, London, 1935, for a discussion of this point.
- (70) Quoted in Williams, F., 1959, op. cit., p 15.
- (71) Koss, S. The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1981, Vol. 1, p 37.
- (72) For details of the subsidisation of the press in the period prior to and following imposition of the Stamp Duties, see Siebert, F.S., op. cit., 1952, chap. 16.
- (73) Ibid., p 342.
- (74) Williams, F. Op. cit., 1959, p 34.
- (75) Aspinall, A. Politics and the Press, 1780-1850, Home and Van Thal, London, 1949, pp 66-108.
- (76) Williams, F. Op. cit., 1959, p 34.
- (77) Aspinall, A. Op. cit., 1945, p 225.
- (78) Ibid., pp 221-222.
- (79) Ibid., pp 219-20.
- (80) Ibid., p 220.
- (81) O'Boyle, L. "The Image of the Journalist in France, Germany and England, 1815-1848", Comparative Studies in Society and History, Vol. x, 1968.
- (82) Aspinall, A. Op. cit., 1945, p 45.

- (83) O'Boyle, L. Op. cit., 1968, pp 290-291.
- (84) Elliott notes that the practice of preserving a contributor's anonymity was felt by many in the nineteenth century to be a factor which contributed to the low status of journalists: Elliott, P., "Professional Ideology and Organisational Change", in Boyce, G., et al (eds.), 1978, op. cit. This view, however, is rejected by Reeve, op. cit., 1855, pp 489-91.
- (85) Ibid., p 173.
- (86) The Origins of the Popular Press in England 1855-1914, Croom Helm, London, 1976, chap. 4.
- (87) Elliott, P., op. cit., 1978, notes how the payment of merit awards, and the reluctance of many journalists to declare their earnings, has traditionally made it difficult to assess their earnings accurately.
- (88) Lee, A.J. Op. cit., 1976, chap. 4.
- (89) O'Boyle, L. Op. cit., 1968, chap. 4.
- (90) Curran, J. and Seaton, J. Power Without Responsibility, Fontana, London, 1981, p 19.
- (91) For an elaboration of this argument and its weaknesses, see Curran, J. and Seaton, J., op. cit., 1982, chap. 2.
- (92) See for example Smith, A., "The long road to objectivity and back again: the kinds of truth we get in journalism", in Boyce, G. et al, Newspaper History: from the 17th century to the present day, Sage/Constable, London, 1978; Elliott, P., "Professional ideology and organisational change: the journalist since 1800". *ibid.*

- (93) Aspinall, A., "The Social Status of Journalists at the beginning of the nineteenth century", Review of English Studies, xxi, 83, July, 1945.
- (94) Elliott, P., op. cit., 1978, p 175; Lee, A.J., op. cit., 1976.
- (95) Lee, A.J. Op. cit., 1976, chap. 4.
- (96) Ibid., p 65.
- (97) Smith, A. Op. cit. 1978.
- (98) Ibid., p 155.
- (99) Smith, A. "Technology and Control: the interactive dimensions of journalism", in Curran, J., et al (eds.), Mass Communications and Society, Edward Arnold, London, 1977.
- (100) Smith, A. Op. cit., 1978, p 161.
- (101) Lee, A.J. Op. cit., 1976, chap. 3.
- (102) Knightley, P. The First Casualty, Quartet, London, 1975. Knightley notes (p 20-46) how the telegraph helped transform the nature of war reporting.
- (103) Williams, F. Op. cit., 1959, p 103.
- (104) Smith, A. Op. cit., 1978.
- (105) Reeve, H. Op. cit., 1855, pp 483-484.
- (106) Stead, W.T. "Government by Journalism", Contemporary Review, Vol. L, May, 1886, p 662. See also "The Future of Journalism", ibid. Vol. L, No. 2, November, 1886.
- (107) Ibid., p 664.
- (108) Curran, J. and Seaton, J. Op. cit., 1981, p 17.

- (109) For an elaboration of this argument, see Curran, J., op. cit., 1973; 1978; 1981.
- (110) Boyce, G. "The Fourth Estate: the reappraisal of a concept", in Boyce, G., et al (eds.), op. cit., 1978.
- (111) For an analysis of the political economy of the communications industry see: Murdock, G. and Golding, P., "For a political economy of mass communication", in Miliband, R. and Saville, J. (eds.), The Socialist Register, Merton Press, 1974.
- (112) Robbins, J.C. "The Paradox of press freedom: A study of the British experience", in Journalism Quarterly, Vol. 44, 38, 1967, p 431.
- (113) Baistow, T. "Anatomy of a crisis", in Boston, R. (ed.), The Press we Deserve, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1970, p 41.
- (114) Curran, J. op. cit., 1977, p 56; Lee, A.J. op. cit., 1976, pp 274-5.
- (115) Ibid.
- (116) Asquith, I. "The structure, ownership and control of the press: 1780-1855", in Boyce, G. et al (eds.), op. cit., 1978.
- (117) Royal Commission on the Press, 1947-49. HMSO, Cmnd. 7700, p 47.
- (118) Robbins, J.C. Op. cit., 1967, p 64.
- (119) Ibid.
- (120) Ibid.
- (121) On the development of the provincial press see Lee, A.J., op. cit., 1976, chap. 3.

- (122) Curran & Seaton. Op. cit., 1981, p 293.
- (123) Ibid., p 295.
- (124) See for example: Lee, A.J. op. cit., 1976, chap. 4.
- (125) See for example, Murdock & Golding, op. cit., 1974.
- (126) Quoted in Curran & Seaton, op. cit., 1981. p. 291.
- (127) Murdock, G. and Golding, P. "Capitalism, Communication and Class Relations", in Curran, J. et al (eds.), op. cit., 1977.
- (128) Curran & Seaton. Op. cit., 1981, chap. 7.
- (129) Ibid.
- (130) Ibid., p 291.
- (131) Lee, A.J. Op. cit., 1976, p 51.
- (132) Asquith, I. Op. cit., 1978, p 110.
- (133) Curran & Seaton. Op. cit., 1981, p 298.
- (134) Ibid., p 297.
- (135) The Guardian, 4th March, 1986.
- (136) The Observer, 10th August, 1986.
- (137) The Guardian, 4th March, 1986.
- (138) Ibid.
- (139) Seymour-Ure, C. The Press, Politics and the Public, Methuen, London, 1968, p 23.
- (140) Curran, J., Douglas, A. and Whannel, G. "The Political Economy of the Human-Interest Story", in Smith, A. (ed.), Newspapers and Democracy, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1980.

- (141) Ibid.
- (142) Ibid., p 301.
- (143) Ibid., p 316.
- (144) Ibid., p 303, ff.
- (145) For an account of the experience of The Times, see: Jenkins, S. Newspapers, Faber & Faber, London, 1979, chap. 4.
- (146) Curran, J. et al. Op. cit., 1980, p 316.
- (147) Peterson, T. "Social Responsibility Theory of the Press", in Siebert, F.S., Peterson, T., Schramm, W. Four Theories of the Press, University of Illinois Press, 1978, p 174.
- (148) Quoted in Taylor, H.A., "The British Concept of the Freedom of the Press", Gazette: International Journal of Mass Communications, Vol. xi, 213, 1965, p 136.
- (149) Jensen, J.W. "Towards a Solution of the Problem of Freedom of the Press", Journalism Quarterly, Vol. 27, Fall, 1950, pp 405-6.
- (150) Peterson, T. Op. cit., 1978, p 74.
- (151) Jensen, J.W., op. cit., 1950, argues that the notion that freedom of communication necessarily depends on private ownership is a "myth", and that if anything the opposite may well be true. (p 407-8).
- (152) Of particular importance in establishing the notion of social responsibility were: A Free and Responsible Press, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1947; and Hocking, W.E. Freedom of the Press: A Framework of Principle, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1947.

- (153) Peterson, T. Op. cit., 1978, pp 87-91.
- (154) Ibid., pp 92-3.
- (155) See Curran & Seaton, op. cit., 1981, chap. 15.
- (156) It also put them out of line with the position adopted in the Minority Report: The Press, Minority Report of the Royal Commission, HMSO, Cmnd. 6810, July, 1977. For an analysis of the press strategies adopted in Europe, see: Smith, A., "Subsidies and the Press in Europe", Political and Economic Planning, Vol. XLIII, no. 569, 1977.
- (157) Curran & Seaton. Op. cit., 1980, pp 301-302.
- (158) Royal Commission on the Press, 1947-49, HMSO, Cmnd. 7700, pp 100-1.
- (159) Quoted in Studies on the Press, Royal Commission on the Press, HMSO, Working Paper Number 3, 1977, p 166.
- (160) Quoted in Koss, S. The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain, Vol. 2. Hamish Hamilton, London, 1984, p 641.
- (161) For an account of the early years of the Press Council, see: Levy, H.P., The Press Council: History, Procedure and Cases, Macmillan, London, 1967.

CHAPTER 2

The British Media and Northern Ireland: Key Perspectives

The social, political and military conflict in Northern Ireland continues to generate a seemingly endless supply of research material for academics across a wide range of disciplines. Historians, sociologists, criminologists, psychologists ... the list of those who have contributed to the vast body of information presently available on the subject of Northern Ireland is almost as diverse as the subjects they have addressed. Indeed, so intense has academic interest in the "Troubles" been that bibliographers have found the task of documenting the constant flood of new publications a frustrating and, at times, impossible one. As the compilers of a bibliography listing material published on Northern Ireland between 1945 and 1983 were to comment, the ever-increasing pace of new publications tends to render bibliographic exercises quickly out of date:

the scale of the up-dating problem can be gauged by the fact that we have included circa three hundred items published between January and June, 1983. Even so, we do not claim the same degree of comprehensiveness for the first half of 1983 as we do for the previous period. (1)

However, while some facets of the conflict taking place in Northern Ireland have been well served in terms of research, others have been largely ignored or, at best, only partially investigated. One subject area which has attracted surprisingly little attention to date is the way Northern Ireland and its conflict have been represented by the British media and the factors which have helped shape this representation. For example, of the 5,842 publications listed in A Social Science Bibliography of Northern Ireland 1945-1983, only 75 publications are listed under the general subject heading, "The Mass Media". (2) Indeed, of the 27 general subject headings listed in the

bibliography, the mass media ranked 27 in terms of publications - marginally behind "Gender and Women's Studies" with 76 publications listed.

If the British media in general have fared poorly in terms of research attention, the press have fared even less favourably. Writing in 1980, Cohen and Young noted with surprise and dismay the lack of current research available on the British press and Northern Ireland.⁽³⁾ The picture may have improved since then, but only marginally. Of the 75 publications listed in the above bibliography, only 24 dealt exclusively with the press and of these, only 13 exclusively with the British press. Consequently, even allowing for those publications that may have slipped through the net, and for those published subsequent to the bibliography itself, the British media's reporting of the Northern Ireland conflict has not been over-exposed to academic analysis.

The purpose of this chapter is to assess the main contribution existing analyses have made to our understanding of the British media's coverage of the Northern Ireland conflict. Given that the literature presently available on the subject ranges from full-scale academic studies to relatively short commentaries in journals and magazines, no attempt is made to address every individual work in detail. Instead, the primary task of this chapter is to provide a general overview of the principal conclusions that may be drawn from the body of material presently available and, where possible, to isolate those areas which would merit further attention.

Generally speaking, the material examined in this chapter emanates from three principal sources: from academics of various critical leanings whose primary concern has been to evaluate the role and performance of the British media in its reporting of the Northern

Ireland conflict; from counter-insurgency theorists and academics whose primary concern has been to formulate information strategies designed to prevent the media from acting as channels for "terrorist" propaganda; and from journalists and senior broadcasting personnel whose primary concern has been with the political and practical problem of reporting an on-going conflict involving their own nation state.

In theory, the material which has emanated from the first two of these sources shares two features in common: first, it is critical of certain aspects of the British media's reporting of Northern Ireland; and secondly, its authors have approached this reporting as "outsiders", distanced in varying degrees (and in some cases entirely) from the factors that help shape it. In practice, however, the analyses emanating from these two sources offer diametrically opposed assessments of the role and performance of the British media in its reporting of Northern Ireland, and diametrically opposed policy implications for journalists. Consequently, in taking account of these differences, it is possible to identify three broadly different perspectives on the British media's reporting of Northern Ireland, each with its own frame of reference, and each with its view of the key issues raised by this reporting. For the sake of convenience, I have labelled these perspectives the "critical", the "anti-terrorist" and the "insiders'" perspective - the latter, for the sake of convenience, being subdivided into the perspective of those responsible for formulating editorial policy and those responsible for carrying it out.⁽⁴⁾

Before moving on to examine these perspectives individually, a number of general observations need to be made about the body of material itself. First, some of the material examined in this chapter falls outside any strict definition of "academic research", though it is

likely to be of interest to academic researchers. This is particularly true of the material examined under the "insiders'" perspective which comprises almost exclusively general commentaries and the personal accounts of journalists. However, in that this material offers some insight into how the problems of reporting Northern Ireland are viewed from the "inside", it is of particular relevance to researchers.

The second general point to be made about the literature presently available on the British media and Northern Ireland is that, by and large, it concentrates on the post-1968 period. Indeed, with the exception of two works on broadcasting, there has been relatively little research on the period prior to 1968.

The third point to be made about this material is that, in the main, it concentrates on how Northern Ireland has been handled as a news item. In this respect, its authors appear to share a common understanding that the significance of the media's representation of Northern Ireland lies in the explicit political content of its news and current affairs output. The underlying assumption here would appear to be that "actuality" output is more persuasive and has a more powerful impact than fictional output. There have, of course, been some exceptions to this general approach. Schlesinger, Murdock and Elliott's study, Televising Terrorism⁽⁵⁾ offers an account of how political violence has been handled across a variety of programme forms. Moreover, there have also been a number of commentaries on how the Irish and the conflict taking place in the Six Counties have been represented by political cartoonists.⁽⁶⁾ In the main, however, most commentators have tended to ignore "non-actuality" output.⁽⁷⁾

However, given that news and current affairs provides the most frequent source of information about the Irish conflict, it is hardly surprising that "actuality" coverage should provide the core substance

and the primary focus of many of the analyses presently available - and indeed provides the primary focus of my own study. The tendency to focus on news and current affairs output, however, has also been influenced by a number of other considerations which reflect not only the content of media output, but also the different conditions and professional imperatives which underpin different forms of output. Though, as we shall see below, the sensitivity surrounding Northern Ireland within the British media has had consequences for all forms of output, journalists engaged in "actuality" coverage operate under quite different conditions, and are subject to much closer scrutiny than those engaged in output of a less sensitive nature. Indeed, given that current affairs output often provides the journalist with greater licence to go beyond the "established facts" than those engaged in news output, it is likely that, even within "actuality" coverage, the conditions under which journalists work may vary.⁽⁸⁾ Moreover, as we have seen in the previous chapter, it is through news and current affairs output that the British media most clearly dispense their responsibility to inform the public in an objective and impartial manner. And it is these professional and institutional goals of objectivity and impartiality, which journalists claim to uphold in their reporting of social and political events, that have provided outside observers with a standard against which their performance may be judged.

The final observation to be made about this material is that, by and large, it has also tended to concentrate on television rather than the press. This is particularly true of the analyses examined under the "anti-terrorist" perspective and, to a lesser extent, it is also the case with the main body of material examined under the "critical" perspective. Two reasons would appear to stand out for this concentration. First, television with its enormous audiences and its combination of immediacy and visual impact, is generally considered to

be the most powerful and influential section of the media. Furthermore, the broadcasting institutions are legitimated by an ideology of "independence" and public service and have a clearly defined responsibility to maintain balance and impartiality in their treatment of important political and social issues.

The "critical" perspective

... the broadcaster's role is twofold. It is to ensure that a democratic society has the full information, through accurate and comprehensive coverage of news, upon which to base its decisions. It is, secondly, to ensure that a fair and free forum is maintained for the discussion of issues of importance. In deciding what is important, and what is relevant, for inclusion in news bulletins and in discussion programmes, the broadcasting editor has, as clear reference points, the twin concepts of democracy and the rule of law. It is not his duty, or his right, to editorialise on the question of democracy, to advocate its virtues or attack its detractors. But he has a firm duty to see that society is not endangered either because it is inadequately informed, or because the crucial issues of the day have not been so probed and debated as to establish the truth. (9)

As I have argued in the previous chapter, the British media have evolved a definition of themselves as vital organs of public enlightenment; they have taken upon themselves a responsibility to inform the electorate, to provide it with all the information necessary for it to make rational decisions on issues of social and political importance. This section draws together analyses on broadcasting and the press which challenge at various levels, and with varying degrees of intensity, the validity of these claims in relation to media coverage of Northern Ireland. Existing studies raise questions not only about the media's claim to provide an accurate and comprehensive account of events in the Six Counties, but also the media's claim to occupy a neutral and objective position in relation to the state. In order to avoid unnecessary duplication of studies containing similar

conclusions, those studies which merely support rather than add to the basic arguments laid down in this section will be referred to in the footnotes only.

The British media and Northern Ireland pre-1968

I think that we, the BBC, and the press as a whole, will be held guilty of not having warned the 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 the historians will charge us with that I suspect. (10) (Alasdair Milne, BBC)

Though, as the above comment by the then Assistant Director General of the BBC suggests, it is now widely acknowledged that, prior to the outbreak of the present round of troubles, the British media had tended to ignore events in Northern Ireland, there has been little detailed research as to the precise factors which contributed to this policy. Anthony Smith's study, which traces the role of the broadcasting organisations both before and during the early years of the present conflict, remains to date the most detailed account of the BBC's involvement in Northern Ireland politics between 1924 and 1971. (11) Given that Smith's study provides one of the few detailed accounts of the role of the British media in the period prior to 1968, much of what follows draws heavily from it.

British broadcasting, in the shape of the BBC, first came to Northern Ireland's newly created state in 1924. From the start, Smith notes, it was to be heavily influenced by the special political problems pertaining in the Six Counties - problems which in effect flowed from the very nature of the state itself. While elsewhere, the BBC operated

within a society which enjoyed a political consensus, in Northern Ireland it did not. Partition had created a state whose very legitimacy was denied by as much as forty per cent of its inhabitants. The problem facing the broadcasters, Smith argues, was how they should position themselves in relation to these contending forces. In other words, what role could, and should, the BBC perform in a society where there was no general agreement as to the nature and legitimacy of the state, and no general intellectual or political gravity? As Smith writes, from the start the broadcasters were hampered by what he calls the "religion of objectivity" which required them above all to "reflect" rather than "provoke":

The basic problem for the broadcasting authorities ... was to prevent the coverage on radio or television of political or social events from being itself the cause of further events. The BBC ... has always been shy of committing any act that can be construed as outright interference in the world it is observing. But in a province as tightly controlled as Northern Ireland, living in a sense an artificial political life based on the suppression of a series of social forces by means of manipulated boundaries and police powers, it was difficult to provide any kind of broadcast coverage (in an organisation committed to objectivity) which failed to arouse tempers and invoke the ever-latent spirit of civil commotion. Broadcasting in such a context is inevitably an agent of political action: the facts under observation could only continue in existence if they remained unreported. (12)

Smith's analysis of the period from 1924 onwards reveals how British broadcasters dealt with this dilemma first by avoidance and then increasingly by retreat.

Until 1959 broadcasting in the Six Counties was entirely in the hands of the BBC, and as an institution it was firmly entrenched in the Unionist hierarchy. As Gerald Beadle, a former station master in Northern Ireland was to recall:

mine was the task of consolidation, which meant building the BBC into the lives of the people of the province and

making it one of their public institutions ... I was invited to become a member of the Ulster Club; the Governor, the Duke of Abercorn, was immensely helpful and friendly, and Lord Craigavon, the Prime Minister, was a keen supporter of our work. In effect, I was made a member of the Establishment of a province which has most of the paraphernalia of a sovereign state and a population no bigger than a moderate sized English city. (13)

Being part of the Establishment, however, demands a degree of loyalty, not least to its social and political goals, its institutions, and its particular view of the world. As Smith notes, what was expected of the BBC and its hierarchy in its handling of events in the North was quickly made clear to Beadle - in much the same way as it was to be made clear to his successor. In 1926 Beadle's decision to celebrate St. Patrick's day brought a storm of protest from Unionists and his drama department was attacked for using "southern" accents in some of its plays. Following a pattern that was to be repeated many times over the coming years, these protests were to be sufficient to bring the BBC to heel. From then on, Smith argues, Beadle's policy was to act as if the "Border was an Atlantic coast". In terms of broadcasting policy, this meant that all events South of the border were to be studiously ignored.

During the 1930s and 1940s under G.L. Marshall, the BBC's policy on Northern Ireland was "to keep an iron grip on all local news and allow nothing to go out which suggested that anything in Northern Ireland could or would ever change". (14) This policy was made all the easier due to the fact that all the BBC's news came from a locally owned - hence Unionist - news agency. Marshall demanded, and was given, the right to be consulted by all departments of the BBC on any matter which related to Northern Ireland in any way. In effect, Smith notes:

the chief in Belfast came to act as a kind of censor over the whole of the BBC's output from London both in its domestic and overseas services, and naturally

this tended to give a Unionist tinge to everything that came out. (15)

The net effect of this policy was that the problems facing the nationalist minority were completely ignored. Despite the obstacles to the full enjoyment of civil rights, the excesses of the gerrymander, and the open discrimination in housing and employment, the plight of the nationalist community rarely surfaced as a topic on British radio and television.

The BBC's monopoly over broadcasting was to be broken in 1959 with the arrival of ITV. The emergence of commercial broadcasting and the element of competition it introduced into broadcasting had the effect of liberalising the broadcasting institutions - even though ITV had strong links with the Unionist Party. However, despite a degree of relaxation, broadcasting was still acutely sensitive when it came to the internal politics of the North, and the plight of the nationalist community continued to be studiously ignored. Curtis notes how, prior to 1968, only two programmes on the political situation in the North were transmitted on national television, and how, in 1966, a Tonight reporter was reputed to have left the BBC because he was refused permission to make a film on gerrymandering. With the exception of a Sunday Times report on discrimination published in 1966, she notes, the record of the British press was scarcely any better. (16)

Cathcart, in his study of BBC Northern Ireland, has also argued that the BBC was generally supportive of the Unionist regime, and that it effectively ignored the existence of the Catholic community and the nationalist opposition. (17) According to Cathcart:

Overall the BBC programme policy in Northern Ireland remained what it had definitely become in 1948: the building of political consensus in a divided society. Such a policy involved, in effect, accentuating the positive in community relations, stressing that which was held or suffered in common. It was unlikely to

draw too much attention to that which divided. (18)

The growing strength of the civil rights movement in the latter half of 1968 and the response it was to elicit from sections of the majority community, however, was to prove a rude awakening in the taken-for-granted world of British broadcasting. Tottering on the brink of open communal violence, events in the Six Counties could no longer be ignored. How then did newspapers and television accommodate events in Northern Ireland in the post-1968 period?

The British media and Northern Ireland post-1968

Generally speaking, the British media were initially sympathetic to the demands of the minority community which they reported with conventional liberal appeals to social justice and equality. Kirkaldy, in his study of British press reporting, quoted the following editorial from the Daily Mail, which he found to be typical of the coverage accorded to the civil rights campaign:

It is nearly 25 years since the rest of Britain decided that everyone over 21, not just householders and businessmen, should be able to vote for his local council ... It is intolerable that council houses should be allocated for reasons of religion and not of poverty. It is intolerable that Catholics should be denied an equal chance of a job. (19)

In his study of British press reporting between 1968 and 1971, McCann also notes the general sympathy accorded to the civil rights movement in the British press. As a consequence, McCann noted, British photographers and journalists tended to be well received in Catholic areas; harassed and on occasions physically attacked in Paisleyite demonstrations. (20)

This initial support for the civil rights movement was, however, to prove shortlived. Even before the entry of the army in August, 1969, the British media's attitude to events in the North had begun to harden.

Kirkaldy describes how frustration over the lack of Catholic gratitude for the reforms grudgingly conceded by Stormont, annoyance at continuing Protestant intransigence, and a growing lack of comprehension (except in terms of Irish insanity) as the violence escalated, combined to bring about a distinct anti-Irish tone in many newspaper reports. As early as January, 1969, Kirkaldy notes how a Daily Express editorial complained that: "Many of these demonstrators could not care less about civil rights. They are either hooligans looking for a punch-up or anarchists with a grudge against society".⁽²¹⁾ McCann also noted how this tendency to blame the continuing violence on sinister forces (usually the IRA) became more pronounced in the period following the entry of the army.⁽²²⁾

As the political situation in the North continued to deteriorate in the weeks and months following the entry of the army, the British media were again faced with a dilemma in their reporting of events in the Six Counties. At the heart of this dilemma were two separate but inter-related developments. First, nationalists, who had initially welcomed the army as their protectors, increasingly came to view them in the same light as the Black and Tans - that is as an instrument by which the Unionists maintained their political ascendancy. Secondly, and related to this process of Catholic alienation, was the entry of the IRA into armed conflict with the British army. The dilemma facing the media was as follows: given that the conflict in the North was not in any conventional sense a "war", how was it to be handled? In other words, how did broadcasting and the press position itself in relation to the contending forces: the British state, the majority community which conditionally supported it, and the nationalist minority which opposed it? The history of the British media from 1969 onwards has largely been a story of how it has sought to resolve this dilemma and the consequences this has had for its coverage of events in the North.

How this dilemma has been resolved by the British media has again been most clearly documented in relation to broadcasting. Indeed, there is very little detailed information available on how the press have resolved this dilemma at an editorial level, and one of the key objectives of my own study is to come to some understanding of how newspapers have sought to resolve it.

According to the "critical" perspective, confronting the problems of reporting civil disorder in Northern Ireland has produced a progressive tightening of editorial control within the British media and, in the process, has significantly reduced the political space in which journalists are able to address events in the North.

Smith notes how, as the political crisis in the North deepened, the role of Controller Northern Ireland (a position which carried with it the right to opt out of programmes whose content was considered politically unsuitable for transmission in the North) became more prominent. Reporters from news and current affairs, sound and vision, working out of London, were expected to work from the Controller's office under a high degree of supervision. The BBC's policy was to transmit all programmes nationally where possible; it therefore sought not to produce material for the UK which was so inflammatory that the Controller decided to opt out. Smith notes how the Director General instructed producers not to do anything that might provoke the Controller into such action. In effect, editorial control was shifted from the programme level to that of the Controller.⁽²³⁾

Significant shifts in the BBC's editorial policy were to continue as the crisis deepened with the imposition of internment without trial and the escalation of the IRA's campaign against the army. Schlesinger, in his detailed study of BBC news,⁽²⁴⁾ argues that over the years the BBC has adopted what he terms a "public order" broadcasting policy on

Northern Ireland. This policy, according to Schlesinger, consists of three important elements. First, there is a general support for the British Army and the RUC and their role in law enforcement in the North. Second, there is a negative evaluation of extremism and "terrorism", and of the IRA in particular, which is presented as the principal threat to order and stability. Finally, there is a view of the need for "responsible" coverage of the conflict, which requires especial sensitivity to criticism of the supposed inflammatory effect of broadcasting.

The basis of this policy, Schlesinger argues, was laid down during the course of 1971 as the BBC found itself increasingly under attack over its coverage of events in the North. Schlesinger describes how, during the course of 1971, primarily as a response to external criticism, the BBC began to adopt in greater detail policy guidelines for dealing with the conflict. These guidelines, he suggests, not only inhibited investigative journalism, but also brought the BBC's definition of the conflict increasingly into line with that of the state. At the heart of this system of internal control, the author notes, was the demand that all editors, producers and reporters, wishing to produce items on Northern Ireland, have to take their requests to the highest editorial levels of their organisations. This demand, he writes, "set Northern Ireland into a special category, one in which reference upwards was a 'routine' part of news production practice".⁽²⁶⁾ Schlesinger also details how the political sensitivity surrounding Northern Ireland has prompted the BBC to dispense with its conventional commitment to "impartiality" in its coverage of the conflict in the North.

So successful was this internal control system to prove that the BBC saw no reason to alter or strengthen it until 1979, following another bout of external criticism over its reporting. Curtis notes

how, in 1979, in the wake of criticism over its decision to film an IRA roadblock at Carrickmore, the BBC issued new guidelines which tightened up the consultation process and further strengthened the role of Controller Northern Ireland's strategic importance in controlling output on Northern Ireland. According to Curtis, the reference upwards system as presently formulated has functioned to sanitise broadcasting output on Northern Ireland of material likely to cause criticism:

The reference upwards system acts firstly as a filter removing 'undesirable' programmes or items at an early stage and, in theory, eliminating the need for embarrassing acts of censorship. Secondly, it is an early warning system, so that if a 'sensitive' programme is allowed through ... not only can it be checked and double checked, but also the upper echelons can prepare themselves for the inevitable onslaught from the right. (27)

These restrictions do not only apply to news and current affairs or to proposed interviews with members of illegal organisations - though their impact has been particularly significant in these areas. From the very beginning there has always been intense sensitivity at the top of broadcasting about the danger presented by all forms of output, particularly plays and historical documentaries. In 1980, for example, the Sunday Times reported on Harlech television's decision to suppress a documentary dealing with events in Ireland 60 and 300 years ago. The programme, which consisted of a series of interviews with nine Irish men and women who fought against the British in 1916 and 1918, was considered to be so politically sensitive that the company sold the rights of the film (costing an estimated £30,000) to its director for £1, on the condition that every reference to Harlech was removed from the credits and the director would not reveal which company had financed the project. According to the paper:

Harlech's manoeuvre will be seen as perhaps the most extreme example yet of television's sensitivity on Northern Ireland. It will also be interpreted as yet another example of the lengths television

companies will go to to avoid giving offence, as their licences come up for re-allocation. (28)

Curtis provides clear evidence of how sensitive the broadcasting authorities have been on the issue of Northern Ireland irrespective of the form it takes. According to a list compiled by the author, over forty programmes ranging from Top of the Pops to Panorama have been banned, censored, or delayed on all four channels between 1959 and 1983. (29) The range of programmes included in this list gives some indication of the scrutiny applied across the spectrum of broadcasting output.

According to the "critical" perspective, the ramifications of the system of internal control presently operating within British broadcasting, and the political sensitivity surrounding the issue of Northern Ireland in general, has been most acutely felt at the point of news and current affairs production. Schlesinger, Murdock and Elliott point to how the tight controls presently operating within broadcasting have meant that certain topics are virtually off-limits and that reporters and producers have to make immense efforts to persuade the broadcasting authorities to pursue them. (30) Curtis, commenting on a similar theme, notes how the need to argue at length over programme suggestions and the political fuss that this may often incur, has increased the tendency towards self-censorship within broadcasting. In an age when job security is likely to be foremost in the minds of many journalists, Curtis suggests, the desire not to rock the boat is likely to be more pronounced:

The 'reference upwards' procedure, and the knowledge that Ireland spells trouble, also acts as a deterrent to career-conscious TV journalists, many of whom are especially vulnerable because they are employed on short-term contract. As has been seen, for every programme that gets banned, there are probably 20 that are never made. (31)

What then, according to the "critical" perspective, have been the consequences of these developments for the kinds of information made available to the public on the issue of Northern Ireland? How well, if at all, have newspapers and television *dealt* with their responsibility to provide the public with the information necessary for it to arrive at a rational and informed understanding of the conflict taking place in the Six Counties?

Northern Ireland as news: enlightenment or obfuscation?

According to the "critical" perspective, in its efforts to avoid controversy in its reporting of Northern Ireland, the British media, and broadcasting in particular, have tended to restrict their news coverage to the symptoms of the Irish conflict rather than its causes. In the main it has been violence, rather than the socio-political factors that give rise to it, that has provided the dominant theme for news coverage. In his detailed analysis of the coverage accorded to Northern Ireland by the British, Irish and Northern Irish media, Philip Elliott found that most of the stories carried by the British media were about violence and law enforcement.⁽³²⁾ During the periods examined in his study (each of which contained a major election in an attempt to maximise the level of political reporting), such stories accounted for 72 per cent of the coverage accorded to Northern Ireland by national television, 58 per cent of the coverage in the quality press, and 65 per cent in the popular press.⁽³³⁾ In all, only a third of the stories dealt with politics and other matters. Elliott contrasted this approach with that of the Irish media which not only carried more stories about the North (a ratio of about 5 to 1) but were also much more concerned with the political dimension.⁽³⁴⁾ The British media's preoccupation with violence and its related issues has also been noted by Blumler,⁽³⁵⁾ Curtis,⁽³⁶⁾ Kirkaldy,⁽³⁷⁾ and Schlesinger.⁽³⁸⁾

Furthermore, according to these studies, news coverage has not only concentrated on violence to the exclusion of politics, it has also tended to present violent incidents in a decontextualised form with little, if any, attempt being made to go beyond the immediate details of given incidents or to place them within an analytical framework. As early as 1971, Blumler, in one of the earliest attempts to provide a systematic analysis of the coverage accorded to Northern Ireland, noted that television news bulletins were failing to explain what was happening in the North.⁽³⁹⁾ According to Blumler, when the battle on the ground (to which 26 of the 46 items carried by television during the sample period were devoted) surfaced as an item on television news:

It was mainly strategic assessments that were neglected: the impact of army measures on IRA resources; the nature of the propaganda (as distinct from the physical) campaign which the IRA was waging; Catholic attitudes to the IRA and the army; the balance of military and political priorities in official policy and the factors that may determine its success or failure; and the pressures exerted by other political forces in both Eire and Ulster. In other words, the television news bulletins tended to ignore much that could give some point and meaning to the ceaseless struggle.⁽⁴⁰⁾

Commenting on a similar theme, Elliott was also to find that in its efforts to steer clear of controversy broadcasting news was largely limited to what could be covered using a "factual and objective style of reporting" which was preoccupied with the who, what, where and when of given incidents, and which left "background and significance to take care of themselves".⁽⁴¹⁾ Furthermore, as well as being descriptive and non-explanatory, Elliott noted that violence was presented in such a way as to be both simple and of immediate human interest. "Simplicity", Elliott argues:

involves both a lack of explanation and a lack of historical perspective; human interest, a concentration on the particular detail of incidents and the personal characteristics of those involved.⁽⁴²⁾

According to Elliott this style of reporting has two main consequences. First, by concentrating on the known facts and human interest aspects of given events, it excludes much of that which could give some meaning or sense to those events and thereby makes political violence less, rather than more, explicable; the result is a continuing procession of senseless violent episodes. Secondly, it increases the dependency of journalists on those sources best suited to providing information in this form. Elliott found in the British media a "reliance on official sources to provide accounts of incidents, to identify victims and attribute violence".⁽⁴³⁾ This led Elliott to contrast the British media's reliance upon official information sources with that of the Irish papers which "often went further, not just printing alternatives but dropping versions, including the official versions, they no longer believed and taking on themselves the responsibility of pointing the reader in the right direction".⁽⁴⁵⁾

A similar point was made by Chibnall, who found that the immense pressure on journalists in Northern Ireland to accept "official" versions of events, together with a dependency on official information services and particularly those run by the army and police, has made them highly susceptible to official policies of misinformation.⁽⁴⁶⁾ The form these policies have taken and their consequences for news coverage will be returned to in some detail in Chapter Six and need not detain us here.

In its coverage of Northern Ireland, Elliott also found a preoccupation within the British media with events on the mainland as compared with those occurring in the Six Counties. This tendency was most pronounced in the coverage accorded to the bombing of two pubs in Guildford which occurred during the first sampled period. Elliott found that the Guildford bombings received nearly twice as much space

in the British media as all the incidents in Northern Ireland during the same period. Yet, in that three week period, twice as many people were killed in Northern Ireland as in Guildford and there were also numerous other violent incidents.⁽⁴⁷⁾

The Guildford bombings were also exceptional in that they were the only incidents to become a running story in the British media. While killings and other incidents of violence taking place in the North tended to be reported once and then dropped, the Guildford bombings were to be followed by numerous related stories. The prolonged attention given to the Guildford bombings compared with the often staccato coverage given to violent incidents in the North did not, in Elliott's view, simply reflect the importance British news editors attached to events on the mainland as against events in the North. In Elliott's view, it also reflected much more fundamentally the different societies in which those events were taking place. It was rather as if British society, united against an external threat, was daily applying a new dressing to the wound it had received.⁽⁴⁸⁾

A further consequence of the British media's preoccupation with violence and its aftermath is that coverage accorded to events in the North by all media has tended to ebb and flow according to the intensity of the violence at any given time. Kirkaldy, for example, notes how, as violence in the North became "routine" and less frequent from 1973 onwards, press interest in the conflict was to diminish rapidly and is now only revived when something new or spectacular happens.⁽⁴⁹⁾ This tendency to devote less space and prominence to events in the North, Kirkaldy suggests, was noticeable in the popular press even before the violence had reached its peak. Schlesinger, in his study of BBC news, also found a similar tendency within broadcasting noting how, from 1972 onwards, there was to be a steady shift in resources away from the

Northern Ireland story.⁽⁵⁰⁾ The consequences of Northern Ireland's diminishing news value on journalistic practice in the North will be returned to in some detail in Chapter Seven.

Violence as news: actors and acts

In their coverage of Northern Ireland, the British media have not only focused on violence while neglecting its causes, they have also, the "critical" perspective contends, presented this violence in a way which both obscures the reality of violent conflict in the North and presents an incomplete and misleading picture of the contribution made to this violence by the various parties to the conflict.

Statistics on violence in the North reveal that a combination of state, anti-state, and inter-communal violence have all made significant contributions to the 2,500 fatalities to date. Between 1st June, 1969, and 30th June, 1983, according to statistics reported by the Irish Times, 2,304 people had been killed in Northern Ireland as a direct consequence of the conflict.⁽⁵¹⁾ The figures revealed that republican paramilitaries were responsible for 1,264 of these deaths, loyalist paramilitaries for 613, the security forces for 264, while a further 163 were "non-classified". Other statistics showed that, of the 1,297 civilian victims, 773 were Catholics, 495 were Protestants and a further 29 were not natives of the North.

The complex pattern of violence suggested by these figures, critics of the British media contend, has largely been ignored by newspapers and television which, several studies conclude, have tended to be preoccupied with the violence of those who oppose rather than those who represent authority. Studies by Curtis,⁽⁵²⁾ Elliott,⁽⁵³⁾ Kirkaldy,⁽⁵⁴⁾ McCann⁽⁵⁵⁾ and McClung Lee⁽⁵⁶⁾ have all noted a strong tendency within the British media to cast the army and police in a strong and positive

light, to minimise and at times ignore their involvement in violence even when it clearly breached democratic and legal standards and, when violence emanating from the army and police was reported, to treat it in an uncritical and sympathetic manner.

Elliott, in his survey of news coverage during 1974 and 1975, found that, insofar as the army's role in the North surfaced as a news item, little was reported which undermined its image as an "impartial peacekeeping" force, or which suggested that its presence in the North had a direct or indirect impact on the level of violence. When the army did surface in the news, Elliott notes, it "appeared as almost above the fray - brave, tormented, but largely inactive except as a rather superior Boy Scout Troop".⁽⁵⁷⁾ Summarising the general treatment accorded to the security forces by the British press, Elliott found that:

almost the only active part the security forces played in events in the province was issuing warnings of expected terrorist activity. Otherwise their members were involved in incidents but invariably as targets though occasionally they returned fire; soldiers and policemen won awards for bravery, took part in public parades, occasionally helped ordinary citizens and were compensated for injuries received.⁽⁵⁸⁾

The British media have not only overplayed minority group violence, they have also failed to go beyond a condemnatory approach to this violence in order to examine the complexity of factors that give rise to it. Instead, the tendency of newspapers and television has simply been to present the violence of minority groups as irrational, senseless and horrid. Elliott found that in its treatment of conflict in the North, the British media identified three principal sources of violence which, when taken together, he suggests, contributed to a general image of a society being torn apart by an irrational and mindless cycle of violence and counter-violence:

In general the source of violence was portrayed as terrorism, the result of inexplicable, asocial forces. In so far as it wasn't terrorism, it was sectarianism, the product of another force, equally inexplicable, but somehow diffused throughout the community. Or it was feuding. Feuding was irrational because it involved death and injury but more explicable because it occurred among the perpetrators of terrorism and sectarianism who had put themselves outside of society and beyond the reach of reason anyway. (59)

Looking back over the ten year period examined in his study, Kirkaldy also found that as far as the British press was concerned, "The violence of Northern Ireland is generally portrayed as the product of 'gunmen', 'thugs', 'psycopaths', 'terrorists' and other such terms of convenience." (60)

The British media have not only been preoccupied with "terrorism" as opposed to other forms and sources of violence, but even within this narrowly defined category they have been selective and sometimes tendentious. As we have already seen, loyalist paramilitary groups in the North have been responsible for over 600 of the 2,304 deaths recorded by 1983 and almost all of their victims have been civilians. Yet despite this, the British media have tended to present "terrorist" violence as if it were solely the preserve of the IRA and other republican groups. So much so, the "critical" perspective suggests, that the casual observer of the British media could be forgiven for arriving at the conclusion that violence in the North emanated pre-eminently, if not exclusively, from republican groups. Elliott notes how the involvement of loyalists in acts of violence had been played down to such an extent "that Protestant extremists themselves had complained about the lack of attention paid to their efforts". (61)

During the six week period examined by Elliott, the death toll in the North was 16 Catholics, 6 Protestants, one member of the security forces and one other. Yet despite the fact that Catholics were the

main victims, the media blamed most of the violence on the IRA or some other republican group:

There was a paradox implicit in the general consensus of the British media that most of the violence could be attributed to the Provisional IRA or another republican group and that most of the identified victims were law enforcement agents or members of the Catholic community. The consensus was that 'Catholics' were both the main perpetrators and one of the main victims of violence ... The paradox was implicit however in the sense that it emerged only from a numerical analysis of the detail of the stories and not from an immediate reading of the news angles the British media used to report violence. (62)

The British media have not entirely ignored the fact that some of the perpetrators of violence in the North have been loyalists. Nevertheless, as Elliott points out, the British media have tended to use the ambiguous label "sectarianism" to identify incidents in which Protestant extremists have been involved and to couple such reports with explanations in terms of "loyalist anger, reprisals or a Protestant backlash", (63) explanations which, in presenting loyalist violence as essentially reactive and defensive, tend to reinforce the image of a peaceful Protestant community under attack from republican "terrorists".

The guarded and ambiguous treatment of loyalist violence, Elliott and others have noted, contrasts sharply with the treatment of republican violence which dominates the headlines and attracts the majority of attributions of responsibility for violence in all sections of the British media. (64) While incidents of loyalist violence tend to be presented as spontaneous and unconnected responses to the violence of others, republican violence, Elliott observes:

was presented as if the events were related to a planned campaign, as if there really was a war in progress, but also as if it were simply senseless random and unpredictable events. The view of terror as a planned campaign was presented in various references to who or what were now regarded as legitimate targets by the provisionals. (65)

The view that the British media have tended to define violence in the North almost exclusively in terms of the IRA is also supported by Curtis, who documents a number of incidents in which newspapers and television, usually on the basis of information supplied by the army or police, have blamed the IRA for acts of violence committed by others.⁽⁶⁶⁾ Criticising the British media's "selective amnesia" when it comes to the violence of loyalists, Curtis notes how the tendency of journalists to blame the IRA for most of the violence culminated during the 1981 hunger strike when sections of the press blamed the IRA for all the deaths. An example cited by Curtis appeared in The Times. Christopher Thomas began his front page report of the funeral of Bobby Sands: "The Roman Catholics buried Robert Sands yesterday as Protestants lamented their 2,000 dead from 12 years of terrorism".⁽⁶⁷⁾ He went on to refer to the "2,000 victims" of Bobby Sands' "collaborators". The fact that Thomas could confidently make such a grossly inaccurate statement, Curtis argues, bears testimony to the bias and distortion that has characterised the British media's reporting of political violence since the early 1970s.

Conclusion

According to the studies examined above, the British media have clearly failed in their responsibility to provide the British public with the information it needs to arrive at a rational assessment of the conflict taking place on the streets of Northern Ireland. In response to external political attack newspapers and television have abstained from presenting interpretations of the conflict and its underlying causes which challenge or bring into question the view being promoted by the authorities. Reluctant to upset the powers that be, the British media have contained their Irish coverage more and more tightly within a catalogue of bomb blasts, shootings and murders leaving the public to

arrive at its own conclusions as to the significance and background to these events. The limitations of this approach to the reporting of violent political conflict are obvious: without an understanding of the factors that motivate individuals and communities to resort to violence as a means of securing (or resisting) social and political change, then the violence itself cannot be fully understood.

According to the "critical" perspective, the inadequacies of the British media's reporting of Northern Ireland has seriously undermined the ability of the British people to participate in a rational and informed discussion on how best to resolve the continuing crisis in the North. This, many conclude, can only be rectified by a more open approach to the reporting of events in the North. In Blumler's view, such an approach would demand at the very least "a continual attempt to clarify the options open to the policy makers and to assess how the course they are steering is working out". "Anything less", he continues, "is both a denial of politics as an arena of choice and a standing invitation to the nay-sayers to press for yet more restrictions and controls". (68)

The "anti-terrorist" perspective

As was mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, those working within the "anti-terrorist" perspective are also critical of certain aspects of the British media's reporting on Northern Ireland. Any similarity between the two perspectives, however, ends there. As many of the principal arguments deployed by those working from within the "anti-terrorist" perspective are examined in detail in Chapter Three, I shall restrict myself here to making a few general observations.

The first, and perhaps the most important, point that can be made about the body of material examined under the "anti-terrorist" perspective is that generally speaking, its authors share a common

understanding that the central issue raised by the coverage accorded to Northern Ireland by the media is not whether it is accurate, if it deals with the most important developments, if it is clarifying, representative, or even fair, but simply - does it undermine the state's campaign against the "terrorists"? In this respect the range of issues addressed by the "anti-terrorist" perspective is more restricted than those examined within the "critical" perspective.

The second point to be made about many of these analyses is that, unlike much of the work cited in the previous section, they have rarely been based on any detailed empirical analysis of either the coverage accorded to Northern Ireland, the process of news production, or the constraints that many journalists presently operate under. As we shall see in Chapter Three, much of the evidence presented in support of these analyses has often been of an impressionistic and selective nature, making unwarranted leaps from correlation to causality. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the "anti-terrorist" perspective's attempts to establish a link between the reporting of "terrorism" and the subsequent levels of "terrorist" activity.

Thirdly, unlike the majority of studies cited in the previous section which are critical of the degree of control presently operating within the British media and the consequences these controls have had for the ability of journalists to address events in Northern Ireland, many of the analyses provided by those working within the "anti-terrorist" perspective have called for greater control over the operations of the media. The controls canvassed by these studies range from invoking legal sanctions to securing a gentleman's agreement on a voluntary basis.

Conclusion

In contrast to arguments outlined in the previous section, the "anti-terrorist" perspective has tended to deny the media an independent role in the conflict between the British state and those who oppose it in Northern Ireland. Instead, the media are seen as having a positive duty to support the forces of law and order in their campaign against "terrorism". Insofar as these studies have addressed the coverage accorded to events in the Six Counties by both television and the press, it has been evaluated in terms of who benefits from it rather than in terms of the contribution this coverage has made to the wider debate about political violence and its underlying causes.

The "insiders'" perspective

The danger is that when you express a desire to understand, you run the risk of being labelled a 'sympathiser'; if you want to understand the Easter Rising and the Fenians, you must be an IRA sympathiser, and if you want to understand the Orange Lodges you must be a UVF supporter. (69)

One of the most significant gaps in the literature presently available on the British media and Northern Ireland, is the general lack of detailed material on the problems encountered by journalists in the reporting of Northern Ireland - either within their own organisations or in the day to day process of newsgathering. Indeed, with the exception of the occasional article and book here and there, journalists and the organisations they work for have contributed remarkably little to the body of material available on the British media and Northern Ireland. Consequently, in order to construct some understanding of how the problems of reporting Northern Ireland are viewed from the "inside", this section draws on material from two sources: policy statements and general commentaries from senior broadcasting personnel, and the personal accounts of journalists who have reported the conflict at

various times since 1969.

The View from the Top

Since the early 1970s the criticism levelled at television's handling of events in the Six Counties has prompted a number of policy statements from senior broadcasting personnel. Generally speaking, the purpose of these statements (which have usually appeared in the BBC's house magazine The Listener) has been to clarify and explain what the broadcasters consider to be their key responsibilities in the day to day reporting of Northern Ireland.

The central problem, as seen through the eyes of those responsible for formulating, and ultimately defending, editorial policy within British broadcasting (and the theme most frequently addressed in these articles) has been how to reconcile the political pressure for stricter controls in the reporting of the "terrorists" and their campaign, with the constitutional and professional responsibility to provide the public with the information necessary for it to form a rational and informed understanding of what motivates this campaign. As the recent outcry over the BBC's Real Lives "At the Edge of the Union" programme most clearly demonstrated, nowhere has this problem been more acute than over the issue of granting access to those involved in anti-state violence. What has made this problem doubly sensitive for the broadcasting authorities has been the frequent criticism that, in providing access for those engaged in "terrorism", television actually provides the "terrorists" with an opportunity to propagandize their cause and thereby undermine the security efforts of the state.

This conflict between the interests of the broadcasting authorities and the wider interests of the state, is not insignificant. Contrary to the claims often advanced by "conspiracy theorists" broadcasting is

not merely a tool of government nor does it automatically reflect the interests of the state. On the contrary, the relationship between broadcasting and the state is complex and often divergent. The complexity of this relationship is perhaps best illustrated by the example of the BBC. According to Kumar, in understanding why it is difficult for the BBC to act as a simple channel for the attitudes and values of dominant groups or the short term interests of the state, one has to take into account two important considerations:

On the one hand, its national standing has turned essentially on its ability to remain clear of political affiliations or involvement: to be seen or thought to be too friendly to the state would have been the kiss of death ... On the other hand it has been reminded at every turn of its history of its ultimate reliance on the state (over matters such as the allocation of wavelengths, the renewal of the charter, the increase of the licence fee). This latter factor does of course claim priority. It is about survival in its most basic sense, and must and does figure predominantly in the calculations of the higher management of the BBC. But there is also survival in the only sense valued by most people who work for the BBC, in the terms in which it acquired its cultural significance, especially in the Reithian era, and in which it marked out its role as an independent and equal estate of the realm. Its entire credibility as an institution depends upon its maintaining some sort of existence in these terms. This has meant the adoption of particular strategies which at different times and at various points have jarred against the ruling institutional complexes and assumptions ... it has also meant that the medium of broadcasting retains the capacity for opening up issues in some surprising and unexpected ways; the mask occasionally slips, and we are given a glimpse of a range of options and possibilities normally closed off. (70)

Moreover, as the Glasgow Media Group point out: "it is incorrect to see the state as a single unified apparatus able to transmit its views at will, via subservient broadcasters". (71) To do so, the Glasgow Media Group argue, is to ignore the divisions within the state and between various sections of the state - as between the government and the military and between different parts of the armed forces. (72)

Furthermore, it is also to assume a unity of interests between the various sections of the media and those who work within these media at various levels.

The state's ability to secure prominence and complete credibility for official views on television is also hampered by the nature of the conflict taking place in the Six Counties. As Schlesinger et al point out:

At the present time, one of the state's great problems in its efforts to win the propaganda advantage in the 'war against terrorism' in Northern Ireland, derives precisely from the fact that it is not waging a war as such. There is no general mobilisation, nor is there a large enemy power to be defeated. (73)

"Total war", the authors go on to argue, "simplifies matters. It allows the liberal-democratic state to exercise control over the production of news, without thereby risking the legitimacy of the system because in national emergencies security prevails over free expression". (74)

Not surprisingly then, in defining what they consider to be their key responsibilities in the reporting of Northern Ireland, and in particular their responsibilities vis-a-vis the state and those who oppose it, most broadcasters have rejected the argument that they should give uncritical support to the state. Francis⁽⁷⁵⁾ and Cox⁽⁷⁶⁾ reject the argument that in situations lacking consensus the broadcasters should stand by the government in the "national interest" on the grounds that the national interest lies in solving the problem rather than in the policies or viewpoints of governments or parties. In defending this position the broadcasters have stressed their role as a Fourth Estate. According to Francis:

The experience of Northern Ireland, where communities and governments are in conflict but not in a state of emergency or a state of war, suggests a greater need than ever for the media to function as a 'fourth estate', distinct from the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. But if the functions are to remain separate, it must be left to the media themselves to take the decisions (within the limits of responsibility) as to what to publish, as to when, and as to how. That puts a lot of responsibility on all of us to answer these questions wisely, not, I submit, by adopting special criteria for Northern Ireland, but by deploying the best professional skills and by scrupulously fair dealing. (77)

In defending their independence from the state, the broadcasters have also been keen to stress the positive benefits accruing to society. Curran refers to the role broadcasting plays in the "enlargement of enlightenment", (78) Francis, to the "independent information-gathering process which is our contribution to democratic society". (79) According to Richard Cox, Chairman of Tyne Tees Television:

A good broadcasting news service is essential to the functioning of democracy. It is as necessary to the political health of society as a good water supply is to its physical health. This news service must probe and investigate as well as report. The broadcast journalist must expose and examine the weaknesses and evils of society, as well as its strengths and virtues. (80)

Nowhere have the broadcasters stressed their right to function independently from the state more vigorously than over the issue of programming, and in particular, the right to provide access to the views of the "enemy". Curran (81) and Hill (82) both point to the BBC's resistance to direct political pressure in the decision to screen the programme "A Question of Ulster" in 1972, as the clearest example of the BBC's independence from government. According to Cox:

the ultimate sin of the broadcaster is to keep off the air, because of his political or social prejudice, subjects which are relevant and significant. To do that is worse than to treat them with bias - for then, at least, they get an airing. Producers need to be judged as much by what they have not covered as by their treatment of the subjects they have selected. (83)

Francis, in a direct reply to criticism over the BBC's decision to broadcast an interview with a member of INLA, defended the BBC's right to interview members of "terrorist" organisations on the grounds of public interest:

The objections to the BBC doing such programmes seem invariably to come from those who fail to understand what the role of the media should be in a situation like the one we face in Northern Ireland. I start from the presumption that the media have a very real contribution to make, in particular a contribution to the maintenance of the democracy which is under threat, both by providing a forum where the harshest differences of opinion can be aired, and by reporting and courageously investigating the unpalatable truths which underlie the problems of the province. I have no doubt that if and when the communities of Northern Ireland reconcile their conflicts, it will be by understanding them not ignoring them. (84)

The problem according to the broadcasting authorities at an editorial level, is how to balance the requirements of the public's need to understand the conflict with the danger of providing the "terrorists" with a platform for propaganda. Francis talks about "weighing carefully the possible propaganda risks against the value to the public of the information to be gained". (85) While Curran in defending the BBC's decision to screen an interview with IRA leader David O'Connell, spoke of the need:

to consider ... whether the undeniable wish of the IRA to make propaganda through such interviews will be outbalanced by the value of the information which will be brought to the attention of the British public. The rarity of the permission given indicates the way in which I have judged these questions. (86)

Writing in his autobiography, A Seamless Robe, Curran admitted that: "In eight years I agreed to only two such interviews, and I was bitterly attacked on both occasions". (87) Francis was also keen to stress how infrequently such interviews were screened:

In the 12-month period from October 1975 to 1976 there were six interviews on BBC Northern Ireland Television with Provisional Sinn Fein and 12 with spokesmen for the Loyalist paramilitaries, six of them being with elected representatives. These figures compare with a total of 307 interviews with elected representatives of all parties, including 56 with UK ministers. In the same period there were 41 interviews with official Trade Union leaders and four with UWC spokesmen. All these were on the basis of relevance, not according to a representational formula. So, over the year, the proportion of paramilitary interviews (18 out of 325) was extremely low, and incidentally contrasts with 18 interviews for leaders of the Peace Movement in the first three months of its existence. Maybe we have been guilty of under-representing the forces which have had the most profound effect on everyday life in the province? (88)

Together with emphasising the infrequency of interviews with what Curran calls the "enemies of democracy" (89) the broadcasters have also stressed that reporting the "enemy" does not mean supporting the "enemy". Indeed, without exception, the broadcasters have rejected the implication that independence and objectivity means impartiality or neutrality. Francis summed up the BBC's policy on interviewing "terrorists" and reporting their campaigns in the following terms:

Nobody involved in the journalistic coverage of terrorism is other than sympathetic to the victims or repelled by the perpetrators of terrorist crimes. We do not deal impartially with those who choose to step outside the bounds of law and decent social behaviour. Not only do they get very much less coverage than those who pursue their aims legitimately, but the very manner and tone that our reporters adopt makes our moral position quite plain. (90)

The general picture to emerge from the body of material examined above is that the broadcasters seem to consider that they have handled a sensitive and difficult problem well. Insofar as the coverage accorded to Northern Ireland is concerned, most senior broadcasters are of the opinion that this has been more than adequate. Curran was satisfied that "there had been enough reporting of the views and activities of the IRA for understanding to be there". (91) In his address to the Royal Institute of International Affairs, Richard Francis also expressed

satisfaction over the BBC's reporting of the conflict and its underlying causes:

Does the BBC as a whole pay too little attention to the underlying problems of Northern Ireland? I don't think so. Despite the diminished news interest, the flow of analytical programmes has been fairly constant. Over the last six years, on the BBC television networks alone, there have been 349 current affairs features about Northern Ireland (anything from 5 to 50 minutes) - that's rather more than one a week. Over the last fortnight there have been two complete editions of The Money Programme on BBC 2 looking into the province's economic difficulties. Since 1971 there have also been three major studio enquiries into the political options for Ulster, 24 documentary films, ten 25-minute programmes (twice repeated) and an accompanying book on the historical background - coverage far in excess of any other regional problem in the UK, including devolution! (92)

As we shall see below, this assessment of television's reporting of the Northern Ireland conflict is not one shared by many journalists.

The View from Below

The continuing conflict in Northern Ireland has challenged many of the central principles of liberal journalism. The deeper the crisis became during the 1970s and the more controversial the methods used to meet it, the greater the strain on the institutions of broadcasting and the press forced to choose between the journalist's insistence on the public's right to know everything and the government's preference, ostensibly for security reasons, for it not to know too much. Since the early 1970s the experience of many journalists has suggested that, in choosing between these two options, the British media has come down firmly on the side of the government.

One of the earliest accounts of the problems encountered by journalists in the reporting of Northern Ireland was provided by an anonymous BBC reporter in an article published in the New Statesman. (93) The reporter described how, as a consequence of the editorial policies being pursued within his own organisation:

the BBC is both imposing and encouraging censorship to such an extent that its employees are forced increasingly to misrepresent, distort, and suppress much of what is happening in Northern Ireland. (94)

According to the journalist, who cites a number of censored stories, the effect of the censorship and restrictions imposed on journalists working for the BBC had been dramatic:

The censorship and restrictions now imposed on reporters and editors make it practically impossible to ask the question 'Why?' Why do Catholics now laugh openly when a British soldier is shot down and killed, when a year ago they would offer the army cups of tea? Why do the Catholics refuse to condemn the bombing and shootings? Why do they still succour the IRA when they know if they refused, the IRA and thence the British army would depart their homes? What influence does the Civil Rights Movement have? Or the SDLP? The answers to such questions are fundamental to understanding the problem, crucial to any judgement of the British policy, yet they cannot be asked by BBC employees: quite simply the management of the BBC has decided that it does not want such questions raised. Its reporters and editors stand transfixed - censored - in a maze of insuperable restrictions. (95)

This view of the internal situation within the BBC however, was not one shared by all BBC reporters. Writing in the BBC's house magazine, The Listener, Martin Bell, a senior and respected Northern Ireland reporter, dismissed the debate about censorship within the BBC as being "ill-informed and off target" and as having "little to do with the realities of news reporting in Northern Ireland". Bell argued that he had not found himself "overwhelmed by any sense of a corporate doctrine of what might be permissible to report. Events move too quickly for that". Bell's argument was that all the reporter did was "talk to both sides, record their version of events, and leave the viewing public to judge". (96)

In a subsequent article, Bell again dismissed what he called the "hypochondria of criticism" over censorship on the grounds that:

the patient is unable to locate or identify the illness that he fears. Rather he complains of a feeling of censorship, and a general unease about the apparatus of supervision through which it might be applied. The thing itself proves strangely elusive, as in this context it always has done. Indeed, some of the original clamour about it came from journalists whose acquaintance with Northern Ireland was extremely slight, and that made over a telephone and at a range of 400 miles. (97)

While Bell did admit that there had been a tightening of editorial control within the BBC in its coverage of Northern Ireland, he argued that the "effects are not in my experience as oppressive as academic critics suppose". In effect, Bell went on to argue, the tightening of editorial control simply meant that in practice "editors edit, which one always understood was what they were paid to do". (98)

Since 1972, however, a number of articles have been published which provide further evidence that the political space available to journalists in which to address events in Northern Ireland has been substantially reduced.

Thames Television reporter Peter Taylor in his account of the problems facing journalists within commercial television, is also highly critical of the degree of internal control operating within British broadcasting. According to Taylor, who provides a highly critical insight into how the IBA has sought to wield its power over news and current affairs output:

In principle, the broadcasting authorities should stand between the media and the state as benevolent umpires, charged with the task of defending each against the excesses of the other, guardians of the public interest, upholders of a broadcasting service alleged to be the finest in the world. In practice, where Northern Ireland is concerned, they have become committed to a perspective of the conflict which identifies the public interest increasingly with the government interest. (99)

According to Taylor, television journalism is hampered by restrictions that Fleet Street does not and would not tolerate. Using his experiences with the This Week current affairs programme during 1977 and 1978 as an example, Taylor shows how the IBA has made it almost impossible for journalists to depart from the government's perspective on Northern Ireland, or to provide the public with an alternative to the standard fare provided by news coverage of the conflict. Taylor details how, over this period, the IBA successfully censored, delayed, and banned This Week programmes on the Queen's Jubilee visit to Belfast, and a report on Amnesty International's investigation into interrogation techniques in Northern Ireland.

A former producer of This Week, David Elstein, has also been critical of the way Northern Ireland has been handled by the broadcasters. According to Elstein: "in ITV producers are slowly coming to the conclusion that the most honest response to censorship of programmes about Northern Ireland is simply to stop making them".⁽¹⁰⁰⁾ Elstein describes how structural differences between the BBC and ITV have been reflected in the way censorship takes place. The fact that the BBC is an organic whole while ITV is divided by design, Elstein argues, has tended to make examples of censorship easier to find in ITV. Despite this, he argues, producers working for both organisations have been forced to concede ground over their reporting of Northern Ireland. Elstein concluded:

We worry about sex-and-violence on television. We worry about the materialism and the passivity that lengthening viewing hours induce. But do we ever ask why it is that television's one redeeming feature - its capacity to inform a huge audience about the outside world - has failed with regard to Northern Ireland?⁽¹⁰¹⁾

The television critic Chris Dunkley has also reviewed television's coverage of Northern Ireland and found it wanting. Looking back over his eight years as a television critic, Dunkley suggests that "The exception to television's general rule that the problem of providing continuous Northern Ireland coverage should be solved by simply ignoring it, is London Weekend Television's Weekend World".⁽¹⁰²⁾ The problem with this programme, Dunkley suggests, is that its scheduling ensures that it reaches only a relatively small audience: a point which could also be made about Dunkley's article, which appeared in the Financial Times.

The problems that have confronted journalists in their reporting of Northern Ireland have not been restricted simply to broadcasting or simply to instances of direct censorship. On the contrary, journalists from all media have been confronted with a variety of problems in the daily routine of newsgathering.

One of the few accounts of these problems to be published in the press is Andrew Stephen's account of "A Reporter's Life in Belfast".⁽¹⁰³⁾ Stephen points to how the emphasis placed on the media by all parties to the conflict has made journalists vulnerable to mis-information policies. He notes how the sophisticated information services run by the army and to a lesser extent the RUC have, on occasions, been used to blacken the name of their opponents. The main problem, according to Stephen, was that, in a situation where both sides were keen to use journalists to their own advantage, and where possible to the disadvantage of their opponents, it was impossible to take anyone's word at face value. According to Stephen:

Being an unadventurous journalist in Belfast is very, very easy. The lazy national newspaperman can stay in his hotel room and lift all his material from the comprehensive local radio and television news coverage and the Belfast Telegraph, and still appear well

informed. The skill lies in delving beneath the public relations smoke-screens while still eschewing the sensationalised and the bogus but apparently convincing 'disclosure'. (104)

Hoggart in his account of the "Army PR men of Northern Ireland"⁽¹⁰⁵⁾ also draws attention to the effectiveness of the information services operated by the army and RUC. Though Hoggart denies the existence of an army "black propaganda machine", he does agree that there "were some aspects of army PR work which, taken in sum, must look very much like it to someone with anti-army views".⁽¹⁰⁶⁾ Apart from observing that, on occasions, the army "feeds anti-IRA stories to journalists", Hoggart comments significantly on the speed with which information is fed to certain sections of the media which has given the security forces a tactical advantage in the information war. Hoggart notes how most journalists are almost completely dependent upon the army and the police as sources of information about day to day incidents of violence, and how there is a general tendency among British reporters to take this information on trust unless the incident seems to be controversial. Hoggart also draws attention to the various methods adopted by the army in dealing with what it considers to be "unsympathetic" journalists. These combined factors, Hoggart suggests, have contributed to a highly successful informational strategy:

Hardly a word is breathed against the army in the popular papers or on radio and television in Britain. If criticism is made, it is invariably in the mouths of others, and always hedged with a full account of the army's position - however sceptical the reporter himself might be. (107)

A number of other journalists have also drawn attention to how the security forces have sought to influence and control reporters viewed as "hostile" or "unhelpful" through the application of various information sanctions. Simon Winchester, in his account of the reporting of the Irish troubles, recounts how the army press office sought to deprive him

of information after he had broken an unwritten agreement over how certain types of information should be handled. Following a story in which he mistakenly attributed an off-the-record briefing to an army officer, Winchester recounts, the word went out that he was to be denied information. Winchester also points to how the authorities and the army sought to gain propaganda advantages by leaking selected information in advance and by leaking and supplying false information to journalists. (108)

The Times reporter Robert Fisk, one of the most respected reporters to have covered Northern Ireland, also draws attention to the various ways in which the army have attempted to influence journalists. Fisk recounts how, following a story written by him on the army rules relating to the arrest of civilians, the army's Chief Information Officer complained directly to The Times that his work was "snide and misleading". According to Fisk, the same officer also sent a classified message to all three brigades stationed in the North not to provide him with any information. In addition, Fisk notes that the army set up a "black propaganda section" at army HQ, Lisburn, under the command of an officer who had been trained at an American college of "psyops". According to Fisk, this department was involved in a smear campaign against a prominent Protestant politician, kept extensive files on reporters, leaked bogus information and, on one occasion, forged press cards for plain-clothes officers working on undercover surveillance duties in Belfast. (109)

The general view that emerges from the above accounts suggests that journalists working in Northern Ireland have been subjected to two separate but related problems. First, that the sensitivity surrounding Northern Ireland within the British media has effectively narrowed the political space in which they work, and, as a consequence, has placed

certain topics off-limits. In addition to this, journalists have also encountered a series of practical problems related to their role as newsgatherers. At the heart of these problems has been the emphasis placed on the importance of the media by all parties to the conflict, which has elevated newspapers and television as a key terrain over which the propaganda war is fought. This has not only undermined the reliability of official sources of information but at the same time increased their dependency upon such sources.

Conclusion

In the above account of the literature presently available on the British media and Northern Ireland, I have isolated what I consider to be three broadly different perspectives. Each of these perspectives has approached the media's reporting of events in the Six Counties from different directions and each has its own view of the key issues raised by such reporting. In examining the material under the "insiders'" perspective, I have drawn a distinction between those responsible for formulating and ultimately explaining and defending editorial policy. Not surprisingly, perhaps, each of these information sources has offered different, and often contradictory, accounts of the role and performance of the British media in Northern Ireland. As might be expected, they have also generated different and often contradictory policy implications.

For those responsible for formulating editorial policy and explaining and justifying this policy to the wider audience, the primary concern has been to defend what professional space is presently available as the minimum necessary for them to perform their public responsibilities. For those approaching the issue from an "anti-terrorist" perspective, the key concern has been to isolate those areas where they feel control should be tightened still further. For

those approaching from a "critical" perspective, be they inside or outside the media, the primary concern has been to highlight how the space available for journalists to address events in Northern Ireland has already been seriously eroded, and how, as a consequence, newspapers and television are failing in their public duty to provide a comprehensive and meaningful account of the Irish conflict. As we shall see in the next chapter, of these perspectives, it is the "anti-terrorist" perspective which has commanded the attention of those who control the levers of power within the British media.

However, while each of these perspectives has contributed to our understanding of the range of constraints and pressures placed on those responsible for newsgathering in Northern Ireland, and the consequences these have had for news coverage, gaps in our knowledge remain. In the introduction to this chapter, I drew attention to the lack of current research available on the British press and Northern Ireland. In recent years the picture has improved; it is still, however, far from complete. The main purpose of my own study is to contribute further to the body of evidence presently available on how the press has come to terms with the problems of reporting a protracted conflict involving its own nation state. In doing so, I hope to provide further evidence in support of those analyses and accounts which have called into question the adequacy of British press coverage.

Notes

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- (3) Cohen, S., Young, J. (eds.) The Manufacture of News: Deviance Social Problems and the Mass Media Constable, London, 1981, p 10.
- (4) These perspectives are specifically designed to take account of the different perspectives on the role and performance of the British media in its coverage of Northern Ireland, rather than on the much wider debate on the subject of "terrorism". Schlesinger, P. et al's study Televising 'Terorism', Comedia, London, 1983, isolates four contending perspectives in the political debate over "terrorism" which they label: the "official", "alternative", "populist" and "oppositional". For a review of this study and the analytical concepts employed, see Connell, I. "Televising 'Terrorism'", Screen, Vol. 25 N2, March-April, 1984, pp 76-79.
- (5) Schlesinger, P. et al Op. cit., 1983.
- (6) See for example: Curtis, L.P. Angels and Apes, David & Charles, 1971; Kirkaldy, J. 'The Return of the Irish Joke', Quadrant, May, 1980; Taylor, R. 'Images of the Irish', New Society, 28 November, 1974.
- (7) The fact that many historical documentaries and plays have been banned since 1969 suggests that these forms of output may often contain perspectives on

the conflict which are contentious or antithetical to government policy, or divert or detract from the perspective usually found in "actuality" coverage.

- (8) In order to take account of the fact that different forms of output may allow for different ways of presentation, Schlesinger, P. et al categorises television output according to whether it is "open", "closed", "tight" or "loose".
- (9) Cox, G. "Impartiality is not enough", The Listener, 20th March, 1976, p 627.
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- (18) Ibid., p 324.
- (19) Kirkaldy, J. "Northern Ireland and Fleet Street: Misreporting a continuing tragedy", Terrorism in Ireland, Alexander, Y. (ed.) Coom Helm, London, 1983, p 175.

- (20) McCann, E. The British Press and Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Socialist Research Centre, 1971.
- (21) Kirkaldy, J. Op. cit., 1983, p 176.
- (22) McCann, E. Op. cit., 1971, pp 4-8.
- (23) Smith, A. Op. cit., 1972, pp 21-22.
- (24) Schlesinger, P. Op. cit., 1978.
- (25) Ibid., pp 222-43.
- (26) Ibid., p 214.
- (27) Curtis, L. Op. cit. 1984, p 177.
- (28) "Why Gladstone was too hot to handle", Sunday Times, 2nd March, 1980.
- (29) Curtis, L. Op. cit. 1984, pp 279-290.
- (30) Schlesinger, P. et al Op. cit. 1983,
- (31) Curtis, L. "British Broadcasting and Ireland", Screen, Vol. 27, No. 2, March-April, 1986, p 49.
- (32) Elliott, P. (1) Reporting Northern Ireland: a study of news in Britain, Ulster and the Irish Republic, University of Leicester: Centre for Mass Communications Research, 1976. (mimeographed copy)
- (33) Ibid.
- (34) Ibid.
- (35) Blumler, J.G. "Ulster on the small screen", New Society, 23rd December, 1971.
- (36) Curtis, L. Op. cit. 1984.
- (37) Kirkaldy, J. Op. cit. 1983.

- (38) Schlesinger, P. Op. cit. 1978.
- (39) Blumler, J.G. Op. cit. 1971.
- (40) Ibid.
- (41) Elliott, P. (2) "Misrepresenting Ulster: news as a field-dressing", New Society, 25th November, 1976.
- (42) Elliott, P. (1) Op. cit., 1976, Chap. 2, p 32.
- (32) Ibid., Chap. 2, p 33.
- (44) Ibid.
- (45) Ibid.
- (46) Chibnall, S. Law and Order News, Tavistock, London, 1977.
- (47) Elliott, P. (1) Op. cit. 1976.
- (48) Ibid. Chap. 2 p 11
- (49) Kirkaldy, J. Op. cit. 1983.
- (50) Schlesinger, P. Op. cit. 1978.
- (51) The Irish Times, 4th November, 1983.
- (52) Curtis, L. Op. cit. 1984.
- (53) Elliott, P. (1) Op. cit. 1976.
- (54) Kirkaldy, J. Op. cit. 1983.
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- (58) Ibid., Chap. 2, p 6.
- (59) Ibid., Chap. 5, pp 3-4.
- (60) Kirkaldy, J. Op. cit. 1983, p 187.
- (61) Elliott, (1) Op. cit. 1976, Chap. 5, p 3.
- (62) Ibid., Chap. 2, p 5.
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- (64) Ibid., Chap. 2, p 4.
- (65) Ibid., Chap. 2, p 7.
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- (67) Ibid., p 108.
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- (69) Dunkley, C. "A Deafening Silence", Financial Times, 6th April, 1977.
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- (71) Glasgow Media Group War and Peace News, Open University Press, Milton Keynes, 1985, p 23.
- (72) An example of such a division between the military and the government occurred in 1974-75 when the army, unhappy with the Labour Government's policy of phasing out internment without trial, sought to discredit the policy by leaking false information to certain journalists. See: "The Army's Secret War in Northern Ireland", The Sunday Times, 13th March, 1977.

- (73) Schlesinger, P. et al. Op. cit. 1983, p 111.
- (74) Ibid., p 111.
- (75) Francis, R. Broadcasting to a Community in Conflict: The Experience of Northern Ireland, BBC, London, 1977.
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- (103) Ibid.
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CHAPTER 3

"Terrorism" and the Media; A Critical Analysis

The BBC is often accused of regularly, almost ritually, recounting the effects of terrorism in our daily news bulletins and not doing enough to expose the underlying causes. I believe it would be irresponsible and that we would be failing the public if the BBC, of all organisations were to be seen interviewing the likes of Mr. Nkomo about the shooting down of airliners, talking to spokesmen for the PLO, PFLP and the Sandinista guerrillas, and yet failing to grasp the nettle in our own backyard. Is the public in a stable democracy such as ours to be trusted only with those threats which are distant, and those nearer to home which can be treated comfortably? (1)

The previous chapter focused on how the British media has sought to accommodate the problems, constraints and political pressures engendered by a violent political conflict in close proximity to, and involving, its own nation state. This chapter casts a wider net and examines the broader debate over the role and social significance of the media's coverage of political violence. In many respects, it is this wider debate concerning the media's coverage of violence in general, and anti-state violence in particular, that has helped shape the British media's approach to the reporting of Northern Ireland.

The Background

The debate over the social and political effects of the mass media is one that has continued almost unabated ever since the possibility of reaching a mass audience with a single message, or view of the world, was first realised with the advent of national newspapers, radio, the cinema and latterly television. Underlying this debate has been the assumption that the media represented a powerful source of messages, and that in a society characterised by a mass of atomised and relatively passive individuals, these messages had the capacity to manipulate the responses and beliefs of individuals who, deprived of first-hand

experience, could be persuaded of almost anything.

The debate about media effects has often been at its fiercest when the subject has been violence, and the medium has been television or the cinema, the assumption being that the visual media were an especially powerful source of messages. Hilde Mosse, a writer who has devoted considerable time to the issue of media effects, has argued that, in their representation of violence, the visual media are capable of influencing individual responses at both a conscious and subliminal level:

Television and films have an immense impact on emotions. They reach feelings directly, not via the intellect as reading does. This effect is often subtle and far reaching. It enters our unconscious sphere ... Television can, like no other mass medium, manipulate not only ideas, but also the mood of entire populations. The people who control it, officially or unofficially, have a key position in the power structure of any society. Violence is contagious. Television has the power to spread it or to prevent it from spreading.⁽³⁾

The argument that the media, via representations of violence and violent conflict (be it street rioting, "terrorism", conventional warfare or simply fictionalised violence), have the power to directly shape individual and group responses is hardly a new one. Indeed, it has, and continues to have, an important place within conventional thinking about the mass media and their social effects.⁽⁴⁾ Television and newspapers have always been something of a soft target for those seeking simple explanations for complex social and political phenomena. The fact that research into the media has, as yet, failed to prove in any conclusive manner the capacity of the media to influence public attitudes in the short term, has not prevented the finger being pointed in the direction of television and newspapers when expediency has demanded a speedy explanation for some new or disturbing social phenomenon.⁽⁵⁾

It was hardly surprising then to find that, following the riots that erupted in Britain during the summer of 1981, the question of the media and their social effects should have again been brought into sharp focus. The arguments were to follow a well-worn path. Bored and disaffected teenagers, so the argument ran, took the coverage of rioting in Toxteth, Liverpool, as a model and cue for their own actions. Scenes of missiles being hurled at the police in Liverpool, it was contended, were translated via the television screens into similar acts elsewhere. The phrase "copycat rioters" was quickly coined to explain the assumed link between these geographically separate incidents, and it was readily incorporated into popular explanations for those traumatic events during the summer of 1981. Television was again placed in the dock; the accusation being that, by its coverage of events in one part of Britain, it was culpable for similar events elsewhere. Whether or not the evidence supported the hypothesis that the media were in some way responsible for the escalation of street violence during the month of July, 1981, hardly seemed to matter. While on the one hand the accusation that the media were culpable for the escalation of street violence could simply be dismissed as another case of the messenger being blamed for an unpleasant message, on the other hand, the debate which these events stimulated (much of it in the letters page of The Times and Guardian) bore testimony to the widespread feeling that the media had the capacity to instigate profound social change.⁽⁶⁾

In its coverage of war, the media have been accorded an equal if not greater power to influence public attitudes and thereby shape the course of events. Indeed, so great is this power assumed to be that military theorists have come to see the media as a crucial factor in modern warfare. The need to maintain public support at home has elevated the media, and in particular television, to a position of

immense strategic importance, so much so that they are now regarded as an important terrain on which modern wars can be won or lost.

The example most frequently cited in support of this theory is the American experience in Vietnam. One explanation for why America was forced to withdraw from Vietnam with its army still intact, was that the daily images of soldiers dying on the battlefields of South-East Asia provided by American television weakened the resolve of the American public to continue the fight. As William Small, director of CBS has put it:

When television covered its "first war" in Vietnam it showed a terrible truth of war in a manner new to a mass audience. A case can be made, and certainly should be examined, that this was cardinal to the disillusionment of many Americans with this war and the destruction of Lyndon Johnson's tenure of office. (7)

On the surface, the argument that television coverage contributed to the erosion of public support for the war in Vietnam, is an attractive one. In many respects the war in Vietnam was television's "first war". Developments of television technology, lightweight cameras, and fast and efficient lines of communication enabled the American public to watch in graphic detail images of war which, prior to Vietnam, would have been unthinkable. And it would be surprising if the daily scenes of death and destruction did not have some effect on their viewers. The real question is, what effect? Did they, as some have argued, lead to a collapse in public morale, and a growing lack of confidence in, and support for, the army? Or did they simply reinforce and give expression to an existing climate of opinion which, even without television, would have culminated in direct opposition to a war that many Americans were increasingly losing support for? Given the importance attributed to the media in the American defeat in Vietnam, and given the long term influence that this experience has had on

official thinking towards the media in times of war, it is perhaps worth pausing briefly to examine the extent to which such a theory is supported by the available evidence.

The argument that the media in general, and television in particular, was a significant factor in the collapse of the American public's support for the Vietnamese war is, like the argument which suggested that television was partly to blame for the 1981 riots, hardly supported by the available evidence. If anything, what evidence is available tends to run contrary to the notion that television exerted a negative effect on public attitudes to the war. A survey undertaken by Newsweek in 1967 found that, rather than leading to a weakening of public support for the war, television actually had the opposite effect: it encouraged a majority of viewers to support it. When asked whether television coverage made them feel like "backing up the boys in Vietnam", or opposing the war, 64 per cent replied that they were moved to support the soldiers and only 26 per cent to oppose the war.⁽⁸⁾

Others have suggested that, rather than producing an aversion effect on its audience, daily coverage of war actually conditions its audience to more readily accept war.⁽⁹⁾ As one writer has argued, while the American public were fed a daily diet of action footage from Vietnam, television was in fact incapable of presenting the real horror of war, and that this was inevitable given the nature of the medium. If anything, the impact of news footage, regardless of how horrific and dramatic, was undermined by the medium itself:

in part by the physical size of the television screen, which for all the industry's advances, still showed one a picture of men three inches high shooting at other men three inches tall.⁽¹⁰⁾

The proposition that television coverage of the Vietnam war exerted a negative effect on public attitudes towards the military is also open

to considerable doubt. Hofstetter and Moore, in their study "Watching TV news and Supporting the Military", concluded that:

For several years the military had been in a position of high visibility within a negative setting, fighting a losing war and subjected ... to anti-military news coverage. Yet, public attitudes towards the military seemed more positive than thought; the military image appears to have fared better than it would without TV news. Perhaps the live pictures of soldiers fighting in Vietnam and the anti-military bias of the networks' interpretations caused the public to react sympathetically to the military itself. (11)

The "Vietnam Syndrome", which this assumed relationship between television and the American defeat in Vietnam has been termed, is also heavily criticised by Michael Mandelbaum. (12) According to Mandelbaum:

It is true ... that Americans got most of their information about the war, as about the world in general during the Vietnam period, from television. In the 1960s it became the principal medium of news in the United States. The correlation between the outcome of the war and the way Americans learned about it, however, is spurious; or, if not plainly spurious, at least not proven and not plausible. It was not the special properties of television, not the fact that it was this medium and not others upon which Americans relied to follow events on the other side of the Pacific, that shaped American attitudes towards the conflict. (13)

While Mandelbaum admits that television showed a high proportion of combat footage in its coverage of the war (partly in an attempt to attract more viewers), he rejects the argument that this coverage had any significant impact on public attitudes to the war. Given that there was little interest in showing footage of the Vietnamese, he argues, the subjects of this combat footage were "invariably Americans, who were usually engaged in unspecified, but seemingly successful, military activity. Moreover, this footage was rarely broadcast the same day, and thus could rarely be used to illustrate a breaking story". (14)

In the event, Mandelbaum argues, most combat footage appeared as

background to give viewers a general flavour of the war.

According to Mandelbaum, rather than pushing a negative line on the war, television coverage in fact contained very little overt editorial content:

The networks simply presented a series of images, mainly of Americans fighting an unseen foe. They provided the public with a kind of "illustrated wire service". Images themselves ordinarily carry no explicit message. The impression that they leave depends on the interpretive framework that the viewer brings to them. (15)

Whatever interpretive framework was applied to the daily images of war transmitted by television, Mandelbaum suggests, was not provided by the television networks who showed themselves to be highly reluctant to provide such a framework, let alone one critical of the policies of the American government:

Where the networks feared to tread, the government had the field to itself. It was left mainly to government spokesmen to provide the interpretive framework for the television coverage of the war in Vietnam. Government officials in Saigon and Washington, above all the President, had ready access to broadcast time. (16)

"The United States", Mandelbaum concludes:

lost the war in Vietnam because the American public was not willing to pay the cost of winning, or avoiding losing. The people's decision that the war was not worth these costs had nothing to do with the fact that they learned about it from television. Whether it was based on the fact that many of their fellow citizens were vehemently opposed to the war, which they also learned from television, is difficult to say. It is possible that it was not. It is possible that the public would have reached the same judgement in the same way over the same period of time - that is, that the war would have followed the course it did - even if the cathode ray tube had never been invented. (17)

While this evidence is not in itself conclusive, it does constitute an important caveat against seeking simple explanations for

the complex process which led to the American defeat in Vietnam.

The lack of evidence in support of the "Vietnam Syndrome", however, has not prevented it from being incorporated into official thinking about the potential effects of "opening-up" the battlefield to the television cameras in the event of some future war. Without doubt, memories of Vietnam were to play a significant part in the way the media were handled during the Falklands conflict. As Robert Harris, in his study of the British media's coverage of the Falklands conflict, has commented:

The American experience in Vietnam did as much as anything to shape the way in which the British Government handled television during the Falklands crisis. To ITN it seemed that the "Vietnam analogy" was a spectre constantly stalking the Falklands decision makers and was invoked privately by the military as an object lesson in how not to deal with the media.⁽¹⁸⁾

In the post-war debate over the government's handling of the media during the Falklands crisis, the "Vietnam Syndrome" was again to surface as an important consideration in the military's ability to prosecute a successful military campaign. The House of Commons Defence Committee, in its report on the official handling of the media during the Falklands crisis, believed that the Americans were "over-generous in acquiescing to the media's wishes".⁽¹⁹⁾ And the Beach Report on The Protection of Military Information⁽²⁰⁾ maintained that "there is little doubt that the media, including television, played a role in the American public's disillusionment" with the war in Vietnam.⁽²¹⁾

The argument that the media, and television in particular, are capable of exerting a negative effect on the state's ability to successfully pursue its policies has not simply been restricted to conventional warfare between states. On the contrary, the area in which the "Vietnam Syndrome", or some variant of it, has surfaced most

frequently, is the debate surrounding the media's reporting of "terrorism".

"Terrorism": the background debate

In recent years, the debate over the possible role and influence of the media in its reporting of violence has increasingly centred on the issue of "terrorism". Concern over the possible link between the media, and what was perceived as an epidemic of political violence, was itself prompted by a widespread feeling during the 1970s and 1980s that "terrorism" was the most pressing political problem facing the Western democratic system. During the 1970s in particular, the Western democratic system was felt by many to be under attack, both internally, from indigenous groups such as the Red Brigades, the Baader-Meinhof groups, the IRA and INLA, and externally, from international "terrorists" such as the PLO and other Arab groups. During this period hardly a day seemed to pass by without some new "terrorist" outrage taking place in Europe. "Terrorist" spectacles like the Munich Olympic's hostage crisis, convinced many that democracy was losing the battle against the "terrorists". In the public, and not so public, debate which the activities of these and other groups was to generate, the role of the media was again to be brought into sharp focus.

As a consequence of the publicity accorded to the issue of "terrorism" during the 1970s, the subject was to attract considerable attention from academics in many different fields. Social psychologists, psychiatrists, military theorists and counter-insurgency experts have produced a plethora of books and analyses dealing with one aspect or another of "terrorism". Many touched on the issue of the media. Before going on to examine this debate in more detail, I would first like to make a few general comments on the conceptual ambiguity that has afflicted, and has indeed been the hallmark, of much of the

recent work on the subject.

Perhaps the main criticism that can be levelled at much of the recent work on the subject of "terrorism" is that the field of study selected by many of its authors has been so narrowly defined as to ignore much of what, in any ordinary sense of the word, would pass as "terrorism". While many of its authors have professed to be concerned with political violence and its consequences, in the main it has been violence of a left-wing or revolutionary character that has attracted their attention. Political violence emanating from other sources, perhaps most significantly from the state, has generally been ignored. "Terrorism" for many of the "experts" has constituted little more than a shorthand for "left-wing extremism".

Paul Wilkinson, one of the key contributors to the debate on "terrorism" in Britain, in his study Terrorism and the Liberal State⁽²²⁾ defines "political terrorism" (which he distinguishes from "repressive" and "epiphenomenal terrorism") as the:

systematic use of murder and destruction, and the threat of murder and destruction in order to terrorise individuals, groups, communities or governments into conceding to the terrorists' political demands. (p 49)

In Wilkinson's view, what distinguishes "terrorism" from other forms of political violence is that it is essentially arbitrary and unpredictable; it is inherently indiscriminate; that it refuses to distinguish between combatants and non-combatants and that it rejects all moral constraints (pp 52-53). What is striking about this definition is that its salient characteristics could hardly be said to be the exclusive preserve of the "terrorists", be they the IRA or the PLO. On the contrary, one only has to consider the activities of certain Latin American states to realise that the use of indiscriminate violence against individuals, groups and communities to secure political

goals is by no means the sole preserve of anti-state groups.

Furthermore, the argument that "terrorism" can be differentiated from other forms of political violence on the grounds that it is inherently indiscriminate, and refuses to distinguish between combatants and non-combatants, is also open to serious challenge: if these are the defining characteristics of "terrorism", how are we to distinguish it from conventional warfare, which nowadays nearly always involves the killing of civilians as well as combatants? The author must surely be aware of Dresden, or more recently, Beirut.

Wilkinson's "typology of terrorism" (pp 56-57) accepts that states may resort to the use of "mass terror" in order to achieve their goals (and thus he lists it as a form of "politically motivated terrorism"), yet it occupies no place in a book devoted to "terrorism". Wilkinson also accepts that "large scale terror" often plays a part in conventional war; however, he distinguishes it from "politically motivated "terrorism" on the grounds that it has "no specific aim" and that it is "random rather than deliberately planned and organised" (p 57). On the basis of such slippery thinking, Wilkinson chooses to restrict the ambit of his study of "terrorism" to what he terms "revolutionary and sub-revolutionary terrorism by non-governmental groups" (p 55).

A similar criticism can also be made of Richard Clutterbuck, another writer who has done much to shape the "agenda" of the contemporary debate on the media and "terrorism". In his study Living with Terrorism⁽²³⁾ Clutterbuck restricts his analysis of "terrorism" to revolutionary and anti-state groups. Indeed, Clutterbuck writes almost as if there were no such thing as "state terrorism". He speaks of his concern to help the "citizen in a society under attack" (p 15), and of his fear that the "terrorists" might become "so powerful that they can overthrow civilised government altogether" (p 57). In his more recent work,

The Media and Political Violence⁽²⁴⁾ the author treats political violence as the exclusive preserve of left-wing and anti-state groups.

Another writer who has tended to equate "terrorism" with anti-state groups is Brian Jenkins of the Rand Corporation, who directs a research project on international "terrorism" for the State Department. In a paper presented to an international conference on "terrorism" held in Florence in 1978, Jenkins equated "terrorism" almost exclusively with the activities of left-wing anti-state groups. While accepting that the "total amount of terrorist violence in the world has been greatly exaggerated", he justified the attention it was attracting on the grounds that "terrorism" "is not measured by body counts, nor by the amount of property damage, but rather by the attention it receives and the effect it produces".⁽²⁵⁾

Other writers do not ignore the importance of "state terrorism" altogether. Schmid and de Graaf, in their study of "terrorism" as communication⁽²⁶⁾ rightly point out:

It can be argued - and there are some good reasons for it - that state terrorism is the main terrorist problem in a world where as many as 117 states violate human rights in one way or another. (p 2)

They go on to argue that while left-wing and revolutionary "terrorism" has attracted a disproportionate amount of attention in the media and within academic circles:

state terrorism is a much more serious problem. In terms of victims the state terrorism in Guatamala, for instance, has cost many more lives in one year than all the international insurgent terrorist incidents of the last ten years together. (p 85)

While acknowledging that it is "state terrorism", or what Chomsky⁽²⁷⁾ and Herman have termed "wholesale terror" rather than anti-state "terrorism", or "retail terror", that is the main source of political violence, Schmid and de Graaf do little to rectify the inbalance when,

in the introduction to their study, they define their objectives to be an analysis of:

insurgent terrorism (social-revolutionary, separatist and single issue terrorism aiming at the top of society) excluding other forms of political terrorism such as vigilante terrorism and state terrorism. (pp 1-2)

Though "terrorism" is so clearly a political phenomenon, and though many of the recent works on the subject profess a concern with "political violence", what is strikingly absent from many of these analyses is any coherent attempt to address the political dimension of the phenomenon. Indeed, many of the "experts" on "terrorism" have tended to ignore the political in defining, and theorising about, "terrorism" and have tended to view the social and political factors which give rise to it as largely irrelevant in seeking to understand it as a phenomenon. Laqueur, for example, has suggested that "as a rule of thumb, one learns much more about a terrorist group by looking at its victims than at its manifestos".⁽²⁸⁾ And that "Connections between terrorism and economic trends are at best tenuous".⁽²⁹⁾ Commenting on the levels of terrorism in recent decades, Laqueur concluded:

If any lesson can be drawn from the experience of several decades of terrorism, it is the uncomfortable and indeed shocking conclusion that the more injustice and repression, the less terrorism there is. In other words, terrorism succeeds only against non-terrorists, namely groups or governments which refrain from responding to indiscriminate murder with equally indiscriminate repression. Terrorism continues in Ulster not because the terrorists are invincible but because the British government treats the violent men of both sides decently, unlike the Brazilians or Iranians, Russians or Yugoslavs.⁽³⁰⁾

This may be comforting for government spokesmen seeking to dismiss "terrorism" against their own states as irrational and criminal, but it is hardly of much assistance to those seeking to arrive at a precise and well thought out understanding of "terrorism".

Having abstracted from the phenomenon of "terrorism" much of that which could give it meaning, most of the "experts" on "terrorism" have tended to focus on the moral, tactical, or psychological dimensions of the subject. Yet "terrorism", contrary to the way it is presented in many of these analyses, is a highly problematical concept, and it is clear from many of these works that there is in fact no clearly agreed definition of what "terrorism" is, only an agreement over who the "terrorists" are. In many respects, such studies raise more questions than they provide answers for. Ironically, rather than contributing to our understanding of "terrorism", the studies referred to above unintentionally lead the reader to question whether the concept has any analytical value whatsoever.

The narrowness of the perspective contained within many of the recent analyses suggests that authors have been concerned less with the phenomenon of "terrorism" itself than with the use of political violence in the pursuit of political goals that the authors do not endorse, and against states whose legitimacy they accept.⁽³¹⁾ If the influence of such theories was limited to academic circles only, then this one-dimensional treatment of "terrorism" would perhaps be of less significance. However, these, and similar theories, have done much to shape the political debate on the relationship between the media and political violence, and in doing so have provided much of the ammunition that has been fired at broadcasters and journalists in recent years. In the specific case of Northern Ireland, these theories, ill-defined and often contradictory as they are, have legitimated a continuing attack on journalists and broadcasters; an attack which has effectively narrowed the political space in which they work, and one that has restricted the range of perspectives available to the British public on an issue of pressing social and political concern.

"Terrorism" and the media: an unhappy marriage

If the freedom to publish rests, as indeed it must, upon a general public interest expressed in terms of "need to know", is this not most sensibly limited by that other public interest of denying to those who would damage the common weal the use of this potent, near irresistible force of the media? There is a real competition of interests here which must be resolved on a philosophical plane before the practical issues can be tackled. The terrorist is an urgent suitor; if he cannot get what he wants by seductive means, he will not hesitate to attempt rape. The real problem seems to be uncertainty on the part of the media whether to play the coy handmaiden or harlot. (32)

During the early 1970s, the broadcasting authorities in Britain, and in particular the BBC, were the focus of a sustained, and at times vitriolic, attack over their coverage of Northern Ireland. It was an attack which raised serious questions about journalistic ethics, and one which was to challenge many of the central principles of liberal broadcasting. Central to this attack was the assertion that the relationship between the media and the continuation of "terrorism" in Northern Ireland was a close and important one. Some critics went so far as to suggest that the relationship between the media and "terrorism" was indeed symbiotic: that the need of the media for news and the need of the "terrorists" to secure publicity for their cause fed off, and indeed sustained each other. Within such a view, the media were accused of being little more than accomplices in the phenomenon of national and trans-national "terrorism". At the more sophisticated end of this argument, it was contended that the daily representation of the "terrorists" and their campaigns of violence on television and in the press was having a series of profound and disturbing social effects. Not least among the effects listed were that:

1. Television provided a platform for the expression of extremist views which had provoked violence and undermined the authority of the state;

2. the reporting of spectacular terrorist incidents had a contagion effect which increased the possibility that other groups and individuals would seek to emulate the violence being reported;
3. the reporting in excessive detail of both terrorist and counter-terrorist operations supplied disaffected groups with tactical and strategic information, and technical knowledge which makes the resolution of future terrorist incidents more difficult:
4. the competitive nature of newsgathering places an undue emphasis on the sensational aspects of terrorist incidents, which has made entertaining the public with violence more important to the media than their duty to inform. (33)

In Britain, a country with the oldest "terrorist" problem in Western Europe, these arguments found particular favour within conservative political and academic circles - though by no means was it limited to them. The political stalemate which existed on the question of Northern Ireland, and the apparent inability of the British state to secure a military victory over the paramilitary organisations in the Six Counties, led some to seek other explanations for the continuing violence. In the forefront of the attack on the BBC was Roy Mason, then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and a vigorous opponent of the Provisional IRA. In November, 1976, while attending a dinner organised by the BBC in the Culloden Hotel on the outskirts of Belfast, Mason took the opportunity provided by this function to lambast the BBC for what he saw as a clear dereliction of its duty to the public. During the course of his speech, Mason argued that the BBC was "disloyal, supported the rebels, purveyed their propaganda and refused to accept the advice of the Northern Ireland Office on what news to carry". (34) Central to Mason's attack - and this was simply one of many - was the assertion that the BBC had allowed itself to become an agent for "terrorist" propaganda. The daily publicity given to the activities

of the paramilitaries, he contended, was making it increasingly difficult for the security forces to prosecute a successful campaign against the "terrorists". Indeed, so convinced was Mason that the media were helping to prolong the conflict, that he proposed a three month news blackout on all events in the Six Counties in the belief that, deprived of publicity, the campaign against the "terrorists" could be brought to a speedy conclusion.

While Mason's words were to find few sympathetic ears among the assembled BBC personnel, his central assertion that the media were in some respects a part of the "terrorist" problem has not been short of support. In 1979, the Tory Home Secretary, William Whitelaw, lent his support to the suggestion that the broadcasters should consider carefully both the motives of the "terrorists" and their duty to the public before reporting acts of "terrorism". According to Whitelaw:

Terrorists and terrorist organisations seek and depend on publicity. A principal object of their acts of violence is to draw attention to themselves and gain notoriety ... they bomb and murder themselves into the headlines.

In doing so they make war on society and outlaw themselves from its privileges. The broadcasting authorities owe them no duty whatsoever, and can owe society no duty whatever, gratuitously to provide them with opportunities for the publicity they want. (35)

The growing concern which these and similar attacks on the media was to stimulate was to become so acute that it led some to question the efficacy of informing the public about acts of violence in Northern Ireland. Alan Wright, Chairman of the Police Federation for Northern Ireland, challenged the journalistic commitment to a free flow of information when he was reported as saying:

Without publicity terrorist acts would lose much of their effectiveness and very reason for being ... Surely it is time for journalists to think long and hard about the relationship that must exist between the public's right to know and the public's need to

know. As regards terrorism, the crucial question is, does it need to know everything immediately. (36)

This conflict between the public's right to know (which is conventionally regarded as a central principle of democratic society) and the potential damage that unrestricted coverage of "terrorism" was assumed to pose for the stability of the social order, has been a consistent theme in the debate over the coverage of "terrorism". As we shall see below, it is a view premised on an exceptionally narrow understanding of the motivating force of political violence, and some very dubious assumptions about the liberal democratic system and the role of the media therein.

In attempting to explain the apparent epidemic of "terrorism" in Western Europe, the "experts" on "terrorism" have focused their attention not on the specific social, political, economic and cultural factors which gave rise to political violence in such countries as Italy, Germany and Britain, but rather on the liberal democratic system itself, and what were perceived to be its essential weaknesses. This system, with its tradition of free speech, its commitment to a free and open media, and its freedom of movement between states, it was argued, was an inherently fragile political form and one that was vulnerable to internal and external attack from those who would exploit these freedoms for their own political ends. Within this perspective, "terrorism" was a phenomenon which had an uneven impact on the world: the threat being proportional to the degree of freedom exhibited by a given society. Generally speaking, the Western democracies were seen as being most at risk, the communist world least. This view, that the apparent absence of "terrorism" in the Soviet Union and its neighbouring states flowed from the undemocratic nature of these states, is one that has been regularly canvassed by Walter Laqueur. According to Laqueur:

Terrorism today occurs either in Parliamentary democracies, or half-hearted, inefficient authoritarian regimes. In the 19th century, terrorism was mainly concentrated in despotic regimes, today terrorism occurs mainly in democratic societies. In a totalitarian regime terrorist action would not be reported. But terrorist action by itself is nothing; what makes it significant is the fact that it is shown on television and featured in the press. Unless there is propaganda terrorism is just not effective. (37)

Moreover, while the "free world" is usually seen as the main victim of "terrorism", the communist bloc, and in particular the Soviet Union, is usually seen as the main source of financial and political support for those "terrorist" groups operating in the West. Ignoring the diversity of "terrorist" groups operating in the West, which range from neo-fascist to Marxist, and the diversity of their goals, which range from national separatism to anti-imperialism, "terrorism" is seen as a manifestation of the age-old struggle between democracy and communism. The Soviet Union, in keeping with the Cold War rhetoric of many Western states, is seen as being at the centre of an international "terrorist" conspiracy, whose aim is to undermine the stability of the capitalist system. (38) It is a view which provides the backcloth for the work of Paul Wilkinson, an influential commentator on "terrorism", who has argued:

Part of the vast resources of the KGB is undoubtedly devoted to fostering and aiding terrorist groups operating in Western societies. There is evidence that they are prepared to provide indirect and covert support even to groups which they have little in common with ideologically, presumably on the grounds that any disruption and damage sown in Western states will have the effect of hastening the "collapse of capitalism". (39)

This commonly asserted notion, that if one looks hard enough it is possible to find the hand of the Soviet Union behind the activities of the "terrorists", is one that fits comfortably into the global

perspective of Britain's main political ally, the United States. The American Secretary of State, George Shultz, addressed a conference in Washington on what he called the world "league of terror". In his speech, Shultz lent further support to the Soviet-terrorist-conspiracy thesis when he argued that:

The international links between terrorist groups is clearly understood. The Soviets use terrorist groups for their own purposes and their goal is always the same - to weaken liberal democracy and undermine world stability.

When the Soviet Union and its clients provide financial, logistical and training support for terrorists worldwide, they hope to shake the West's self-confidence and sap its will to resist aggression and intimidation. (40)

In the view of the "experts", what has made liberal democratic societies particularly prone to "terrorism" is, ironically, a feature of such societies which has generally been considered to be one of their strengths - a free and open media. According to Wilkinson:

The crucial advantage of a liberal democratic state to the terrorist is the freedom of the media. The terrorist operating within such a society knows that his acts of terrorism will be instantly publicised by the television, radio and press. And that pictures of a really sensational attack or outrage can be relayed round the world with the aid of TV communications satellites. (41)

Denied recourse to direct censorship, and lacking the repressive apparatus available to communist states, liberal democracy has thus become a prime target for "terrorist" groups seeking to bring world attention to their cause. Developments in communications technology combined with unrestricted media freedom have made liberal democracies a particularly attractive theatre of operations for the "terrorist". By removing the geographical constraints on the transmission of media messages, television satellites have expanded enormously the potential audience for the "terrorists". The publicity value of a "terrorist"

act is no longer limited to its immediate audience; in the words of Brian Jenkins, "The whole world is now their stage. The whole world is possibly watching".⁽⁴²⁾

According to this perspective, the "terrorists" have been quick to recognise this inherent weakness in the liberal state, and have devoted their energies to exploiting it. Safe in the knowledge that the media will not ignore a good story, the "terrorists" are said to have co-ordinated their campaigns to satisfy its needs: timing their acts to fit in with news deadlines, and informing the media when a planned act is to take place. In a key phrase, Jenkins has suggested that "Terrorists choreograph their violence. Terrorism is a theatre".⁽⁴³⁾ This suggestion that the "terrorists" are essentially showmen dedicated to securing publicity for their cause, is one that has received widespread support among counter-insurgency and anti-terrorist experts. A similar point is also made by Laqueur, who has argued that:

Terrorists have learned that the media are of paramount importance to their campaign, that the terrorist act by itself is nothing, whereas publicity is all. But the media, constantly in need of diversity and new angles, make fickle friends. Terrorists will always have to be innovative. They are in some respects, the superentertainers of our time.⁽⁴⁴⁾

From such a perspective, "terrorist" violence is seen to embrace the key elements of human interest: drama, surprise and unpredictability; factors, which it is said, make such violence irresistible to television and newspapers. Its irresistibility is, however, shortlived; the criterion of news values ensures that for the media what was once spectacular quickly becomes routine, and, in the process, the headlines accorded to it become smaller and smaller. In order to maintain the media's undivided attention, it is contended, the "terrorist" is forced to seek ever new and more spectacular methods of putting his message

across. Hence, it has been argued, a spiral of violence is created with each cycle of the spiral intensifying the scale and intensity of the violence.⁽⁴⁵⁾ Consequently, there is an inflation in the cost of violence necessary to carry an act of violence around the world in banner headlines. The competition between different "terrorist" groups further increases the intensity of the violence as each outbids the other in order to win the headlines. Wilkinson has labelled this "media induced" escalation of violence the "Gresham's Law of terrorism": "those who spill the most blood get the biggest headlines".⁽⁴⁶⁾

This widely supported view that "terrorists" are motivated by the desire for publicity has led some to its logical conclusion: if the media refused to report "terrorism", it would go away. This is the conclusion drawn by David Hubbard, an American psychiatrist who has interviewed a number of hijackers. According to Hubbard, "terrorism" is motivated by publicity and, in his view, if denied this objective, the "terrorists" would lose much of their motivation:

They wouldn't even think of bombing and hijacking unless you guaranteed them a rostrum. So if the media cut their coverage down to the importance of other minor news, these men wouldn't act.⁽⁴⁷⁾

On the surface, such a theory of the relationship between the media and political violence appears highly plausible. In theory, at least, the Western media are characterised by the absence of pre-publication censorship, and the right to publish without regulation and interference is a legitimate principle of liberal media theory and one defended vociferously by its practitioners. And, despite increasing monopolisation, the capitalist media are located in a highly competitive market in which success is often defined in terms of getting the story before one's competitors. Moreover, repetition does tend to blunt the edge of a story, and even the most newsworthy of stories quickly slips

down the news schedule unless it constantly regenerates its own news value. If one accepts the attendant argument, that the motivating force of "terrorism" is publicity, and there can be little doubt that securing an audience for their propaganda is an important element in the strategy of many anti-state groups, then it is a short step indeed to according the media an important role in the phenomenon of "terrorism". As Schlesinger has argued:

In a perspective which sees political violence as unambiguously effective drama it is not surprising that media coverage is accorded such importance. Assuming the simple convergence of the terrorists actions and the values and needs of capitalist media, it is no great step to the view that the media are the willing victims of superstar violence. (48)

However, if one scratches the surface of this theory and examines the evidence provided in its support, it becomes clear that the explanatory force of the theory, and many of the assumptions upon which it is premised, scarcely stand the test of empirical validation.

Advertising violence: the "terrorist" and publicity

There is, in fact, a battle of political wills in progress, a battle to capture public opinion, and one way of capturing it is to get established on television. That is the objective of every kidnapper, every hijacker, every revolutionary political group using violence - indeed, of every pressure group. Get on to television and push the Minister off; make him dance in public to your tune, and above all, diminish him until he appears to be a dwarf. (49)

The most consistent theme in the "anti-terrorist" perspective, and one that commands widespread support among counter-insurgency experts, politicians, academics and, as we shall see in Chapter Seven, journalists, is the assertion that the "terrorists" are essentially publicity-seeking showmen, involved in acts of violence carried out more for their effect on those watching than for strictly military objectives. Jenkins talks

of "terrorism" being "theatre";⁽⁵⁰⁾ Laqueur about them being the "superentertainers of our time";⁽⁵¹⁾ J.C. Stern, of the Metropolitan Police, on how "terrorists need publicity";⁽⁵²⁾ Miller about how "Much of terrorism is undertaken solely for dramatic effect";⁽⁵³⁾ Hooper about how the "terrorist like many of the criminal classes has always been publicity hungry";⁽⁵⁴⁾ and how "The terrorist needs the media as a fish needs water. It is an essential element in his very existence as a terrorist".⁽⁵⁵⁾ Lord Annan, in his report on television, also accepted without criticism the contention that "terrorism" depends on publicity:

Terrorism feeds off publicity: publicity is its main hope of intimidating government and the public; publicity gives it a further chance of recruitment. The acts terrorists commit are each minor incidents in their general campaign to attract attention to their cause. No democracy can tolerate terrorism because it is the denial of the democratic assumption that injustice can, in time, be put right through discussion and compromise. By killing and destroying, the terrorists are bound to exhort publicity - and hence one of their ends - because such news will be reported.⁽⁵⁶⁾

Central to the argument that publicity is an important aim of "terrorism" is the assumption that in a rational democratic society, "terrorism" is the last resort of desperate men who have little, if any, support within the communities in which they operate. In the view of Yonah Alexander:

Terror groups by their very nature, are small and too weak to achieve an upper hand in an eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation on the battlefield. Since sheer violence can accomplish little or nothing in terms of ultimate goals, an extension of the duration and impact of the violent deed is therefore mandatory in the terrorist strategy.⁽⁵⁷⁾

Generally speaking then, "terrorist" violence is denied any strictly military objectives but is said to either satisfy the individual's craving for publicity, or forms part of a wider campaign

to publicise the "terrorists'" cause worldwide. According to the "anti-terrorist" perspective political violence also performs a symbolic function: advertising the potency of the "terrorists" and serving as a constant reminder to society that the state has lost control of the situation. Incapable of securing their goals by military means alone, the "terrorist" is forced to seek other means of securing a victory. Violence then, becomes a means to an end; creating a climate of fear and, in the process, weakening the political will of government to continue the fight. Tugwell has termed this process the "asset-to-liability shift". According to Tugwell:

The theory of the asset-to-liability shift allows us to understand the role of violence in many low-intensity revolutionary situations. To be sure, the murder of selected individuals, such as police informers and intelligence officers, has a direct tactical purpose, as does the destruction of material used by security forces. Such events apart, most violence in situations where the rebels cannot hope to win in open battle is, in Brian Jenkins' words, "aimed at the people watching, not at the actual victims. Terrorism is theatre". The members of the Provisional IRA were never under the illusion that they could drive the British security forces into the sea. They appreciated from the start that theirs would have to be a campaign of leverage, using the economic, international, and domestic side-effects of their violence on the British public and government to cause the necessary asset-to-liability shift. Propaganda and violence were and are two sides of the same coin. (58)

Herein lies the importance of the media: they represent the channels along which the message of fear is transmitted. According to Alexander, the "terrorist" uses the media for two distinct purposes:

First, to enhance the effectiveness of their violence by creating an emotional state of extreme fear in the target groups, and, thereby ultimately alter their behaviour and dispositions, or bring about a general or particular change in the structure of government or society; and second, to draw forcibly and instantaneously the attention of the "whole world" to themselves in the expectation that these audiences will be prepared to act or, in some cases, to refrain from acting in a manner that will promote the cause they presumably represent. (59)

The work of Carlos Marighela, the Brazilian guerrilla theorist, is widely quoted as providing theoretical support for this position. In his now classic work on the theory of guerrilla warfare, The Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla⁽⁶⁰⁾ Marighela advocated a strategy which combined the conventional guerrilla tactic of hit-and-run attacks on military, political and economic targets, with a propaganda campaign designed to demoralise the government and create a climate of political instability:

The war of nerves - or psychological war - is a fighting technique based on the direct or indirect use of the mass media ... Its purpose is to demoralise the government. By it we can spread false or contradictory information by sowing anxiety, doubt and uncertainty among the agents of the regime. In psychological warfare the government is at a disadvantage, and therefore will censor the means of communication. Censorship of course has a boomerang effect, since it leads to unpopularity. (61)

Thus, the "terrorists" are said to favour psychological warfare because it stacks the odds in their favour: either way, it is argued, the government cannot win: if it refuses to censor the media, it provides the "terrorists" with free publicity for their cause; if it censors the media it undermines its own credibility.

Schmid and de Graaf point to the rise and fall of the Tupamaros, a group which operated in Uruguay in the 1960s and 1970s, as further proof that publicity is an essential ingredient in the success or failure of a "terrorist" campaign. During the 1960s, the Tupamaros mounted a highly successful propaganda campaign which resulted in their opposition to the regime of Jorge Pacheco Areco attracting substantial attention in the international press. As a consequence, they argue, membership of the movement swelled from 50 members in 1965 to over 3,000 by 1970. Following the declaration of a state of siege in early 1970, however, access to the world's media became more difficult and, despite attempts to secure alternative organs for their propaganda, the movement went into decline and was eventually defeated by the military.

According to Schmid and de Graaf, it was this latter failure to generate publicity for their cause that was the major factor in their eventual defeat. In securing and extending support for their cause, they argue, "The media were their best allies".(62)

Consequently, the success or failure of a "terrorist" campaign is said to depend on the "terrorists'" success or failure in gaining access to the media. In order to secure this goal, the "terrorists" are said to have become remarkably adept at exploiting the media to their advantage - even to the point of allowing them to shape the nature of their military campaigns. According to Laqueur:

The media act as a selective magnifying glass: terrorism always exerts a strange fascination, especially from a safe distance. It has all the ingredients of a good story - mystery, quick action, tension, drama. It seems natural, therefore, that the media should give inordinate publicity to them. The vital importance of publicity has been realised by generations of terrorists all over the world: the terrorist act alone is nothing; publicity is all. The Algerian rebels of the 1950s quite deliberately transferred their struggle from the countryside to the capital, even though they suspected that they could not possibly win the battle for the capital. As one of them wrote, if ten enemies are killed in the 'djebel', no one will take notice, but even a small incident in Algiers will be picked up by the American press and prominently featured the next day in New York. He was quite right - the Algerians were beaten in the struggle for the capital, but they won the fight for publicity which, in the long run, was the decisive battle.(63)

Another method of securing the attention of the world's media, it has been argued, is to kidnap, or kill, a leading political or social figure: the killing of Lord Mountbatten by the IRA, the kidnapping and eventual assassination of Aldo Moro by the Red Brigades, the kidnapping and eventual release of the world-famous racing driver, Juan Manuel Fangio by the Castro-led Cuban rebels, all secured extensive publicity for these groups, and all are isolated as key examples of how the "terrorists" have sought to manipulate the media. A further tactic,

and one which was successfully used by the PLO, is for the "terrorists" to select a media-saturated event and then hijack it for the purposes of propaganda. In some cases "terrorist" groups, anxious to maintain the media's attention, have stage-managed incidents for the sole purpose of inviting the media: the IRA's roadblock at Carrickmore is viewed by many British counter-insurgency experts as a clear example of how the media have been used by the "terrorists".⁽⁶⁴⁾

According to the "anti-terrorist" perspective, the success or failure of "terrorism" lies not in the scale of the violence the "terrorists" are able to produce, but in the scale of publicity this violence generates. Moreover, in a perspective which isolates "publicity" as the primary motivating force of political violence, all publicity is seen as good publicity, and all publicity is beneficial to the "terrorists". According to Catton:⁽⁶⁵⁾

If publicity is what terrorists seek, then the attainment of publicity is a "success" and is rewarding. If the media provide terrorists with publicity, the media therefore reinforce terrorism.⁽⁶⁶⁾

The argument that "terrorism" feeds off, and is motivated by the desire for publicity, commands such widespread support that it now occupies a central place in conventional thinking on the subject. And, on the surface, its attraction is not difficult to understand. There can be little doubt that securing a wider audience for their cause is likely to be an important consideration in the strategy of many anti-state groups; or that the purpose of anti-state propaganda may be to recruit members for their organisations at home, and financial and political support for their cause from abroad. It may also be true that the use of political violence, in certain situations, may increase the news value of anti-state groups, and therefore attract media attention to these groups. Furthermore, the argument that the

news value of political violence (as indeed of all issues or events) declines, and therefore attracts smaller headlines and less prominence, with repetition is also without doubt. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, the duration of the Northern Ireland conflict, together with the decline in, and predictability of, political violence in the Six Counties, has led to the marginalisation of Northern Ireland as a news story in the British media. However, it is a big step from these rather general observations to the argument advanced by the "anti-terrorist" perspective that the media are the simple dupes of the "terrorists", or that they provide a free platform and an unobstructed channel for "terrorist" propaganda. Indeed, when this proposition is examined in closer detail, a number of significant questions are raised, questions which the supporters of this argument not only fail to answer, but, perhaps more significantly, fail to ask.

What is noticeably absent from the "anti-terrorist" perspective on "terrorism" in general, and the relationship between "terrorism" and the media in particular, is any real attempt to provide a serious understanding of the social and political forces which motivate individuals and groups to use violence as a means of securing their goals. Indeed, by focusing on the assumed need of the "terrorists" for publicity, the proponents of this argument are relieved of the need to provide a clear analysis of the social and political objectives of anti-state groups, and the legitimacy or otherwise of their causes. Laqueur's suggestion that one learns more about a "terrorist" group by "looking at its victims than at its manifestos" may be convenient but it is hardly conducive to furthering our understanding of the political dimension of "terrorism". The net effect of this approach is that anti-state violence is largely separated from its social and political causes. This tendency to de-politicise "terrorism" is further reinforced by the failure to differentiate between the variety of groups

at any given time engaging in anti-state violence. By definition, a group or individual engaged in violence against an established political order are "terrorists", and by definition all such violence is publicity orientated. As Schlesinger et al have argued:

Grouping these disparate movements under the unifying label of "international terrorism" ignores important differences between them. They appear to be the same because they are shown as engaging in similar actions (bombing and kidnaps) with similar results (the death of innocent people). In the process, the complexity and specificity of the circumstances which have produced these various movements slides from view. They are detached from their particular histories and redefined as part of a general phenomenon of our times. (67)

In that it ignores the possible legitimacy of anti-state violence under certain circumstances and fails to provide a clear analysis of either the groups involved in such violence or the level of support they enjoy within the communities in which they operate, the "anti-terrorist" perspective ignores much of that which could give meaning to the phenomenon of "terrorism". As Curtis has written:

Instead the "terrorists" are portrayed as the cause: they are seen as confidence tricksters, purveying lies and organising spectacular events to con both their own community and more distant audiences. The problem is located not in reality but in the mind: the "terrorists" are said to manipulate or condition people into believing lies. (68)

De-politicised and de-legitimised, anti-state violence is explained either in terms of individual pathology: the "terrorist" is presented as a psychopathic monster engaged in killing for its own sake; or, more commonly, in terms of its essential criminality. This argument that political violence, and the publicity it seeks to attract, is best understood in terms of individual pathology or criminality, is one which, since the early 1970s, has increasingly been applied to the activities of the IRA. Paul Johnson, for example, writing in the New Statesman, described the activities of the IRA in the following

terms:

In Britain, as well as in Ulster, we face in the IRA not a nationalist movement, not a league of patriots, not "guerillas" nor "freedom fighters", or anything which can be dignified with a political name, but an organisation of psychopathic murderers who delight in maiming and slaughtering the innocent and whose sole object and satisfaction in life is the destruction of human flesh. The misguided patriots who joined the IRA in the heady days of 1968 and after have melted away and have been replaced by men and women who have far more in common with Ian Brady and Myra Hindley than with old-style terrorists like Michael Collins and De Valera. (69)

The significance of this argument in which "terrorism" is denied a political dimension and is redefined in terms of its criminal nature, is one that goes far beyond outraged letters and articles in newspapers. In Britain, it has provided the ideological justification for the state's anti-terrorist strategy in Northern Ireland. Between 1974 and 1979, the Labour Government devised a policy for Northern Ireland designed to localise the conflict and remove British troops from direct involvement. The rationale behind this strategy was that, by presenting the Irish conflict as an internal problem of law and order, rather than a conflict over the legitimacy of the Northern Ireland state and Britain's continuing involvement in its affairs, Britain could extricate itself from a politically embarrassing situation. The cornerstone of this policy, known as "Ulsterisation", was an attempt to criminalise the IRA and its activities in the hope of undermining its standing at home and abroad. To this end "special category status", by which those convicted of "terrorist" offences were granted special privileges in recognition of the political nature of their offences, was removed in 1976.

As we shall see below, the insistence on criminalising violence which might otherwise be seen as resulting from more complex social and political motivations, together with the argument that this violence is

motivated by publicity, have been used by counter-insurgency experts to justify imposing tighter controls over the media.

A second criticism of the argument that "terrorism" depends on publicity is that it assumes a trade-off between publicity and an increase in support for the "terrorists" and their social and political goals. While in the long term the success of a "terrorist" campaign may well depend upon their ability to secure wider support for their ends, to assume that all publicity is necessarily good publicity, and therefore beneficial to this end, is singularly implausible. The indiscriminate killing of individuals, for example, may well bring substantial publicity for "terrorist" groups, but may also have disastrous consequences in terms of public support. Take, for example, the Birmingham pub bombings of 1974. The bombing of two pubs in Birmingham in November, 1974, undoubtedly secured extensive publicity for the IRA. And, if we accept that this was the sole purpose behind these acts, then the Birmingham bombings were undoubtedly an IRA "success". However, the Birmingham bombings also precipitated the passing of the Prevention of Terrorism Act, and also led to a backlash of public opinion, neither of which can be said to have been beneficial to the IRA. Similarly, the bombing of Harrods during the Christmas rush hour in 1983 was seen by many, including many inside the IRA, as a major setback to Sinn Fein's attempt to gain a platform for its views.

A third criticism of the argument that the "terrorists" engage in violence primarily for the publicity it generates, is that its proponents have usually had little to say about how "terrorist" violence is actually handled by the media. Apart from rather general statements that it is glamourised or over-emphasised, little attention is paid to the character of news coverage itself nor its possible consequences for public opinion. Indeed, the "anti-terrorist" perspective, as generally

formulated, allows for no such thing as "bad publicity". Publicity is either directly beneficial to the "terrorists" in that it leads to increased support for, and increased awareness of, their political ends, or it is indirectly beneficial, in that each act of violence symbolises the state's inability to maintain order and thus undermines its authority.

Formulated in this way, the precise nature of the publicity given to "terrorist" violence is of little significance: all publicity, good or bad, is of utility to the "terrorists". Despite the centrality and the significance of this argument within the "anti-terrorist" perspective, its supporters are thus relieved of the need to furnish anything in the way of evidence to show that publicity serves either of these two goals: that it either leads to increased support and awareness of the "terrorists'" goals, or that it symbolises the inability of the state to maintain order and stability. If anything, such arguments run contrary to a growing body of research evidence which suggests that the way in which the media report anti-state violence, particularly when this violence is directed against the journalists' own nation state, may serve none of the goals postulated by the "anti-terrorist" perspective, and indeed may actually work against them.

Underlying the arguments advanced by the "anti-terrorist" perspective is the belief that, in its reporting of "terrorism", the media play a vital role in shaping public attitudes to it and that, therefore, the media are a crucial weapon in the battle for public opinion. In attempting to assess the likely impact of media coverage on public opinion, the nature of this coverage needs obviously to be taken into account. If we accept that public attitudes to a given issue are likely to be influenced by the negative or positive treatment this issue is accorded on television and in the press, then the degree to which the media reinforce "terrorism" or undermine the state's

authority in fighting it, is perhaps best assessed by examining the nature of the coverage accorded to it.

In moving to how the media have reported "terrorism" and those who engage in it, it becomes clear that, rather than functioning to reinforce "terrorism" or undermine the authority of the state, media coverage may actually have the reverse effect.

Epstein, in his study of the coverage accorded to anti-government violence against American supported states in Latin America in the American press, found a high degree of press bias in favour of these regimes and against the "terrorists".⁽⁷⁰⁾ According to Epstein, even though these regimes were highly authoritarian and often engaged in serious acts of repression against segments of their own citizenry, the general tendency within the American press was to "portray most individuals who are hostile to United States supported regimes as fanatics who are irrationally bent on violence and destruction".⁽⁷¹⁾ Apart from observing that the American press tended to concentrate on acts of "terrorism" rather than the government repression which often gave rise to them, Epstein found that the coverage accorded to "terrorism" ignored much of that which could give some sense or meaning to it:

No attempt is made to explain why certain groups might wish to use violent means against these governments. No articles refer to the serious repressive acts of these same governments against segments of their own citizenry.⁽⁷²⁾

Indeed, with the partial exception of the New York Times, Epstein found that the American press rarely pointed their readers to the possibility that "terrorism" and government repression are perhaps related. Instead, the general tendency was to portray government repression "as an unfortunate but necessary 'response' to actions initiated by the "terrorists".⁽⁷³⁾ In terms of the general coverage accorded to

anti-government violence against these regimes, it was Epstein's view that the American press presented their readers with an interpretation in keeping with the US government's position. According to the author:

such orthodox views on matters of government policy (here foreign affairs) act to build or to reinforce public support for decisions made by a limited group of policy makers in government. The press plays a most essential role in conditioning the public to accept such policy without a serious discussion of either its implications or its alternatives. Within the context of a largely co-operative press, one of the major uses of labels like "terrorism" is to help shape public opinion. Whether or not those running major newspapers understand or intend the political function being performed by their newspapers is of little importance.⁽⁷⁴⁾

In an analysis of the coverage of Northern Ireland in the British media⁽⁷⁵⁾ during two periods in 1974 and 1975, Philip Elliott also draws similar conclusions. Elliott found that while the British media gave a disproportionate amount of space to political violence, with few exceptions, this violence was reported in a simplistic, de-contextualised, and ahistorical manner which concentrated on the symptoms rather than the underlying causes of violence. As a consequence, Elliott argues, Irish political violence was presented as a series of unique and inexplicable events. Rather than undermining the legitimacy and authority of the state, it was Elliott's view that the reporting of Irish "terrorism" actually served to strengthen that authority by mobilising society against the threat posed by "terrorist" activities.

Elliott also offers a cautionary note against the argument often advanced by the "anti-terrorist" perspective, that television is attracted to "terrorism" because it embraces the key elements of drama and visual impact. On the basis of his own content analysis, Elliott found that:

The first finding seems to support the claim that the news on television over-emphasises violence. It is doubtful, however, whether the results also support the argument that often accompanies such a claim, that violence is attractive to television, a visual medium, because it is a visual phenomenon. For the first period, data is available for the BBC radio programme, The World at One. This radio programme carried an even larger proportion of violent incident stories than the two national television bulletins. Apparently, it is not the visual impact of violence so much as its immediacy that is important in accounting for the emphasis on violence. Radio is the fastest medium, bringing up-to-date news of the latest events. Violent incidents are sudden unexpected events which lend themselves to this type of immediate reporting. Many television news stories, including many reports of violent incidents were simply read by a newsreader to camera and so could be regarded as visual radio news of much the same immediate type. (76)

A further criticism of the argument that the "terrorists" engage in violence simply for the publicity it generates and the wider audience it secures for their cause, is that it ignores the complexity of the reasons which may motivate the use of violence. To illustrate this, let us take two examples: the killing of a leading social or political figure and the killing of a soldier. In the case of the former - the killing of Lord Mountbatten, for example - the motivation may well be to secure worldwide publicity for their cause, or it could well be the act of disillusioned, embittered sections of a movement trying to undermine formal political or peace initiatives. But can we say the same for the latter? This act could be undertaken for a variety of reasons: as a reprisal for a previous act, as a warning to the government that the group still exists as a viable force, or to boost the morale of its members or supporters. In each case, the intended message of the act and its intended audience are different, and in none of these cases would the group be dependent upon the media to transmit its message.

Consequently, the argument that "terrorism" depends on publicity generates more heat than light, and poses many more questions than it

attempts to answer. While accusing the media of giving too much attention to "terrorist" violence, it ignores the question of what form this publicity takes, and perhaps more importantly, who it benefits. While the above arguments are hardly conclusive, they do sound a cautionary note against a too simplistic reading of the media's role in the reporting of "terrorism". At the very least, they suggest that the publicity given to "terrorism" need not necessarily be detrimental to the state, and indeed may be beneficial.

Violence a contagion

When a hostage taker gets his picture on the evening news, we can just about predict the epidemic that follows. Some other sick soul grabs his hand gun and takes a hostage too. (77)

To turn now to the final, and perhaps most controversial, argument advanced by supporters of the "anti-terrorist" perspective on the relationship between the media and "terrorism": that is the contention that the manner in which "terrorism" is reported by the media contributes to its escalation. Conventionally, this argument has taken three forms. First, it has been argued that the media have glamourised "terrorist" violence, made public heroes out of its perpetrators, and in doing so have persuaded more people to emulate their deeds. Secondly, that the detailed reporting of "terrorist" and "anti-terrorist" operations has provided disaffected groups with the practical knowledge and the techniques with which to undertake acts of "terrorism". And thirdly, that the mere presence of the media, and in particular television, is capable of increasing the scale and intensity of violence and sparking off new violence.

The argument that "terrorism" is, like a disease, contagious, and that the media, wittingly or unwittingly, have helped spread its infection around the world, is one that has received widespread support

within the "anti-terrorist" perspective. Mosse, for example, has argued that "violence is contagious" and that "television has the power to spread it or to prevent it spreading further".⁽⁷⁸⁾ Wilkinson talks of how media coverage of "terrorism" "has the effect not merely of handing the terrorists the advertisement they so crave, but also of inspiring other groups to emulate them for similar purposes and even to outbid each other in atrocity".⁽⁷⁹⁾ The Gardiner Report on the disturbances in Northern Ireland argued that the media encouraged "terrorist" activity by giving publicity to "terrorist" leaders, and by sensational reporting which gave a false glamour to violence and those engaged in it.⁽⁸⁰⁾

Perhaps the most frequently cited evidence in support of the contagion thesis is that of hijacking. During the late 1960s and early 1970s hijacking was to reach almost epidemic proportions. For many individuals hijacking served as a means of ventilating personal grievances or making financial gain; political groups used hijacking in order to secure the release of their colleagues and to bring attention to their cause; while others used it as a means of gaining political asylum. The frequency of hijackings, and the fact that many hijackers used similar techniques and often made similar demands, fuelled speculation that the publicity given to hijacking by the media was assisting in its contagion.

Schmid and de Graaf, among others, cite hijacking as substantial proof that the media contribute to the spreading of "terrorism" by providing potential "terrorists" with the techniques for imitation. "Hijacking", they argue, "is one of the most spectacular phenomena and, as such, especially attractive for imitators".⁽⁸¹⁾ In support of their argument, they cite a sequence of 26 hijackings which occurred over a period of eight years, which they argue constituted a causal chain of

events in which the media played a key role. The first of these incidents, and the one which they argue provided both the model and the stimulus for subsequent hijackings, occurred in 1971. On 12th November, 1971, Paul Joseph Cini, a 26 year old Scotsman, seized an Air Canada DC-8 en route to Toronto and threatened to blow the aircraft up unless he was given a sum of money. What was unusual about this particular case was that Cini carried on board his own parachute as a means of escape. Despite its failure, the case attracted substantial coverage in the American media. Over the following 7 years, a further 26 cases of hijacking in which the hijackers used a similar technique were recorded. These incidents took place in countries as far apart as Brazil, Japan, and Britain, though the majority were in North America. The writers conclude that the fact that these subsequent hijackings all adopted the same techniques as the 1971 case indicated that a causal relationship was at work, and that the media, by giving publicity to the first of these cases, was, ergo, culpable for the others.

In our view, the media must have played a decisive role in fostering the twenty-six parachute hijackings that followed the Cini example. Had the media not reported the detail about the parachute, these imitations in all likelihood would not have taken place. (82)

This suggestion that the media, simply by giving extensive publicity to one incident, actually provide the stimulus for subsequent acts is one that has also been advanced by Wardlaw. According to Wardlaw:

If one looks at chronologies of events of political terrorism, it is apparent that during a particular period bombings, assassinations, or hostage-taking enjoy a particular popularity. Frequently it is possible to identify in each series a highly publicised event of that class. (83)

Yonah Alexander, a frequent proponent of the contagion thesis, has argued a similar point:

To be sure, because terrorism, however local, is by its very nature a world-wide theatrical attraction, it tends to encourage angry frustrated groups beyond a particular country to undertake similar acts as a way out of their helplessness and alienation. For example, several weeks after Argentina's Montoneros removed the body of ex-President Pedro Arambura to secure the return of Eva Peron's body from Spain, Burmese terrorists stole the body of U Thant for the purpose of using it in negotiations with the Burmese government. (84)

Apart from this somewhat inconclusive example, Alexander can provide no firm evidence for such a contention. Instead, he simply refers to two opinion polls which found a greater public awareness of the PLO after extensive publicity had been given to its leader Yasir Arafat, or quotes like-minded academics and politicians who believe a cause and effect relationship exists. (85)

In other instances, the evidence provided in support of the contagion thesis is even less convincing. Brian Jenkins, for example, in a sweeping generalisation, suggests that:

It also appears that the reporting of terrorism inspires other acts of terrorism. It is difficult to imagine the South Moluccans doing what they did in the absence of the publicity previously given to Palestinian terrorists and other groups. The actions of West German terrorists probably inspired Italy's Red Brigades just as the West Germans were themselves inspired by certain groups - especially the Tupamaros - in South America. Similar incidents follow one another. Tactics that achieve widespread publicity are imitated elsewhere... The news media definitely play an important role in terrorism. (86)

The argument that the media have played a significant role in the spreading of "terrorism" throughout the world is, on the basis of such highly impressionistic evidence, to say the least, hardly convincing. The mere fact that one act is similar to another does not, in itself, prove that the reporting of one caused the other. As Schlesinger et al have pointed out, (87) the techniques adopted by "terrorist" groups cannot be evaluated in isolation from the particular social and

political contexts in which they take place. To draw causal relationships between spatially, geographically and culturally disparate incidents simply on the basis of their similarity ignores other conditions which may explain why such acts occur, and the circumstances under which one technique was chosen over another. It assumes, in the case of hijacking, for example, that the country in which the hijacking takes place had given extensive publicity to a previous hijacking, that those involved were aware of this publicity, and, perhaps more importantly, were motivated by it.

Central to the contagion thesis, and indeed central to the issues of media effects in general, is the assumption that the real problem lies not in the images and messages of violence per se, but rather in the receivers of these images and messages - the audience. The assumption is that the audience, especially an uneducated and fragmented one, is susceptible to the reports it reads in its newspapers and the images it watches on its television and cinema screens. These reports and images are said to act as a powerful stimulant to social action. Attractive as this assumption may be to advertising agencies, it has little basis in empirical research. What research has been undertaken into the relationship between the media's portrayal of violence as a stimulus to violence in real life has generally been restricted to the effects of fictional violence on children and adolescents. Even under tightly controlled test conditions, the findings have, at best, been inconclusive while at worst contradictory.⁽⁸⁸⁾ To put such evidence at its strongest, the media have been shown to be simply one possible variable in determining social action. Generally speaking, those who have sought to give credence to the contagion thesis have ignored the possibility that there may be other factors which are of equal, if not greater, importance in explaining particular forms of social action.

A further argument contained within the contagion thesis is that the media, by giving extensive coverage to "terrorist" violence, give the impression that they sympathise with the "terrorists", and give their activities an aura of glamour which enlists support for their cause and persuades people to violence. Such a view has been forwarded by the British counter-insurgency expert, Brian Crozier, who has argued:

Media publicity tends, very often, to favour the terrorists because of the drama they represent ... it is in the very nature of television as a medium that it tends to favour the revolutionary side. This is not a reflection on the people who are involved in television. It is in the character of the medium itself. (89)

A similar point has also been made by Alexander, who has argued that:

by providing extensive coverage of incidents the media give the impression that they sympathise with the terrorists' cause, thereby creating a climate congenial to further violence. (90)

Such statements are both simplistic and misleading, and again tend to run in advance of the evidence and ignore the manner in which "terrorism" is reported by the media. As I have argued above, research on the media's reporting of "terrorism" suggests that, rather than being sympathetic towards those who engage in anti-state violence, the media are highly hostile to, and indeed seek to deny the rationality of, such campaigns. The argument deployed by the "anti-terrorist" perspective, that the media "glamourise" or are "sympathetic" to the "terrorists", is hardly supported by even a cursory examination of the coverage accorded to "terrorist" violence. The coverage accorded to the INLA's bombing of the Droppin Well pub in Ballykelly in December, 1982, can hardly have been said to have been sympathetic to the "terrorists". Without exception, the British press condemned those responsible and gave extensive coverage to the victims of the blast and extensive space to those critical of the attack. The Daily Mirror, in an editorial

typical of the response of the British press, described those responsible for the act in the following terms:

The disco bombers of Ulster are completely mad. But it is a callous, calculated, unspeakable madness. It is beyond any sane person's comprehension. It cannot be treated.

The killers of Ballykelly cannot debate, only destroy. They have no arguments but Armalite rifles and explosives. They have no cause but carnage. (91)

While Shaun Usher in the Daily Mail was to write:

That Monday night disco, where soldiers from the Cheshire Regiment relaxed in a semblance of normality, was a symbol and landmark of - by Northern Ireland standards - an extraordinary community, deliberately immune to hatred.

For the INLA, with the murder of Airey Neave included on its battle honours, the peaceful village was an intolerable affront and dangerous example. Mass murder came to Ballykelly not in spite of being a modest oasis of sanity offering truce in a corner of the forgotten war - but because of it. (92)

The British press's depiction of those responsible for the Ballykelly bombing as mindless psychopaths, hell bent on the destruction of innocent lives, can hardly be said to have glamourised "terrorism". Nor could the publicity given to the "terrorists" be said to have been favourable.

Despite the absence of any significant evidence in their support, the theories advanced by the "anti-terrorist" perspective have commanded a central position in the contemporary debate over the media's coverage of political violence. Since the early 1970s, these theories have provided the ideological justification for a continuing attack on the media. In the face of this attack, journalists, and especially those working within television, have increasingly been placed on the defensive. The political space in which they can address "domestic terrorism" has been eroded, tendencies towards self-censorship have

increased, and their freedom to address controversial issues has been restricted. While in the short term, the effect of these theories has led to an increasingly cautious approach within broadcasting, their long term significance has yet to be fully determined. Given the widely accepted argument that the media constitute part of the "terrorist" problem, it is only natural that the critics of the media should turn their attention to how it could and should be controlled. During the 1970s, and in the wake of the criticism being levelled at the media, a variety of information strategies have been advocated by "terrorist experts", strategies which sought to restrict even further the space in which journalists could handle the issue of anti-state violence.

"Terrorism" and the media: strategies of control

The reckless driver does not have to kill anyone, or even hit anything, to be found guilty. He merely has to handle his vehicle recklessly. A television camera can be at least as lethal as a car. (93)

The barrage of criticism that was levelled at the media's coverage of "terrorism" during the early 1970s brought in its wake increased demands that the media should put their houses in order. The "experts" were not slow in suggesting what changes they would like to see implemented in the way newspapers and television approached the reporting of "terrorism". Central to many of the proposals advocated within official and counter-insurgency circles was the belief that when a democratic society was confronted with "terrorism", the media could not, and indeed should not, remain neutral. If, as was commonly argued, the media had been used by the "terrorists" in their campaigns against legally constituted authority, then the converse could also be true: the media could assist democratic states in their campaigns against

"terrorism". This argument, that the media constituted a weapon which could be used by either side, has been advanced by the British counter-insurgency expert Richard Clutterbuck. According to Clutterbuck:

The television camera is like a weapon lying in the street. Either side can pick it up and use it. If governments use it in this way encouraging their officials, policemen and soldiers to help the mediamen, and answer their questions - it is far more effective than any kind of censorship or government control. (94)

While the real issue is conceptualised as being one of controlling the media, the problem was how much control and by whom? The dilemma facing those who called for greater control over the media in their reporting of "terrorism" was voiced by Sir Robin Day when he posed the crucial question:

How, in a liberal democracy, with a tradition of free reporting and independent broadcasting, can television be prevented from becoming an ally of terrorism and other forms of violence used for political ends? (95)

Generally speaking, the supporters of the "anti-terrorist" perspective have canvassed four "solutions" to this dilemma: the creation of additional legislation designed to counteract "irresponsible" journalism by creating a series of "information crimes" backed up by legal sanctions; direct censorship by governmental bodies of material deemed to be beneficial to the "terrorists"; a system of formal news guidelines designed to ensure "responsible" reporting of "terrorism"; and a system of informal co-operation between the media and anti-terrorist agencies during particular "terrorist" incidents.

For many critics of the media's reporting of "terrorism", the solution to "irresponsible" journalism was a simple one: the government had at its disposal a range of existing legislation which, if used more stringently, could ensure that journalists who crossed the

line between reporting "terrorism" and encouraging it could face prosecution. In Britain, the Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act, 1986, makes it an offence (section 11) for a person to fail to disclose information which might be of material assistance in preventing acts of "terrorism". In the Irish Republic, section 31 of the Broadcasting Authority Act bars the broadcasting of any material calculated to further the aims of an illegal organisation. These acts, it is argued, should be used against any journalist acting in an "irresponsible" manner.

Others have gone even further and demanded the passing of additional legislation, including, for example, making it a criminal offence for the broadcasting organisations to transmit material which encourages "terrorism" or violence used for political ends. The broadcasting authorities should be required, under new legislation, to deposit copies of scripts and tapes of programmes, at least in the fields of news and current affairs, with a central organisation analogous to the British Library.⁽⁹⁶⁾

While the passing of additional legislation designed to strictly control the media's coverage of "terrorism" may be attractive, few governments have shown any willingness to travel along this path. Except in periods of exceptional crisis, real or imagined, the legislative process is often slow and burdensome, and any government attempting to curtail the freedom of the media via the courts would be likely to face stiff opposition.

Similar problems accompany the second of the four options, direct censorship. While direct censorship would appear to be the obvious solution, given the argument that "terrorism" depends on publicity, with few exceptions, it is rarely advocated as a viable long term information strategy for the state, partly because it has rarely been

necessary. In Britain, for example, the mere threat of governmental control has, more often than not, been sufficient to persuade the broadcasting authorities to put their own houses in order and instigate a system of internal control and regulation. Indeed, the mere threat of direct government control is likely to be more effective than its implementation. More important, perhaps, is the fact that, while direct censorship may bring short term benefits, these are likely to be outweighed by its long term costs. As Schlesinger has pointed out:

Although mere expediency might seem to dictate outright censorship in order to deny violent opponents of the state the supposedly clear-cut advantage of publicity, matters are not so simple. Overt censorship threatens the legitimacy of the liberal-democratic order, one in which the perceived conception of press freedom is that the media are completely separate from the state. (97)

This is not to ignore the importance of censorship, nor to suggest that censorship has been ruled out altogether; on the contrary, censorship (often in the form of the D-notice system) has been frequently employed in the past and will no doubt continue to be a feature of media-state relations in the future. As was noted in the previous chapter, the censorship of plays, documentaries and current affairs programmes and the banning of interviews with leaders of illegal organisations has been a regular feature of broadcasting's response to the continuing conflict in Northern Ireland. However, direct government interference into the affairs of broadcasting in the past has shown it to be a highly unpredictable and unwieldy strategy of news management. Direct censorship not only threatens the credibility of broadcasting, it is also likely to create opposition and friction from journalists. (98) If anything, direct censorship represents an unpredictable managerial resource and as such it will always be the last rather than the first resort of government.

The third option, and the one most frequently advocated by

counter-insurgency experts in Britain and America, is a system of formal news guidelines designed so as to clarify in advance areas of potential conflict between the interests of the media and those agencies seeking to defeat the "terrorists". The attraction of such guidelines for anti-terrorist agencies is obvious: by regulating the media's role prior to, during, and after a "terrorist" incident, areas of potential conflict can be resolved in advance and the media's coverage of such incidents can be more carefully controlled.

The precise nature of the guidelines advocated has varied from country to country according to the perceived nature of the "terrorist" problem, and the objectives of military and law-enforcement agencies. While the character of such guidelines may vary, their objective has always been the same: a stricter control over the flow and the character of information on "terrorism" disseminated by the media.

Generally speaking, the trend towards the use of formal guidelines in relation to the media's reporting of "terrorism" has been more pronounced in the United States than in Britain. The major source of "terrorism" in America has not come from national separatist or revolutionary movements, as has been the case in Britain and other European states, but from kidnapping, usually for financial rather than political ends. And this is reflected in the nature of the news guidelines demanded by law-enforcement agencies.

In 1976, following a series of widely publicised kidnappings, the Task Force on Disorders and Terrorism published a report calling for a rethink on the way the media approached the reporting of "terrorist" incidents. The Report concluded by calling upon the media to implement the following guidelines in their reporting of "terrorism":

1. The use of a "pool" of reporters to cover the situation on behalf of all news organisations.

2. Limitations on direct interviews with hostage-takers during an incident.
3. Avoidance of enquiries to reveal tactical information that would be detrimental to police operations if disclosed.
4. Delaying the reporting of details which might inflame the situation.
5. Avoidance, where possible, of reporting that emphasises the sensational aspects of the incident.
6. Reliance upon official sources.
7. Balancing of coverage of self-serving terrorist propaganda with contrasting information from official sources. (99)

As with all attempts to impose news guidelines from the outside, these proposals were given a mixed reception by the main American television networks. As we shall see below in the case of British broadcasting, the impetus for the use of guidelines in the reporting of "terrorism" has generally come from within the broadcasting industry itself, partly as a response to external criticism and partly in an attempt to pre-empt government-imposed regulations.

These two factors were undoubtedly influential in the Columbia Broadcasting Station's decision to become the first major American broadcasting network to enact a system of internal news guidelines in April, 1977. During the previous two months, two major kidnappings forced the issue of the media's coverage of "terrorism" to the top of the political agenda. Both these incidents (the kidnapping of an Indianapolis mortgage executive on the 8th February, and the kidnapping of 134 people by the Hanafi Muslim sect on the 9th March) resulted in widespread criticism over the way television approached the reporting of "terrorism". (100) Ambassador Andrew Young expressed concern about the contagious effect of the coverage accorded to the Hanafi incident, stating that such coverage was tantamount to "advertising to neurotic people" who are inspired to attempt "suicidal and ridiculous acts." (101)

On the 14th April, 1977, in the wake of the criticism levelled at American television over its coverage of these two incidents, Richard S. Salent, President of CBS News, issued seven guidelines to be followed by CBS journalists. The document began with four assumptions: first, that there was a real possibility of "contagion" in covering these kinds of events; secondly, that suppressing news could adversely affect CBS News credibility; thirdly, encourage rumour; and fourthly, distort news judgement for "some extraneous judgmental purpose".⁽¹⁰²⁾ While the guidelines issued by CBS called for restraint and care in the coverage of "terrorist" incidents, and placed an embargo on live coverage ("since we may fall into the trap of providing an unedited platform for him"), except in the most compelling circumstances, CBS retained the right to make the final decision on how incidents were to be reported.⁽¹⁰³⁾

Later in the same year, a second major network, United Press International (UPI), issued its own guidelines based in part on those of CBS. As with CBS, the guidelines issued by UPI reserved the right to cover incidents according to the criteria of news value:

1. Each station should have established procedures for coverage of such events, which should include prompt notification of management.
2. Judge each story on its own and if the story is newsworthy, cover it.
3. Coverage should be thoughtful, conscientious and show restraint, and be carried out with an awareness of the potential threat to life.
4. Report demands made as an essential point of the story but do not provide an excessive platform for those demands.
5. Reporters should avoid deliberately injecting themselves into the story as intermediaries or negotiators.
6. If there has been no mention of a deadline, no one should ask the terrorist kidnappers if there is one.

7. Above all, apply the rules of common sense.(104)

Despite opposition from some quarters to the use of guidelines on the grounds that they both amount to self-censorship and interrupt the flow of news, the trend towards a more cautious approach to the coverage of "terrorism" has gathered pace in the United States since the mid-1970s. A survey carried out by Terry in 1977 found that a quarter of the stations represented in his sample (22 out of 62) claimed to have adopted written codes for handling a terrorist-hostage situation. A further 17 stations claimed to be writing a code when the survey was taken. On his sample, only 9 said they would be unlikely to adopt news codes.⁽¹⁰⁵⁾ Similar developments have also been shown to be taking place in the press.⁽¹⁰⁶⁾

In Britain a similar process of external attack leading to internal control and regulation occurred during the early 1970s. The British state's apparent inability to prosecute a successful campaign against the paramilitaries placed the broadcasters in a position where any attempt to provide an impartial account of events in Northern Ireland was viewed as an act of disloyalty. In an attempt to ward off the possibility of future attacks and placate those who called for government-imposed regulations, the BBC drew up a list of rules applicable to the coverage of all issues relating to Northern Ireland. As was noted in the previous chapter, these guidelines were first hammered out in the early 1970s and they are illustrative of how sensitive the authority had become over the issue of Northern Ireland:

1. News staff sent to Northern Ireland work through Controller Northern Ireland and News Editor Northern Ireland; they must be consulted.
2. No news agency report from Northern Ireland should be used without checking the Belfast newsroom first.

3. The IRA must not be interviewed without prior authority from ENCA. There can be no question of doing the interview first and seeking permission for broadcast afterwards. (107)

The rules also forbid the use of broadcasts from illegal radios and the reporting of bomb scares involving BBC buildings. In terms of keeping the IRA and other illegal organisations off the air, the rules proved an undoubted success. Between 1972 and 1977, the BBC was to carry only two interviews with IRA spokesmen - one in 1972 and the other in 1974. During 1971, a similar system of internal control was also developed within the IBA. Any programme dealing with any subject related to Northern Ireland had to be approved at the highest level. These developments have made the Northern Ireland conflict one of the most sensitive and the most tightly controlled subjects within British broadcasting.

If the coverage of Northern Ireland during the early 1970s was characterised by a process of external attack leading to internal control, the coverage of "terrorism" since the mid-1970s has been marked by a process of mutual co-operation and integration. During this period, anti-terrorist agencies in Britain have increasingly pursued a policy of integrating the news media into the process of news management. The thinking behind this strategy was simple: it was hoped that by developing closer relations with the media, journalists could be persuaded of the "realities" of the "terrorist" problem and thus be enlisted as allies in the battle against "terrorism". This strategy, variously described as "mutual aid", "voluntary restraint", or "responsible journalism", has been widely supported by "anti-terrorist experts". Paul Wilkinson, for example, has argued that:

government pressures to control the media on the grounds that a terrorist emergency justifies such measures should

be strongly resisted. The curtailment of a free press would play directly into the hands of terrorists, being one more step towards the destruction of democracy. Fruitful co-operation between media, public, police and government, in terrorist situations, can only be achieved by informal understanding and goodwill and by voluntary restraint on the part of the media. (108)

Co-operation between the media and the state is hardly new, indeed it has a long tradition in Britain. Leaving aside contacts between highly placed news editors and state representatives via the "old boy network", there is the D-notice system which has been in operation since 1912. D-notices, which have no legal force, are issued to editors suggesting that an item, deemed by the government to be relevant to national security, should receive no publicity. While the D-notice system is meant for external defence matters, in the past it appears likely that it has also been used in relation to internal "terrorism".

During 1971, for example, Scotland Yard responded to a series of bomb attacks carried out by the Angry Brigade by sending a confidential memorandum to news editors via the Press Association. The memorandum requested editors to publish no details of two bomb attacks (one on the home of Metropolitan Commissioner Sir John Waldron, and the other on the home of the Attorney General, Sir Peter Rawlinson) until enquiries were complete. (109)

Generally speaking, however, the relationship between the media and the police continued to be marked by a degree of suspicion on both sides. It was not until the arrival of Sir Robert Mark as Metropolitan Commissioner that this ad-hoc system of news management was replaced by a more formal system of co-operation between the media and the police.

On becoming Commissioner in 1972, Mark set in train a policy of "open" press relations which was to mark a radical departure from previous police policy. The new policy was set out in an internal

Scotland Yard memorandum in 1973. It called for a more open, trusting and co-operative relationship with the media. In September, 1975, this policy was to be given further impetus when Mark held a press conference for the media at Scotland Yard with the aim of working out agreed procedures for "mutual aid" during "terrorist" incidents. (110)

Before the end of the year, this new policy was to be put to the test on three separate occasions: the Spaghetti and Balcombe Street sieges, and the kidnapping of a 17 year old Cypriot girl, Alio Kaloghriou. It proved an unqualified success in each case. Not only did the media agree to police requests for news blackouts (nine days in the kidnapping case), but in the Balcombe Street siege, by leaking a report that SAS snipers had been called to assist in the siege. As a consequence, the media played a direct role in bringing the siege to an end. In an interview given by Mark in December, 1975, he announced the new policy to be an unqualified success:

We believe the press have such a high degree of trust in us that we expect them to believe us when we tell them the truth, and we are fully confident of a responsible attitude on their part. Any apprehensions are unnecessary, because it is an entirely voluntary agreement ... There is such a degree of confidence and trust now between Fleet Street and the Metropolitan Police Force that you almost make a journalist uncomfortable if he disbelieves you. (111)

The procedures and machinery of news management developed by Mark during the mid-1970s were bequeathed to his successor, Sir David McNee, who quickly endorsed the policy and sought means of extending it. During the course of 1980, this "special relationship" between the police and the media was again put to the test with the siege at the Iranian Embassy. Within minutes of arriving at Prince's Gate, procedures for handling the media were again put into operation. (112) Once again, the media showed themselves willing to comply with the news management techniques of the police. During the course of the siege,

which was to last for six days, in return for regular police briefings, British television, radio and the press became an integral part of police operations. (113)

While this policy of voluntary restraint and mutual co-operation has met with widespread approval among politicians and anti-terrorist agencies, some critics have argued that it does not go far enough. Clutterbuck, for example, has called for the establishment of a professional body along the lines of the British Medical Association and the Law Society. This new body, the Institute for the Mass Media (IMM), would initially be confined to anyone involved in the editorial process - though this would later be extended to include all journalists working within a mass medium. The IMM, Clutterbuck argues, should have its own code of practice and would be invested with the power to strike off any media practitioner in breach of this code. Furthermore, registered members of the IMM would also be required to blacklist the work of any journalist who had knowingly broken its code of practice. Until such a body has been established, Clutterbuck suggests that temporary legislation should be introduced to enable a Chief Constable to declare a Local State of Emergency at his own discretion, for a period not to exceed six hours. During this period, the police would, by way of an Enabling Act, be able to bring charges against journalists who contravened the IMM's code of practice. (114)

Conclusion

Since the late 1960s, the debate over the media's role in the reporting of political violence has been elevated to a highly ideological plane. Drawing upon arguments about the social effects of media representations of violence and the motivating force behind political violence, which at best constituted a series of tentative hypotheses

rather than empirically validated facts, a relatively small group of academics, counter-insurgency experts and politicians have provided both the terms of reference and the intellectual backing for a concerted attack on broadcasting and the press.

In Britain, as in America and Europe, what stimulated this attack was a growing crisis of legitimacy within the liberal-democratic order. Trade union and student militancy, unsolved national problems, and race relations, contributed to a growing crisis of law and order. Against this background, the issue of political violence was to become a major preoccupation of academics, politicians and the media.⁽¹¹⁵⁾ Given that it was through the medium of mass communication that the issue of political violence was brought to the public's attention, it was hardly surprising that television and the press should come in for a degree of criticism. During the early 1970s, primarily in response to the growing crisis in Northern Ireland, arguments about the possible effects of the media's portrayal of political violence, which during the 1960s had generally lain dormant, were to be increasingly applied to the coverage of "terrorism". And during this period, the argument that the media, rather than simply reflecting political violence, was actually contributing to it, was to be increasingly voiced by conservative academics and politicians as a means of explaining the continuing conflict in Northern Ireland.

In Britain, the impact of the arguments being advanced by the "anti-terrorist" perspective has been most clearly felt by broadcasting. As the IRA increased its attacks on the British state and brought the campaign to the streets of England itself, the broadcasting authorities became increasingly sensitive to the argument that, in providing access to the "enemies" of the state, they were possibly prolonging the crisis. In an attempt to ward off future attacks, the broadcasting authorities

were to implement a system of internal control and regulation which, while maintaining the outward appearance of independence, brought them closer to the definition of the Irish conflict employed by the state. By the late 1970s, British broadcasting had abandoned any attempt to provide a critical evaluation of the Irish conflict and had, instead, in its efforts to avoid controversy, concentrated on the symptoms of the conflict rather than its underlying causes.

Since the late 1970s, however, the British state's attempts to control the broadcasting media by external criticism and political pressure has given way to a policy of integration and mutual co-operation. The long term implications of this strategy have yet to be fully worked out and, as the recent outcry over the BBC's Real Lives "At the Edge of the Union" programme illustrates, what little space is presently available in which journalists can address the issue of "domestic terrorism" is by no means secure.

Notes

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- (2) The question of the power of the media to achieve their intended effects on audiences is too large a subject to deal with here. Nevertheless, it cannot be ignored, since a basic assumption underlying both the public concern and much of the work carried out on the media, is that the media can have a significant influence over their audiences. The mass society thesis offers perhaps the most clear example of the argument that the media have powerful effects on social and political action. For an elaboration of the arguments advanced by mass society theorists, see: Bennett, T., "Theories of the media, theories of society", in Gurevitch, M., Bennett, T., Curran, J., Woollacott, J., Culture, Society and the Media, Methuen, London, 1982.
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- (5) See for example: Howitt, D. & Cumberbatch, G., Mass Media, Violence and Society, Elek Science, 1975.
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- (28) Laqueur, W. "The Continuing Failure of Terrorism", Harpers Magazine, November, 1976, p 70.
- (29) Ibid., p 71.
- (30) Ibid., p 74.
- (31) Arblaster, A. "Terrorism: Myths, Meanings and Morals", Political Studies, Vol. 25, No. 3, September, 1977.
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- (33) Wardlaw, G. Political Terrorism: Theory, Tactics and Counter Measures, Cambridge University Press, London, 1982, p 77.
- (34) Quoted in Curtis, L., Ireland: The Propaganda War, Pluto Press, London, 1984, p 161.
- (35) Ibid., pp 142-3.

- (35) Ibid., p 143.
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- (37) Laqueur, W. "The Anatomy of Terrorism", Ten Years of Terrorism, Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies, London, 1979, p 12.
- (38) See for example: Sterling, C. The Terror Network: the Secret War of International Terrorism, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1981.
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CHAPTER 4

Methodology and Fieldwork

Before returning in detail to the reporting of Northern Ireland in the following three chapters, this chapter provides an account of the methodological approaches employed in the study, and reflects on some of the practical problems encountered during the course of the fieldwork.

The principal research methods employed in this study are those of content analysis and interviewing. The fieldwork for the project itself was conducted in three stages. The first stage, which provides the focus for section one of this chapter, was undertaken during the summer of 1982 when, during a visit to the Newspaper Library of the British Museum, a content analysis of the reporting of civilian assassinations in seven British and two Northern Irish papers was carried out. A report on the findings of this analysis is presented in Chapter 5. Stages two and three of the fieldwork were conducted in Belfast and London during 1983 and 1984, when a series of interviews with journalists and representatives of the information services operated by the British Army and the Royal Ulster Constabulary were carried out. The background to these interviews is examined in the final section of this chapter and the material generated by them is presented in Chapters 5 and 6.

Section One: Content Analysis

As a substantial body of literature dealing with the strengths, limitations, design and general application of content analysis as a research method within the social sciences is widely available, a detailed evaluation of the method need not detain us here.⁽¹⁾ Instead, this section will be more concerned with providing a general account of the coding schedule employed in the project and the practical and

methodological considerations which informed its design. Nevertheless, before turning to the details of the model and procedures adopted in this study, it is perhaps necessary to say something, albeit briefly, about the significance that can be attached to an analysis of newspaper content of the kind discussed below.

Why study press content?

Any study of the press or television must, at some stage or another, address itself to what is actually there on the page or the screen. For it is the images, messages, biases and ideologies contained within media output, and their likely impact on public opinion, that lie at the very heart of the debate on the social and political significance of the mass media in contemporary society.⁽²⁾ Since the content of mass communication is seen as so significant, social scientists have sought to devise and routinise methodical procedures for the analysis of text or document content with the purpose of extracting from this content its underlying themes, images, stereotypes and biases. The traditional method used by social scientists for analysing the meaning of mass communication messages is content analysis. Defined by Berelson as a "research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of mass communication",⁽³⁾ conventional content analysis techniques record the incidence of different types of content using a previously prepared coding schedule. The strength of the method lies in producing frequency counts of different types of content which can be further cross-tabulated to show the inter-relationship of different themes and subjects. The ultimate rationale behind this attempt at procedural standardisation, as Beardsworth notes:

is the desire to produce 'hard', 'objective' data. Such data can then be expected (it is hoped) to show a high degree of inter-observer reliability. This

in turn should provide the basis for the building up of cumulative knowledge concerning document content, and hence facilitate the production of 'scientific' generalisation.⁽⁴⁾

A general survey of content analysis literature suggests that there are a number of reasons for which press content might be analysed.⁽⁵⁾ Among these, two are perhaps the most common. The first, as implied above, is from the point of view of the likely impact of this content on public opinion, and the second is to gain insight into the personalities and procedures by which newspapers are produced. It needs to be made clear, however, that content analysis on its own cannot provide final answers to either of these questions. Newspapers make people aware of certain things, and suggest the degree of importance that different events and issues have by the amount and prominence of coverage that they give them. And, while there is reason to think that one of the main functions of newspapers is to influence the shape and direction of the public debate by providing subject matter for discussion and indicating the terms in which the debate might be carried out,⁽⁶⁾ the question of how successfully, if at all, they fulfil this role is one that content analysis is ill-equipped to answer. To draw conclusions as to the influence of newspapers on their consumers simply on the basis of their manifest content alone, is to assume that the meaning attached to this content by the analyst is the same as that attached to it by the reader. Such an assumption, needless to say, is highly problematical. For, as has been pointed out elsewhere, the perspectives and values that we as newspaper readers bring to the task of reading a newspaper, may well influence how we interpret and make use of the information it provides:

If newspapers are not produced in a social vacuum neither are they read in a vacuum. The reader brings to his paper his own perspectives on the world in terms of which he interprets what he reads. His perspectives will have been formed through a continual process of

communication with others since early childhood, in particular circumstances of family life, neighbourhood, educational, work and leisure experience. His outlook is likely to bear similarities to the outlook of others with similar experiences. The same news item may therefore be given quite different interpretations by people in different situations. (7)

Similarly, to draw conclusions as to the procedures by which the information provided by newspapers is gathered, processed and presented by reference to content alone, is also problematical. An analysis of newspaper content may tell us what events and issues regularly feature in newspapers and how they are presented; it may also tell us whose views on a given event or issue are most frequently canvassed by journalists and how they are presented, but it can tell us little, if anything, about the factors and circumstances that help shape this content.

Thus, while content analysis may provide strong indications and hypotheses, if we want to know about the impact and possible influence of newspaper content on public opinion, or the routines and processes which govern newspaper production, we must, by necessity, study readers and production, as well as content.

Consequently, when it comes to the inferences that can be drawn from an analysis of newspaper content, the analyst needs to be cautious. He cannot claim to be studying events or their social consequences as such, nor can he claim to say much about what determines news output. Instead, as Hartmann, Husband and Clark point out, the content analyst has to be:

content with saying something about what has been called 'events as news' - that is, the versions of the world daily laid before the public as a kind of suggested agenda for their thought, discussion and action. How these images originate, and what kind of use is subsequently made of them are questions for further investigation by other means. (8)

Furthermore, it also needs to be recognised that, while content analysis may be an economical and reliable method for charting the major categories of news that appear over time in a given medium of communication, it is not a subtle technique (though this will obviously depend to some extent on the skill of the analyst and the nature of the coding schedule used) and it makes no pretence at capturing the nuances that may permeate any piece of prose.⁽⁹⁾

Nevertheless, despite these limitations, the appeal of systematic content analysis techniques for the student of mass media output remains a strong one. Economical, reliable and systematic in nature, content analysis clearly has advantages for the systematic investigation of a wide range of material. At the very least, it can provide a reliable statistical summary of the prominent features of news coverage. And at best, if rigorously applied according to the formal procedures of content analysis, the result can be a comprehensive and analytic survey of the general way in which a given subject (be it race,⁽¹⁰⁾ crime,⁽¹¹⁾ Northern Ireland,⁽¹²⁾ industrial relations⁽¹³⁾ or the welfare state,⁽¹⁴⁾ to name but a few) is treated in the media studied.

Bearing the above observations clearly in mind, I would now like to turn to look in broad detail at the method and procedure adopted for the study presented in Chapter 5.

Analysing press content: aims, sample and method

As we have seen in Chapter 2, the question of how Northern Ireland has been reported by the British media has already provided the focus for a number of content analyses. As a result of these earlier endeavours, our knowledge as to the general treatment accorded to Northern Ireland as a news issue by newspapers and television, though far from complete, has been expanded considerably in recent years.

Rather than retrace the steps of those studies cited in Chapter 2 which, in the main, have focused their attentions on the general subject of Northern Ireland, and have been concerned to establish the relative prominence accorded to its various dimensions (the socio-economic, the political and the military), the focus of this study is more specific in nature. It is primarily concerned with the issue of inter-communal violence (as opposed to violence directed against the security forces or the paramilitary groups) and, in particular, with the coverage accorded to civilian assassinations by the press.

Directed against the most vulnerable members of both communities and accounting for as many as two-thirds of all civilian fatalities recorded since 1969,⁽¹⁵⁾ the assassination of civilians represents one of the most significant forms of political violence in Northern Ireland, and one that has done much to polarise the two communities in the North.⁽¹⁶⁾ For these reasons alone, an understanding of how this particular form of political violence relates to, and perhaps influences, the wider conflict taking place on the streets of Belfast and Derry could be said to be indispensable to any meaningful assessment of the situation in the Six Counties.

Taking as its focus a five week period in 1972, the study assesses the kinds of information on assassinations made available to the British public. It was undertaken with the following three specific aims in mind:

1. to establish the amount and prominence of coverage given to civilian assassinations during the sampled period;
2. to assess and compare differences in coverage across the range of newspapers studied;
3. to assess and compare the range of explanations advanced by journalists as to the social and political factors that may have underpinned the assassination campaign, and the

assessments offered as to its significance in relation to the wider conflict taking place in the North.

Sampling

In considering a suitable focal point for the study, a number of factors had first to be taken into account. Prominent among these was the need to ensure that a sufficient amount of material would be generated to make the undertaking of the content analysis worthwhile. In view of the intended subject matter of the study, this was by no means a minor consideration. Since the early 1970s, the assassination campaign waged against civilians has been an important feature of the conflict in the North. It has not, however, been a constant one. Instead, like the bombing campaigns that have been waged by the paramilitary groups on both sides of the religious and political divide, the intensity of the assassination campaign has tended to ebb and flow according to the prevailing political climate, and according to the on-going political and military objectives of the organisations responsible for it. In the light of this, it soon became clear that if there was going to be a sufficient volume of reportable activity to make the study worthwhile, it would be necessary to focus on a period when the incidence of assassinations was high.

Before arriving at a final decision as to when the study should commence, it was also necessary to take into account the prevailing level of press interest in the Northern Ireland story as a whole. Since the early 1970s, as we have seen in Chapter Two, press interest in events in the North has diminished significantly. As a consequence Northern Ireland stories, particularly those dealing with "routine" acts of violence, have been accorded increasingly smaller amounts of space and, on a growing number of occasions since the mid-1970s, they have been left out altogether.

In an effort to overcome these problems and maximise the coverage given to civilian assassinations, it was eventually decided to commence the analysis on the 1st July, 1972. This had several advantages. First, it located the study in a year when press interest in Northern Ireland, though already on the wane, was still relatively buoyant. Secondly, it located the study in a period close to the start of the assassination campaign when the likely news value of such killings was still likely to have been high.⁽¹⁷⁾ And finally, by focusing on a five week period in which the incidence of assassination was particularly high, it ensured a constant volume of reportable activity.⁽¹⁸⁾

Sample

The arguments presented in Chapter 5 are based on an analysis of 7 British national dailies and, for the purpose of comparison, 2 Belfast morning papers. The sample of newspapers selected for the project, together with the number of editions included, is outlined in Table 1.

Table 1

Sampled Newspapers: British and Northern Irish		
Newspaper	Editions included	Editions missing*
<u>Daily Express</u>	27	3
<u>Daily Mail</u>	26	4
<u>Daily Mirror</u>	26	4
<u>Sun</u>	26	4
<u>Daily Telegraph</u>	27	3
<u>Guardian</u>	27	3
<u>The Times</u>	26	4
<u>Belfast Press</u>		
<u>The Irish News</u>	27	3
<u>Newsletter</u>	30	0
Total sample size	242	

* All editions lost as a consequence of an industrial dispute during 24th to 27th July, 1972.

Method of analysis and coding procedure

Following conventional coding procedures the individual story as separately presented in each of the newspapers studied was taken as the basic unit of analysis. This not only provided an indication of the significance attached to the issue of civilian assassinations, but it also allowed for comparisons to be made across the media in their treatment of the same story.

An initial pilot analysis, however, revealed that for the purpose of this study there was a problem with adopting the media-defined story as the exclusive unit of analysis. As we shall see when we turn to the findings of the analysis in detail in the following chapter, over the period examined here it was relatively unusual for an assassination to be accorded separate treatment by the British press. More often than not, when such killings did surface as a news item, it was as part of a composite or round-up report, often dealing with several discrete incidents or developments at the same time. While in some instances, such composite stories were explicitly presented as round-up accounts, more often than not there was no indication in the headline or opening paragraph that the report would move on to other topics (in this case, assassinations) later. Thus, to have coded only those news reports dealing explicitly with assassinations in the headline or opening paragraph would not only have neglected the treatment given to assassinations outside of this news format, but would also have underplayed the frequency at which they appeared as news. Given that the decision to present an assassination as part of a round-up report rather than as a news story in its own right, in itself said something about the significance attached to the incident by a particular newspaper, it was felt important that such stories were documented. In the event it was decided that all news that was in any way connected

with Northern Ireland should be scanned and the reporting of assassinations recorded according to whether they surfaced as a news story in their own right, or as part of a round-up report. This was important in that it not only provided a further indication of the significance attached by a particular newspaper to such killings, but again it also allowed for comparison to be made across the media in their treatment of the same incident.

Data analysis

As we have seen above, conventional content analysis techniques operate by establishing certain conceptual categories which are then quantitatively assessed according to their relative absence or presence in the material being studied. While such techniques may generate useful data on the general way in which the subject (be it race, crime or Northern Ireland) is treated as a news issue in the chosen medium, they are not well adapted, as Elliott has noted, to dealing with the treatment of particular stories:

It is difficult to set up categories in advance to differentiate between various treatments of the same story. Inevitably such reports overlap in many of the facts included but diverge in nuances of emphasis, presentation and selection. It can be argued, of course, that the similarities are more important than the differences but that would be more appropriate as a conclusion than as a presumption. (19)

Drawing on the model adopted by Elliott in his study of news in Britain, Ulster and the Irish Republic, ⁽²⁰⁾ the method and procedures outlined below were designed to record both the general treatment given to assassinations as measured by the frequency counts, and the detail of the way individual assassinations were handled as news in particular newspapers.

To assist in the management of the material, all reports dealing with assassinations or their aftermath were recorded on two sheets, the

media sheet and the story sheet. The media sheet was designed to record the frequency of assassination-related reports and the ratio of primary news reports, round-up reports, follow-up reports and editorials carried by each newspaper. It was divided into rows horizontally and vertically by newspaper, date on which the report appeared, page location, pictorial representation and type of news. Following this initial classification, these details, together with a synopsis of the story, were transferred on to the story sheets.

The synopses recorded on the story sheets were divided under three headings: actors and acts; news angle; commentators and comments. As their headings suggest, the purpose of these categories was to establish the various ways in which individual newspapers handled the issue of assassinations: the labels they used to identify those involved and the act of violence itself; the sources of information sought out by journalists, both to give meaning to the incident and to supply the possible motives and reasons behind it; and the central themes around which the reports were structured.

Under actors and acts were listed all the subjects identified in the report (the victims, eye-witnesses, friends and relatives, and those identified as being responsible for the incident), together with the details of the incident itself. In recording these details, particular attention was paid to the labels attached to the victims (for example, their religious and political affiliations), those identified as being responsible for the incident (for example, were they identified as being "gunmen" or "terrorists", republicans or loyalists), and the act of violence itself (for example, was it described as a "sectarian" murder, a "tit-for-tat" killing, or an act of "terrorism"). Under news angle were listed the specific aspects of the incident singled out for special attention in the headline or opening paragraph.

Under the third heading, commentators and comments, were listed all those whose views on the incident were quoted, including those which the newspaper itself supplied without any other attribution. In recording these details, particular attention was paid to the range of commentators sought out by journalists to give meaning to incidents and supply the possible reasons behind them, and the relative weight and prominence given to their comments.

Section two: Interviewing Journalists: Aims, Methods and Fieldwork

Where the first stage of the fieldwork was concerned with an analysis of the coverage accorded to inter-communal violence in the British press, stage two of the fieldwork focused on the activities and perspectives of those partly responsible for this coverage - the journalists themselves. One of my aims here was to take the findings of the content analysis a step further in order to come to some understanding as to how and why the press report what they do. At one level, therefore, this stage of the fieldwork addressed itself to the role performed by journalists in the newsgathering process and sought to establish what it was about the way journalists go about the routine task of newsgathering that helped make news about Northern Ireland the way it is: what are the staple sources of information for journalists working in Northern Ireland and how do these sources help shape what emerges as news; how are such concepts as news value, objectivity and impartiality applied on a daily basis by journalists, and how does their application influence the selection and presentation of news about Northern Ireland; what is the nature of the relationship between journalists on the ground and their newsdesks and how does this relationship influence the individual journalist's approach to newsgathering; how much autonomy do journalists enjoy on a daily basis to determine the selection and presentation of news about Northern

Ireland, and what are the effective limits to this autonomy. These were some of the main issues and questions that I sought to examine in this section of the project.

A further aim of this section of the research was to come to some understanding of how the reporting of Northern Ireland and the coverage accorded to the conflict by the British press is viewed from the "inside". News production, like any other social activity, involves real people doing real jobs about which they are able to reflect. However, despite the fact that the British media have now been covering Northern Ireland for the best part of sixteen years, the experience and perspectives of their journalists have rarely surfaced in any meaningful way. There has, of course, been the occasional article here and there which has afforded a partial insight into the problems encountered by journalists in Northern Ireland, but considerable gaps still exist in our knowledge. Northern Ireland's proximity to mainland Britain has made the political and military conflict in the Six Counties one of the most sensitive issues in British politics. What problems has this created for those whose task it is to report it? Journalists who cover Northern Ireland for the British press are subject to a variety of different and conflicting pressures. On the one hand, they have a professional responsibility to report the news in an impartial and objective manner regardless of their own personal or political allegiances. On the other hand, they are members of, and may share the values and assumptions of, a state which is a major participant in the conflict they report. How do journalists reconcile their membership of a nation state under attack with the professional demands of objectivity, impartiality and balance?

While the primary focus of this section of the research was to be on the role and perspectives of journalists, a further and related aim of this section was to come to some understanding of how the role of the

media in the reporting of political violence was viewed by two of the main official agencies in the conflict - the army and the police. Both have a vital interest in how the conflict is reported by the media, and since 1969, both have adopted sophisticated information strategies designed to give them the edge in the propaganda war. Moreover, since 1969, both these agencies have occupied positions of immense strategic importance for journalists as major sources of information.

Having defined my key areas of interest, and before selecting an appropriate research method, it was first necessary to give careful thought to the kinds of practical and methodological problems that such a project was likely to generate. How does one approach the practical problem of contacting and gaining access to journalists? Given the sensitive nature of the Irish issue, would sufficient journalists be willing to co-operate to make the project worthwhile? Which research method would be most appropriate to generating the kinds of information I required?

The problem of access

If there is any one institutional disease to which the media of mass communications seems particularly subject, it is a nervous reaction to criticism. As a student of the mass media I have been continually struck and occasionally puzzled by this reaction, for it is the media themselves which so vigorously defend principles guaranteeing the right to criticise. (21)

Sociological work on journalists as an occupational group and on the process of news at the point of production is relatively scarce in Britain - though the gaps in our knowledge have slowly been filled in recent years. (22) In part, the relative scarcity of such studies has reflected the priorities of academic research into the mass media which, prior to the late 1960s and early 1970s, was dominated by an interest in the effects/products of mass communications with only marginal attention being devoted to the working practices and ideologies of the

communicators themselves. This is hardly surprising given the theoretical assumptions which underpinned orthodox thinking on the role and social significance of the media in industrial society during the inter-war and immediate post-war years.

During this period, academic debate on the role and social significance of the media in advanced industrial society was informed by two key, yet unproved, assumptions: first, that the mass media were all-powerful and highly persuasive agencies capable of determining how individuals and groups thought, acted and understood the world in which they lived and, secondly, that the nature of the society in which the messages transmitted by the media were received, made the audiences who received them highly susceptible to manipulation.

The mass society and media effects theses appeared, on the surface at least, to support and reinforce each other. Technological developments during the early and middle part of the twentieth century had enabled the media to penetrate society on a previously unimaginable scale, and in a highly powerful way. Mass produced and cheap daily newspapers, radio, and latterly television, had created audiences on a mass scale. Moreover, it was widely believed by a diversity of writers that industrialisation and urbanisation had fragmented a previously stable social order and had created a society that was volatile, unstable, rootless and alienated, and thus inherently susceptible to manipulation.⁽²³⁾ Given the widespread support these assumptions were to attract, it was hardly surprising that academic research into the mass media during this period should take the form of an empirical investigation into audience reaction to, and use of, the mass media. As Curran and his colleagues have argued, these two assumptions:

encouraged a relatively uncomplicated view of the media as all-powerful propaganda agencies brainwashing a susceptible and defenceless public. The media propelled "word bullets" that penetrated deep into its

inert and passive victims. All that needed to be done was to measure the depth and size of penetration through modern scientific techniques. (24)

Even though these assumptions were to be challenged and overtaken by new orthodoxies in the 1950s and 1960s, (25) the main thrust of academic research into the media during the late 1960s and early 1970s continued to be informed by some notion of media effects. This again is hardly surprising given that each successive school of thought on the media merely substituted one interpretation of media effects for another. (26)

However, while the priorities of academic thinking and research on the media may be the main reason for the disproportionate share of academic resources devoted to the analysis of the products and effects of mass communications, it is not the only one. Research priorities, and research into the media is no exception, are not only shaped by the theoretical assumptions of the discipline, they are also influenced by a number of other considerations. Among the most important of these is the availability and accessibility of a suitable database, the availability of a research method capable of exploiting this database, and an environment conducive to research. The relative ease with which these requirements can be satisfied may often be a decisive factor in the selection of potential research topics. For those contemplating a study of media output, these factors are relatively easy to satisfy. Newspaper output, for example, presents relatively few problems for the researcher. Newspapers produce an abundance of material on a daily basis. Moreover, their output, in printed form, provides a convenient and easily handled source of raw data for the analyst which can be culled and analysed with relatively little difficulty. And technological developments like the video recorder have reduced many of the problems previously associated with the analysis of television output. Indeed, the ease with which data can be culled may be one explanation for the frequency of studies on the press.

Ethnographical research, on the other hand, presents the researcher with a more difficult task. Unlike research into newspaper or television output, which allows the researcher to gather sufficient data with ease, the ethnographer, more often than not, has to gather data at source. Consequently, be the research into street gangs, drug users or television or print journalists, access, be it for the purpose of interviewing or observation, has to be secured before such research can begin. Herein lies one of the central problems for those contemplating research of this nature: the success or failure of the project may hang on the ability of the researcher to gain sufficient access to make the project worthwhile. Indeed, as we shall see below, the problem of access has constantly obstructed ethnographical research into the British media in recent years - a fact which perhaps partly explains the scarcity of such studies.

Given that I was seeking access to a notoriously defensive group, and furthermore, was seeking to question its members on matters of a particularly sensitive nature, it was first necessary to give some thought to how the task of gaining access should be best approached.

Unfortunately, and for reasons known only to themselves, it would appear that many researchers (or perhaps more likely their publishers) regard these practical considerations as being beyond the interest of the general reader and consequently rarely include a detailed account of their fieldwork in the published study. For example, a recent study on welfare correspondents⁽²⁷⁾ provides no account of how the authors tackled the question of access, despite the fact that such an account would have been of considerable interest to those contemplating similar research. What accounts were available, however, hardly augured well for my own intended study. While these accounts more often than not related to research into broadcasting, they all suggested that the

question of access has been a frequent stumbling block for many would-be researchers into the British media.

In recent years, the relationship between independent researchers and the various sections of the British media has scarcely been an harmonious, let alone a symbiotic, one. Independent research, and those who undertake it, is at best treated with suspicion by journalists, and at worst with outright hostility. For a profession which has made a virtue of disclosure, journalists, it would appear, are surprisingly coy and even defensive when it comes to the external scrutiny of their own activities and practices. The public's right to know, so often a central and legitimating principle of British journalism, does not, it would appear, extend to their right to be kept informed on the internal workings of broadcasting and the press.

Broadcasting, and in particular commercial broadcasting, has an exceptionally poor record when it comes to providing access and the other facilities essential for independent research. Its record stands in sharp contrast to the public pronouncements of senior broadcasting personnel on the issue of external research. In 1970, for example, Sir Charles Curran, the Director General of the BBC, put the case for research in the following terms:

The case for unfettered research into the wide social issues raised by broadcasting needs no arguing. The BBC has always been wholly in its favour and it looks forward to the eventual increase in our understanding of the process of mass communications which must be expected. Our view is that research of this kind is best carried out in an academic institution. It is only in universities and other establishments of advanced learning that long-term projects of this kind can properly be undertaken. (28)

In private, however, the broadcasters have often shown themselves to be highly resistant to the research they have been so eager to welcome in public. Nowhere has this resistance to independent scrutiny

been more pronounced than in the area of news production. Despite the fact that both BBC News and ITN are wedded to an ideology of public service broadcasting and professional accountability, neither, it would appear, welcomes the external scrutiny of its news operations. The attitude of the broadcasting institutions on the issue of access has, however, varied. In recent years, the BBC has adopted a slightly more positive attitude to requests for access, even when these requests come from groups whose aims the corporation is openly hostile to. To date, the BBC has permitted a number of partial and full-scale inquiries into its news process. The attitude of ITN, on the other hand, has remained unremittingly hostile to independent research. Philip Schlesinger, for example, found his own requests to ITN for observational facilities "rebuffed with sneers and insults".⁽²⁹⁾ The Glasgow University Media Group were to fare no better in their dealings with ITN. ITN refused to allow the group's researcher to spend any time officially inside the newsroom and the group was forced to adopt more surreptitious means in order to observe ITN's news operations. Under the pretext of visiting friends within ITN, the group's researcher managed to snatch five days' observation within ITN.⁽³⁰⁾ Needless to say, research under such conditions is hardly satisfactory.

Even on those rare occasions when the broadcasters have reluctantly recognised the claims of independent researchers and have granted access, the researcher's problems have rarely ended there. Restrictions attached to access and a frequently hostile environment have, at times, made the researcher's lot a difficult one.

One researcher who was to fall foul of the BBC's sensitivity to criticism was Tom Burns. Burns, who was granted extensive access to the BBC in 1963, had given the corporation a veto over his findings and had subsequently been unable to publish his study in full. According

to Burns, despite initially welcoming his research, senior BBC personnel then went to quite extraordinary lengths to prevent his findings being published: ten years later, however, Burns was surprised to find himself being invited back to the BBC to undertake a further period of observation and the restrictions imposed in 1963 were lifted.⁽³¹⁾

The Glasgow Media Group were also to suffer from the BBC's restrictions. In order to supplement their extensive analysis of the coverage of industrial relations by broadcasting news, the group approached the BBC for observational facilities (having been refused access by ITN). Despite its open hostility to the group and its aims (including a slightly veiled threat of copyright action), after lengthy negotiations, the group was given leave by the BBC for one researcher to observe the newsroom for a period of two weeks, together with the provision of other facilities such as transcripts.⁽³²⁾ However, as we shall see below, the group's success on this occasion did not reflect their ongoing relationship with the corporation, which was characterised by an often publicly expressed hostility, even before their full findings had been published.

Philip Schlesinger, author of an important study on the BBC,⁽³³⁾ has provided a particularly telling account of the problems and obstacles that he encountered during the course of his research.⁽³⁴⁾ Initially granted generous access to the BBC's News Department, Schlesinger describes how a growing resistance to his presence was to develop during the course of his fieldwork.

During the early stages of the fieldwork, carried out during 1972, Schlesinger found few restrictions placed on his frequent visits to BBC News. Apart from the condition that he notify the newsroom in advance of his visits, the author managed to secure some thirty full days in the field. By 1973, however, the attitude to his presence

among senior newsroom staff underwent a noticeable change. Schlesinger noted how:

By 1973, a certain amount of pressure began to be exerted on me to be more specific about what I still wanted to know. Mr. Taylor [Editor, News and Current Affairs], for instance, asked during one encounter "Has it come to fruition yet?" In general, newsmen were extremely obliging, but they also made me aware of the passage of time by referring to the study as "a big soft story" or as "an epic". (35)

As Schlesinger was to continue:

The effect of this - apart from sensitising me to the different values placed upon time in academic and journalistic cultures - was increasingly to make me feel that I had to justify my requests for more access. (36)

In order to placate the powers that be, and in the hope of securing further access. Schlesinger produced two draft chapters which he then presented to two senior newsroom personnel on whose goodwill future access was likely to depend. The tactic worked, and future access was secured. However, the reprieve was to be short-lived; by June, 1973, Schlesinger noted that there was now "definite pressure from Television News to 'wrap up' the study". (37) Despite this, however, further periods of observation were secured which enabled stage one of the fieldwork to be completed.

Stage two of the fieldwork, which was to be devoted to developing the study for publication, was to prove more problematical. Despite having secured clearance from two senior news personnel, Schlesinger noted an increasingly restrictive attitude on the part of those who commanded the power of entry. Access, which had previously been granted on a relatively informal basis for periods of between two and three days, Schlesinger was now informed, was to be restricted to one clearly defined period attached to an "overseer". In the event, Schlesinger was to spend only two further days observation at Television

News. On the first of these visits, Schlesinger spent what he described as a "bizarre" and "very short day" in which he was kept away from the newsroom.⁽³⁸⁾ Undeterred by this, he requested leave to visit the newsroom in order to update his study. The response to this request made it clear that the hostility to his continued presence had not abated - a fact that was to be confirmed on his arrival at the newsroom:

I wrote to the chief sub to thank him ... and asked once again whether I could spend a couple of days in the newsroom to update the study, stressing that I would be very careful not to offend anyone. The cold winds of exclusion were still at gale force, however, and I was informed that I could spend between 2.30 and 6.00 p.m. on one particular day inside the newsroom. This, it was said, would be enough to convey what was currently going on. I took the opportunity, and was quite surprised at the unprecedented hostility encountered from journalists with whom I had hitherto had cordial relations.⁽³⁹⁾

Schlesinger puts the apparent change in the attitude towards his presence within Television News down to a series of factors which, though unrelated to his own work, had combined to make an untenable field situation: ironically one reason he suggests is that a visit by a researcher from the Glasgow Media Group had angered several members of the newsroom and this in turn had cancelled out his own credit.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Schlesinger was proven right when he was subsequently allowed back into Television News to complete his study, and with no restrictions being placed on the publication of his findings.⁽⁴¹⁾ Despite the fruitful outcome to his own project, Schlesinger's experience provides a clear illustration of the precariousness of the researcher's position, and the obstacles that may be placed in his path, even after access has been granted.

Accounts relating to the attitude of the national press, both collectively and individually, to those seeking to do independent

research, or accounts detailing the problems encountered by researchers seeking access to individual newspapers, are less common. In theory, the less centralised structure of the national press should provide individual researchers with considerably greater scope for gaining access. In practice, however, it is unlikely that the lack of centralised control should necessarily make individual newspapers any less sensitive to the external scrutiny of their activities. On the contrary, the recent experience of Derrick Mercer suggests that even research emanating from highly distinguished academic institutions, which could be of considerable importance to journalists and the newspapers they work for, does not automatically guarantee the co-operation of the British press.⁽⁴²⁾

In the aftermath of the Falklands war, Mercer was appointed head of an officially sponsored, but independent, inquiry into the future relations between government, the military and the media. The research, though funded by the Ministry of Defence, was to be undertaken by the Centre for Journalism Studies at University College, Cardiff. Despite the credentials of the institution, the official nature of the inquiry, and the potential implications it might have for the media themselves, Mercer was to find certain sections of the British press less than co-operative. As Mercer notes, what was surprising about this reaction was that the project itself had been partly stimulated by complaints made by journalists prior to, during, and in the immediate aftermath of the Falklands conflict:

There was much trumpeting about the public's right to know and much complaining about the inadequacies, to put it charitably, of the Government's handling of press relations. Strange, then, that the only people to spurn the officially sponsored but independent inquiry into future relations between governments, the military and the media should have been some of those very apostles of openness.⁽⁴³⁾

While many individual journalists gave generously of their time, Mercer found those at an editorial level less than co-operative:

Sir David English, of the Daily Mail, was quite candid. He wrote a courteous letter regretting that he was too busy. Brian Hitchen, London editor of the Daily Star, was initially eager to talk, but somehow an appointment was never convenient and my final letter went unanswered. But at least Mr. Hitchen and Sir David got around to writing.

Mike Molloy (Daily Mirror), Kelvin Mackenzie (The Sun), and Tony Chater (Morning Star) failed to reply to two letters - others posted on the same day arrived safely. (44)

How then does one explain the apparent hostility that has characterised the British media's attitude to independent research into their activities? Why is it that a profession which is so quick to criticise the excessive secrecy of other institutions should be so averse to a critical eye being cast over their own activities?

At a general level it may be nothing more than the professional's natural aversion to the external scrutiny of their own professional practice, a trait which, as Richard Hoggart points out, is particularly pronounced among professional journalists:

None of us like our professional practices to be scrutinised by outsiders; and television newsmen must be near the top of the league in this kind of defensiveness. Sometimes I think the strength of their defensiveness is in direct proportion to their refusal to take a good look at just what they are doing each day. One gets the impression of a trade which has hardly ever thought out its own basic premises but continues, come hell or high water, to rest its case on a few unexamined assertions. (45)

The response of British journalists, and particularly broadcasting journalists, when these "unexamined assertions" have come under the scrutiny of "outsiders", often with findings not to their liking, clearly demonstrates their hostility to external criticism. In recent years the automatic response of senior broadcasting personnel to studies

which have cast a critical eye over their activities has been to *deny* the findings of those studies while questioning the political motives, methodological approaches, or professional competence of those who undertook them. Over the last couple of decades, the work of Philip Schlesinger,⁽⁴⁶⁾ The University of Glasgow Media Group,⁽⁴⁷⁾ and several studies emanating from the Centre for Communications Studies at Leicester University,⁽⁴⁵⁾ have all stimulated a defensive, and at times highly hostile, response from senior broadcasters. As Schlesinger has argued, the criticisms levelled against his own study of the BBC's news process are similar to those which have been directed against the sociological study of journalism in general. These criticisms, he suggests, may be reduced to three fundamental propositions:

1. that the sociological study of the actual news production process is in fact focusing on only one set of determinants and giving these a disproportionate explanatory value;
2. that the sociological approach is incapable of really understanding the fundamental priorities of journalists, such as the need for immediacy;
3. that conclusions "drawn in the present tense" are bound to be wrong because the object to which they refer has, in the meantime, changed.

As he goes on to argue:

These three propositions constitute a coherent defence against sociological findings, and are, at the same time, a positive assertion of the integrity of journalistic professionalism. In fact, they go further and deny the entire credibility of the sociological analysis of journalism ... and ... are to be found in one variant or another in others' responses to similar research.⁽⁴⁹⁾

While at an editorial and senior management level, the British media have resolutely defended their professional practices and their handling of sensitive social and political issues, the response of journalists on the ground has more often than not been one of "business as usual".

It is unlikely that few ever bother to read academic studies of journalism, even if they are aware of their existence. Others simply reject such studies out of hand as being politically motivated, or on the grounds that "outsiders" can never fully comprehend the constraints and pressures of their profession. This reluctance to take on board, or to take seriously, external criticism of their professional practices was also evident during the course of my own fieldwork.

Prior to ^{my} visiting Belfast in the spring of 1984, Liz Curtis' highly critical assessment of the British media's coverage of Northern Ireland was published.⁽⁵⁰⁾ Assuming that the study would have stimulated considerable interest among journalists presently working on the story, I took the opportunity of asking those journalists I spoke to for their response to the criticisms raised by Curtis. To my surprise, nearly six months after its publication, a number of journalists claimed never to have heard of the study or its author, even though the book and some of its more critical findings were a frequent bar-side topic for many of their colleagues. Indeed, while many of the journalists I spoke to had heard of the book, few of them had actually read it. One journalist said he had been unable to purchase a copy - though it was on open display in a number of bookshops. Despite the fact that few of the journalists I spoke to were familiar with the arguments laid down in the book, this did not prevent several of them from attempting to undermine both the credibility of the author and the validity of her findings. According to one journalist on a quality paper (who was particularly scathing about academics in general), the author was simply out to "grind her own personal and political axe". A number of journalists questioned me as to the author's political affiliations: one described her as a "troops outer", while another dismissed her as a "republican sympathiser". The assumption that the author's presumed political sympathies automatically invalidated her findings stands in sharp

contrast to the journalists' image of themselves as objective observers and purveyors of "fact". A year later, while conducting a series of interviews in London, I put the question to several other journalists. One assistant news editor on a quality paper, who had covered Northern Ireland during the early 1970s, confessed to having "glimpsed" through the book, while another journalist, who had reviewed the book for his paper, when asked how the book had been received by his colleagues, replied, "I don't think anybody has ever read it". Another journalist, when asked whether he and his colleagues ever discussed the standards and performance of their profession, replied, "It's not the kind of thing you would address yourself to as a journalist. I mean plumbers don't sit around discussing the declining standards of plumbing".

The hostility between journalists and researchers is perhaps inevitable when, as Stuart Hall has put it, "One set of people confront another with a critical image of their own practice".⁽⁵¹⁾ However, as Halloran, commenting on the response to research emanating from his own institution, has pointed out, the journalists' hostility towards independent research does place those engaged in critical research at a distinct disadvantage:

In our early work on news and current affairs and our study of the BBC Local Radio experiment, we received all the necessary co-operation in the planning and execution stages. But the results of both these projects were not exactly greeted with enthusiasm. Of course, it would be naive to expect enthusiasm from those for whom the results were perceived as a challenge to their professional values, a threat to their basic assumptions, a criticism of their *modus operandi*, a questioning of their policies, or ... a contradiction of their claims. If the research results threaten, then the first co-operative research venture may well be the last.⁽⁵²⁾

Part of the problem for those contemplating research into the British media is the absence of any formal or statutory obligation on the part of the media ^{themselves} to support independent mass communications

research into their activities. This has led to a situation where the researcher is the supplicant relying on the benevolence of those who command the power of entry into the broadcasting and print media. In effect, this has enabled senior media personnel to act as gatekeepers, determining what forms of research shall be given support and encouragement and what forms not. While research seen to be in the interests of the various media may well be looked upon favourably, it is unlikely, given the general attitude of hostility and sensitivity towards "critical" research, that those seen to be on a dangerous mission will fare well in the selection process. As Halloran, who has for some time championed the demand that broadcasting and other media institutions have an obligation to support independent mass communications research, has commented:

My fear still is that broadcasters may be willing to accept research only when they see it as reinforcing their position or serving their interests in some way or other. "Bad" research is research that produces results that they don't like. (53)

It was against this background of strained relations between journalists and researchers that I approached my own project. My growing feeling of pessimism was compounded when, discussing the project with friends, I was confidently assured that the majority of journalists would run to ground at the mere suggestion of co-operating on such a project.

Selecting and contacting potential respondents

It was clear, having read the above accounts, that considerable thought would have to be given to how I approached the task of gaining access. Working on the assumption that journalists on a personal level might be more willing to co-operate than those higher up the news hierarchy, I decided upon a strategy of selective targeting. I first

compiled a general list of journalists who had covered the Northern Ireland conflict since 1969, together with those who were presently working on the story. From this list, I selected a small number of journalists for initial contacting. This strategy had two main advantages: first, by contacting journalists personally I was able to by-pass any possible objections that their superiors in the news process might have to the project; secondly, by initially contacting only a small number of journalists, I was able to test the waters before proceeding any further.

As it was at this initial point of contact that the attitude of the potential respondent both towards myself and the project would be shaped, how I presented my request for co-operation was crucial. If the journalist sensed that the project was less than serious, or that the potentially sensitive nature of the information I required could have repercussions for himself, the more likely it was that he would respond negatively to my request. Consequently, in writing to the targetted group of journalists, I provided a clear, though suitably general, statement as to what the aims of the project were, stressing both the academic nature of the inquiry and the official status of its funding body. At this initial point of contact, I simply asked each journalist if he would be prepared to co-operate on a personal level and, if so, whether he could suggest the names of other journalists who might be likewise inclined.

Though five journalists failed to reply to my letters, the response to this preliminary approach was encouraging. Three journalists agreed to co-operate, one of whom furnished the names of several others who he thought might be worth contacting. Those names that were not already on the list were added and letters posted to all the remaining journalists, pointing out how several of their colleagues had already

agreed to co-operate. Though the response to these letters was less encouraging, a further five journalists agreed to co-operate. One based in Belfast provided the names of five journalists, four of whom later agreed to co-operate. In the hope that once in the field I would be in a position to secure further contacts, I decided that the project was feasible.

Having secured sufficient contacts to make a trip to Belfast worthwhile, I then wrote to both the RUC and army press offices informing them of my intended trip and requesting their assistance. Bill McGookin, Chief Information Officer for the RUC, replied offering his assistance and suggesting that I contact his office on my arrival to arrange a suitable date. Though posted at the same time, the army press office failed to reply to my letter. However, once in Belfast, a telephone call to the army press office secured the assistance of Alan Percival, Acting Chief Information Officer who, it transpired, was in the process of replying to my letter.

This strategy, of selectively targeting individual journalists rather than attempting to contact them via their news editors, was to be vindicated some months later after the interviews with the first batch of journalists had been secured. In February, 1984, I wrote to news editors requesting information of a factual nature concerning changes in the staffing levels maintained by individual newspapers since 1969. Despite the rather uncontroversial nature of the request, the attitude of the majority of news editors was to be less than helpful. Of the seven newspapers I wrote to, only three replied. Roy Trueman, Managing Editor of the Daily Star, replied that: "Unfortunately, because of the complex situation, I am unable to devote time to the necessary research to answer your questions". Adrian Lighter, Editorial Manager of the Daily Telegraph, in a short and rather unhelpful letter, made a few general comments before concluding that: "Beyond these rather general

remarks I am not prepared to go into the logistics of our news coverage arrangements". Charles Cowen, Assistant News Editor on the Daily Express, suggested that: "From the tone of your letter I think the material you want might be better provided by the more serious journals such as the Guardian or the heavy Sundays which have the time to both do their daily work and handle gratuitous enquiries". Mr. Cowen, however, did promise to send my letter on to the paper's Northern News Editor who subsequently sent me a detailed letter on the paper's staffing levels since 1969.

Selecting a method

Having secured a sufficient degree of co-operation to warrant the continuation of the project, the next step was to select a suitable research method. Three methods immediately suggested themselves as being appropriate to such an inquiry: the interview, the mailed questionnaire and the observational method. All have a long tradition in ethnographical research and all have been used in various combinations for research into the mass media. In evaluating which of the three was best suited to my own particular needs, they were first judged according to their relative flexibility and economy. Given that my intended sample was to include journalists who had worked on the story over a period of sixteen years, flexibility was essential. The working conditions and experiences of those included in the sample were likely to vary considerably in some respects; therefore it was important that the chosen method should be flexible enough to take account of these differences. The question of economy was also important given the limited resources afforded by a Ph.D. grant. Without recourse to research assistants, it was essential that my limited resources were marshalled in the most effective way, enabling me to generate the most information at the least possible cost.

When set against these two requirements, the first method to be rejected was the observational approach. While the observational approach, such as that employed by Philip Schlesinger in his study of BBC News, can provide the researcher with an unique insight into the internal workings of an organisation or professional group, the approach is not without its problems. One of its most serious shortcomings in relation to my own project is that it is often time-consuming. An inordinate amount of observation time may be required to ensure presence when the crucial events occur. A well-designed and thorough observational study will usually require at least three distinct periods of observation: the amount of time being consumed by each period will tend to vary according to the complexity of the group under study. The first, or preparatory, period will usually be needed in order to familiarise the researcher with the routines, organisational structure and language of the group under study: for example, the lay-out of the newsroom; the lines of authority and communication within it; and the jargon of those involved in the news process at its various stages. Even after the main data have been gathered, it may be necessary to readjust existing hypotheses or to pursue new ones generated during the course of data gathering. Consequently, even on a carefully planned study, it is likely that considerable periods of time will need to be consumed in the field.

A second problem associated with the observational method, and one that is related to the above, is that, because of the time often needed to undertake a thorough study, the method is best suited to generating information on a single organisation or on a closely-knit group. For a project seeking to draw on a variety of information sources, which may be based in different locations, the method is less well suited. To duplicate an observational study would be an impossible task for a solitary researcher.

While these problems need not be insurmountable, there is a third and, to the extent that it is beyond the direct control of the researcher, perhaps more serious problem associated with the observational method - that of access. Though journalists may be willing to assist on a project if co-operation merely demands a few hours of their time, it is unlikely that many would welcome the idea of having a sociologist at their heels for a day, let alone two or three.

The choice between the remaining two methods, the interview and the mailed questionnaire, was, on the surface, less clear-cut. The mailed questionnaire has one obvious advantage as a research method - its economy. For little more than the cost of the stationery, the questionnaire enables the single researcher to reach a large number of respondents simultaneously, thus eliminating the cost of travel and travel time. Given that the majority of journalists included in the sample were based either in Belfast or London, this was obviously an important consideration. However, the response to the mailed questionnaire is often highly unpredictable and, as we shall see below, what the questionnaire gains in economy it often loses in flexibility and response. The interview, on the other hand, though less economical, does have the advantage of being highly flexible.

In theory, the only significant difference between the interview and the questionnaire is that in the former the interviewer asks the questions orally, while in the latter the respondent reads the questions. There is nothing about the form or nature of the questions or answers which can reliably distinguish between the two methods. However, despite the degree to which the two methods may resemble each other, there are a number of general differences between them which had to be taken into consideration before a final choice was made.

Gorden, for example, identifies five general differences between

between the two methods which he lists as "motivation", "interpretation", "flexibility", "control" and "evaluation".⁽⁵⁴⁾ Generally speaking, these differences flow from the presence or non-presence of the researcher in the field.

Motivation

A perennial problem for the mailed questionnaire is that the extrinsic rewards for supplying accurate and complete information are small or non-existent. Questionnaires, especially when requesting lengthy or complex information, often require many hours of laborious form filling. One consequence of this is that the return rate of mailed questionnaires is notoriously unpredictable. Moreover, the time and effort often demanded by questionnaires may mean that, even among those respondents who are willing to co-operate, the tendency to provide the minimal information required to answer a question may be strong. Furthermore, the probability is high that as the amount, complexity and sensitivity of the information required increases, the rewards for supplying the information correspondingly declines. As Gorden has written:

This motivation factor becomes more decisive as the amount of needed information increases, as the degree of answer-structuring decreases, and as the extrinsic rewards for supplying the information decrease ... the respondent will promptly and accurately fill out an insurance claim form if it is short and simple and the amount to be collected is high. On the other hand, the probability is small that a member of a random sample receiving a form with 200 complex questions about his premarital life would supply the information through the mail.⁽⁵⁵⁾

The survey researcher's distance from the field situation leaves him with few, if any, means of ensuring an accurate and comprehensive response to the questions he poses. The interview, on the other hand, provides the researcher with a far greater opportunity to motivate the respondent to supply accurate and complete information. People usually

find talking less demanding and more pleasurable than writing, in the same way that friends are often more communicative on the telephone than in letters. Interaction between the respondent and the interviewer is also likely to make the provision of information a more stimulating and rewarding experience for the respondent, insofar as the interviewer can provide feed-back and encouragement. The mere presence of an attentive and interested listener may in itself provide sufficient incentive for communication.

Given that my own inquiry required the respondent to provide highly complex and potentially sensitive information, without any obvious benefit in return, it was likely that the motivation for providing the information in questionnaire form would be low. Being in the field, therefore, both to ask the questions and to motivate a full and accurate response, was an important consideration.

Interpretation

The interview also provides more opportunity for the researcher to guide the respondents in their interpretation of the questions. When the questions are of a complex or abstract nature, the ability of the researcher to clarify the precise meaning of the question may be particularly important. Moreover, the more varied the respondents in terms of their experience, interest and understanding, the more the presence of the researcher may be needed to explain the general aim of the interview and to interpret the meaning of specific questions.

Control

Another significant advantage that the interview has over the mailed questionnaire is that it allows the researcher greater control over the interview situation. Greater control, as Gorden has pointed out, may be essential in certain circumstances:

For example, it may be extremely important that the respondent deal with questions in a certain sequence, that he answers one question before seeing a subsequent question, or that he does not change the answer to a question in view of the context or clue furnished by a subsequent question. Or it may be necessary that the respondent not consult others in giving his answers. (56)

The ability to control the sequence, timing and wording of the questions is particularly important when the information being requested is of a sensitive, controversial or ego-threatening nature. The unstructured interview also enables the researcher to ease himself into the field situation at an appropriate pace and thereby avoid blundering into delicate areas or subject matter. If need be, the researcher can postpone immediate data gathering to cultivate the relationship drawing out such material only when the informant is ready for it.

Flexibility

Perhaps the greatest advantage the interview has over the mailed questionnaire is that of flexibility. The questionnaire may be an economical way of gathering information, but it is also a potentially rigid one. Once a questionnaire is posted, it's posted; the form, sequence and wording of the questions, and consequently how the respondent interprets and answers them, are thus placed beyond the direct control of the researcher. As Doby has written:

The essence of the survey is the uniform collection of data by means of a questionnaire, and the use of these data for establishing quantitative relationships that enable the social scientist to generalize to a known population. Because of the systematic way that the survey collects its data, it runs into many problems of communication - the standard form of the questionnaire is not always suitable for the wide variety of field situations about which the research worker is trying to gather information. The questions may mean different things to different respondents: the context in which the question is answered may not be understood; the categories for classifying the respondent's answer are rather gross and overlook the subtleties of meaning the respondents may wish to convey; and so on. (57)

Under certain circumstances, this may not be an insurmountable problem: ambiguities or inappropriate questions may be rectified by repeated surveys. However, there may be circumstances when, due to limited resources or a lack of willingness on the part of respondents, repeated surveys are not possible. The researcher may then find, to his dismay and frustration, that he is stuck with the categories he originally used in formulating the problem under study.

Interviewing in the field, on the other hand, allows for a more dynamic relationship between the researcher and the respondents. Questions can be modified to suit the different experience of journalists, or in the light of information gained in a previous interview. In this way, the interview allows the researcher to constantly refine and codify the categories and questions in the light of experiences in the field. Moreover, each successive interview may open up new areas for investigation or suggest new ways of approaching the same area. In this way, interviewing in the field allows the researcher not only to constantly modify and refine the questions and their presentation, but also to shift the focus of the study and pursue new or emerging hypotheses as he goes along. Unlike the mailed questionnaire, the interview allows the researcher to marshal his resources in the most efficient way by adapting his approach to information gathering in order to suit the specific qualities, experience and knowledge of each respondent. To quote Doby again:

The hallmark of the survey method is standardized data gathering. A major characteristic of observation and interviewing in the field is its non-standardization. In fact, it aims to make a virtue of non-standardization by frequently redirecting the inquiry on the basis of data coming in from the field to ever more fruitful areas of investigation. Changes in the research direction are made in order to chase down more critical data for the emerging hypotheses. Informants are not treated uniformly but are interviewed about the things they can illuminate most. Each field situation is exploited to yield the most helpful data without unduly

worrying about their comparability for statistical purposes. The aim is usually a flexible and skillful guiding of field work to make the most of the individual peculiarities of the situation in which you find yourself. (58)

While for some projects flexibility may be less important, for my own it was essential. Within the sample of journalists there was considerable diversity in terms of knowledge, experience and length of time on the story. For example, while some journalists had covered Northern Ireland since the 1950s, others had come to the story as late as 1981; consequently, questions relating to events and issues in the 1970s would be relevant to some journalists but not to others.

The main advantage accruing from this flexibility, as Gorden points out, is that it allows the interviewer to adopt a more exploratory role denied to the survey researcher:

The more exploratory the purpose, the greater the need for flexibility in determining the wording of the questions, the sequence of the questions and the direction and amount of probing used. When the emphasis is upon discovery as opposed to measurement, we must give serendipity a chance to operate and allow the interviewer to pursue hunches and clues he may get as the interview progresses. (59)

Evaluation

Being in the field both to ask the questions and to observe how they are answered, as Gorden points out, may also assist in the process of evaluation:

The interview provides a greater opportunity to evaluate the validity of the information by observing the respondent's non-verbal manifestations of his attitude toward supplying the information. Although it is possible to supply certain cross-checks in questionnaires to detect the respondent who is not serious or who is deliberately lying, it is much simpler to detect, prevent and rectify such attempts by the respondent in the interview. This type of evaluation is particularly important when the subject matter or the circumstances of the interview tend to be controversial or ego-threatening. (60)

The survey worker's distance from the field often means that he is poorly equipped to evaluate the validity of the information supplied by respondents. Without recourse to alternative means of validation, the survey worker may often have to accept the information supplied in a questionnaire at face value. If the information requested is of a non-threatening nature, then this need not be a major problem. However, if the questions threaten, the tendency on the part of the respondent to provide what he thinks is the "right" response, or the tendency to modify his attitude or feelings in order to cast himself in a more favourable light, may be strong.

The problem for the mailed questionnaire is that it not only affords the respondent the luxury of examining the questions in advance (and thus deprives the researcher of the element of surprise), but in doing so, provides him with the opportunity to evaluate the possible implications of each question. If the questions threaten, then there is a strong possibility that the respondent will place self-protection over and above accuracy.

The interview provides a far greater opportunity to evaluate the validity of information supplied by respondents. On the one hand, the interviewer can make use of impressions and observations gained in the field. By observing how respondents react in a non-verbal way when asked questions on sensitive subject matters, the interviewer may be better placed to assess the veracity of the response. While the impressions and observations gained in the field are hardly a reliable means of evaluation, they may at least indicate to the researcher that a certain degree of scepticism should attend the recording of his statements. In addition, the researcher in the field may be able to secure information from other sources which may assist in the process of evaluation.

On a number of occasions during the course of my own fieldwork, the ability to cross-check or simply trade gossip with other journalists proved significant when preparing for a coming interview or pondering on previous ones. On one occasion, a journalist had informed me that he wrote between three and four stories a day on average; later, however, I was informed by a number of his colleagues, independently of each other, that the journalist in question was, to put it kindly, one of the least productive journalists in Belfast. On another occasion, a journalist who, when interviewed, had stressed to me the need for journalists not to accept official statements without rigorously checking them first, was described by a number of his colleagues as being a regular recipient of police leaks. Again, while this may not be totally reliable, it may be of some assistance in evaluating the veracity of information provided in the field.

In the field: tactics and problems

The use of interviewing as a research method can at times be a haphazard means of generating information; much depends on the calibre and experience of the interviewer and the quality of the interviewing schedule. However, even given the most professional interviewer and the most thoughtful and penetrating questions which, together and in the right circumstances, should be capable of generating valuable data, in the final analysis, the success or failure of the method will be determined not only by the interviewer and his questions, but by the respondent and his willingness to co-operate. Co-operation will, in turn, depend on both the ability of the researcher to establish a relationship of trust with respondents and on the conditions under which the interview takes place. This section examines some of the problems and frustrations encountered during the course of my own fieldwork carried out during two separate periods in 1984 and 1985 in Belfast and London.

Establishing field relations

Arriving in Belfast in April, 1984, my first priority was to contact those journalists who had already agreed to co-operate and to follow up other potential contacts. It was also necessary to familiarise myself with the geography of the city - where the main newspaper offices were located, and the local bars popular with journalists. During the early 1970s, when Northern Ireland was a major story and the national dailies all maintained large staffs on the story, the centrality and security of the Europa Hotel made it a popular haunt for many journalists. Many worked out of the hotel (and indeed some still do) and its bars provided a relatively safe and less threatening environment in which to while away the hours in between stories. In the late 1970s, as the violence on the streets declined, the journalists returned to the city's bars.

While the image of journalists as drunken hacks, permanently glued to bar stools, may be something of a caricature, there can be little doubt that public bars do occupy a central place in the working lives of many journalists. In Belfast, as in London, journalists frequently congregate in the local bars in between stories, during lunch hours and often at the end of the day. Locating the bars popular with journalists was to prove a relatively easy matter. The first journalist I was to interview arranged to meet me in a bar which, it transpired, was popular with many of them.

Though the interview proved to be one of my less successful ones, it did provide an early and easy introduction to the target group. Indeed, once introduced, the bar provided a suitably informal and relaxed environment in which to meet and chat to journalists.

Meeting journalists in bars was to have many advantages. Journalists in Belfast belong to a relatively close-knit community and

certain sections of the profession are almost tribal in their habits. As with all close-knit communities, the strengths and weaknesses of all are known by all. The names of certain journalists elicit broad grins when mentioned in conversation, others knowing frowns, others outright contempt and, in the relaxed atmosphere of the bar, it was often possible to pick up snippets of information which might prove to be useful later - even if only for background material. Apart from picking up on in-group gossip, and partaking in a degree of informal participant observation, it was also possible to chat to journalists working for a diversity of publications in a relaxed and informal setting.

Perhaps the greatest advantage to be gained from meeting journalists in an informal setting is that it allows the researcher to meet potential respondents and gain a degree of acceptance before attempting to negotiate interviews. Once accepted, it may be possible to ask more direct questions, identify those respondents likely to have relevant or special information, and identify those journalists who may need to be handled with special care. Consequently, time spent in this preparatory stage may often yield rich rewards later.

Generally speaking, most of the journalists I spoke to were willing to give generously of their time, and many went out of their way to be co-operative. Though arranging interviews was, at times, frustrated by stories breaking, pressing deadlines, and a host of other unforeseen or unavoidable problems which often cropped up at inappropriate times, most journalists were genuine in their efforts to assist in the project.

However, during the course of my fieldwork, a number of journalists proved to be less than co-operative. John Ley, of the Daily Express, refused to co-operate under any circumstances, even though a colleague who shared the same office, though working for a different paper, went out of his way to help me in any way he could. What was more

frustrating, however, was that three journalists (two in Belfast and one in London), who initially consented to an interview, were later to back out. These three cases illustrate quite clearly how, and without formally refusing to co-operate, informants can place obstacles in the path of the researcher while maintaining an outward appearance of co-operation.

On one occasion, a journalist on the Daily Mirror (who, for the sake of convenience, I shall call James) who was introduced to me by another journalist on the same paper who I had interviewed previously, agreed to an interview and told me to contact him at the office the next day to arrange a suitable time. In the hope of allaying any lingering doubts that he might have had, I told him what days and times were already taken up with other interviews. The next day, as arranged, I 'phoned the journalist at his office. He complained about being tied up for the rest of the morning and suggested that I try again later in the afternoon. When I 'phoned up later that day, he apologised again for still being tied up and suggested that I keep on trying. As this had happened with other journalists who I had eventually got round to interviewing, I thought no more about it. However, my lack of success on this occasion was to set a pattern that was to be repeated on many occasions in the coming days. Over the space of the next three to four days, I repeatedly telephoned the Daily Mirror office only to be informed, either by the journalist or his secretary, that he was tied up or out of the office. Suspicious that the journalist was attempting to backtrack on his promise, and reluctant to let a potential interview slip through my fingers, I tried a different tack: without 'phoning in advance, I called in to the Daily Mirror office. I hoped that by catching him in the office, it would be possible to convince him that any fears he had about supplying information were unwarranted - and also in the hope that he might find it more difficult to refuse my request in a

face-to-face situation. The tactic was to fail. On my way into the office I was stopped by a secretary who informed me that the journalist was out of the office and would not be back until later that afternoon: the porter who controls access to the building had previously informed me that the journalist in question was in the office. My suspicions were confirmed a few days later when talking to a journalist from the same paper. According to this journalist, James was attempting to get out of the interview and had told the office secretary to say he was busy should I call. Asking whether he had given any particular reason for his change of heart, I was informed that he thought I was a socialist.

On another occasion, a journalist employed by the Press Association, and a drinking partner of James, adopted similar tactics after initially agreeing to an interview. After repeated attempts, both by 'phone and by calling at his office, I was informed that the journalist had left the city on holiday. A similar strategy was adopted by a journalist on the Sunday Times who had covered Northern Ireland during the mid-1970s for the Observer. This journalist had initially agreed to co-operate some months previously by letter and had reconfirmed his commitment prior to my visit to London. However, no matter how flexible I was prepared to be, a time convenient for him could never be arranged. After numerous telephone calls, it became obvious that he had little intention of being interviewed.

Such experiences are not only frustrating and stressful but also, and perhaps more importantly, they consume energy, time and money which could be more productively employed. A straightforward refusal, though no less disappointing, is preferable to being constantly frustrated only for the same end result.

Interviewing

Having tied a particular journalist down to a specific day and time, the next problem that has to be considered is where the interview should take place. Generally speaking, journalists like to meet in bars. If the purpose of the exercise is simply to chat to journalists on an informal basis, then such a setting presents few, if any, problems. Indeed, as I have mentioned above, away from the office journalists are likely to be more relaxed and, in the alcoholic atmosphere of the local bar, also less inhibited when discussing their work. However, while meeting journalists in bars has its advantages, it also has its disadvantages. First, it is unlikely that a journalist will be prepared to talk openly on subjects of a sensitive or controversial nature - although some did. The second problem with interviewing in bars concerns recording the interview. Public bars are hardly quiet places; juke-boxes, and the usual combination of noises associated with bars often makes tape recording a precarious, if not impossible, task. Fortunately, having had my first interview rendered almost worthless due to background noise, I made a point of suggesting more suitable locations.

Because the relationship between the research worker and his informants is the key to effective interviewing, establishing a relationship of trust is perhaps the most crucial objective of the fieldworker. While in their own circles journalists may be quite candid about the constraints and problems of their profession, they are, and perhaps with some justification, likely to be more wary with "outsiders". If the researcher is to get the best out of his respondent, therefore, it is essential that, from the outset, he cultivates a relationship of trust with informants. The key factor in establishing such a relationship is time. Ideally, the researcher

should ease himself into the field situation gradually, building up the confidence of potential respondents before attempting to negotiate interviews.

If the researcher is working to a tight budget however, such a strategy may not always be possible. Indeed, this was a constant problem for my own project. Without the luxury of a substantial research grant, the amount of time I could spend in the field was limited. During the two weeks I spent in Belfast, I had to fit in as many interviews as possible even if this meant going into some interviews cold. On a number of occasions, my only contact with the journalist prior to interviewing him was by letter or a brief telephone call.

Breaking down the barriers to communication that may exist between the researcher and respondent in the field becomes more problematical the more sensitive the information requested and the more defensive the target group. During the course of the fieldwork, my status as an "outsider" was often evident in my dealings with some journalists - and especially those working for the British press. Indeed, one of the first questions most British journalists asked was: "How is this material going to be used?" A further indication of how reluctant many were when it came to being associated with critical statements either about their own paper's coverage of events in the North, or about the British media coverage in general, was that few of the journalists I interviewed for the study were prepared to be quoted directly. Indeed, the majority of British journalists (even those who had since moved on to other stories) made anonymity a precondition of their co-operation. However, even the promise of anonymity did not prevent two journalists objecting to the interview being taped. In fact, one journalist even went so far as to demand to see the questions in advance, and it took a

considerable effort on my part before he finally consented to the presence of a tape recorder.

Failing to know the subject prior to interviewing invariably limits the interviewer's ability to uncover information which might well be of a sensitive or controversial nature. Nevertheless, many of the journalists I spoke to were prepared to stand back and attempt a critical assessment of their professional practices - even if this reflected badly on themselves. In one isolated case, however, a journalist's account of his own working practices was embellished to such an extent that it was more a case of fiction than honest self-assessment.

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- (1) See for example: Berelson, B.,
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