

## The Media Politics of the Irish Peace Process

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This article examines British television news coverage of the Irish peace process from its public emergence in 1993 up to mid-1994. The analysis is undertaken in the context of the promotional strategies of the protagonists—especially those of the British government—and assesses their significance for understanding the role of the media in relation to negotiations and decision making.

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The emergence of the “peace process” in Ireland in 1993 has posed new problems and opened up new possibilities for the British media. For twenty-five years, Northern Ireland has been covered from within the anti-terrorism paradigm (see Chomsky 1989; Herman and Chomsky 1988; Herman and O’Sullivan 1991; Schlesinger 1991; Schlesinger et al. 1983). “Terrorism” was the cause of the conflict. The only way to bring peace was to defeat the Irish Republican Army (and Sinn Féin, the political party linked to the IRA) and convince people to live together, an analysis that was largely reproduced from official sources such as the government, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), and the British Army (Curtis 1984; Miller 1994; Rolston 1991b). Key sections of the media abandoned their claim to objectivity and effectively regarded their role as part of the “struggle against terrorism.”

With the emergence of the peace process since 1993, however, the official view seems to have changed. Sinn Féin is now to be regarded as having a legitimate electoral mandate and, at some point, a place at the negotiating table. Mainstream British journalism has found it very difficult to deal with this sudden change. Television news especially has been caught between a continued reliance on the anti-terrorism paradigm, the more recent recognition of the inevitability of negotiations, and the perennial habit of following the latest government briefings. At the same time, all sides have attempted to use the news media in the negotiation process, and this has meant that the media have themselves been key players in the unfolding drama.

### **The Context**

This article brings together four sets of concerns. First, an interest in the role of the media in covering conflict and conflict resolution. There is a wide litera-

ture on the reporting of war, counterinsurgency, and terrorism. So far as we are aware, however, there is much less on the promotional politics of, and the role of the media in, the process of peacemaking. In the resolution or attempted resolution of a number of long-running conflicts (in El Salvador, Israel/Palestine, and South Africa, to name a few), previously vilified armed opposition groups were, to some extent at least, rehabilitated. We think that there is a clear case for empirical examination of this process.

Second, the article draws on debates about news bias (Glasgow University Media Group 1995a, 1995b). Although we certainly argue that the television news coverage of the process was systematically skewed toward the official (British) version, this is not our primary focus. We are also interested in debates about the role of the media in contemporary societies, particularly arguments about the integrative function of "media events" (Dayan and Katz 1992), of which the ritualized presentations of Anglo-Irish summit meetings were certainly an example. It is our argument, however, that far from being integrative, such coverage tends systematically to favor elite interests. Arguments about domination of the "public sphere" are therefore of relevance here (Hallin 1994). In particular, the relative success of information management becomes a key focus.

Third, and following from the last point, we take up a recent development in the sociology of journalism that attempts to correct the "media-centric" (Schlesinger 1990) approach of much other work in the area. It suggests that there is a need to examine the media production process not just from the perspective of journalists, but also from that of their sources (Ericson et al. 1989; Miller 1993; Schlesinger 1990). This represents a challenge to some models of domination in which official sources are seen as necessarily dominating media coverage by virtue of their structural position. In this model, "primary definitions" emerge in pure form from the centers of political power to dominate the media and command the field in all subsequent treatment (Hall et al. 1978). As well as being theoretically weak and not matching the empirical evidence in relation to the conflict in Northern Ireland (Miller 1993), the model is particularly inadequate for explaining the *transformation* of "primary definitions" that accompany the peace process.

Fourth, our approach is also concerned with integrating recent developments in media theory with some of the concerns of political science and, in particular, political communication. While media studies (at least in Britain) has tended to neglect the relation between the media and policy making, so political science has tended to neglect the centrality of the media in the political process. The impact of the media on policy- and decision-making processes is in urgent need of more intensive study. Furthermore, the relationship between promotional strategies, the media, and policy making also needs to examine the extent to which the public plays a part in these processes. Both pluralist and (classical and structural) Marxist approaches tend to emphasize a linear relationship be-

tween promotional strategies, media content, public opinion, and "democratic decision making" or "hegemony," respectively. However, in the later parts of our discussion, we suggest that matters are not nearly so straightforward.

### Sample and Method

The empirical material in this article relates to the period beginning September 25, 1993, when John Hume, leader of the nationalist Social and Democratic Labour party (SDLP), and Gerry Adams, president of Sinn Féin, announced that their secret talks had produced a peace plan that they had forwarded to the Irish government. It ends on May 19, 1994, when the British government gave its formal public response to Sinn Féin's request for "clarification" of the Downing Street Declaration.<sup>1</sup> We pay specific attention to television news for two reasons. First, it has larger audiences than the press and is the main source of most people's information about the world. Second, in Britain, television news has a much higher credibility than the press. We also recognize that parts of the press featured alternative analyses to the dominant accounts presented on television and, indeed, that such analyses were also occasionally featured on minority-viewing television news programs. This effectively demonstrates what routine, prime-time television news could have reported.

We go on to analyze the portions of the secret communication that deal with publicity and secrecy, showing that they are central to the whole process. In the concluding section, we discuss the promotional strategies of the principal protagonists in the process, the British government and Sinn Féin, the role of the media in the negotiation process, and the theoretical and practical implications for media research.

### British Government Policy on Northern Ireland

For the better part of twenty-five years, British government policy has been that the conflict in Ireland was caused by "terrorists," primarily republican, whose motivations were not political but criminal, material, or pathological. Its response, it claimed, was to operate within the law. Occasionally, however, ministers have gone farther. In 1989, Home Secretary Douglas Hurd stated:

I believe that, with the Provisional IRA and some of the Middle-Eastern groups, it is really nothing to do with a political cause any more. They are professional killers. That is their occupation and their pleasure and they will go on doing that. No political solution will cope with that. They just have to be extirpated. (Rolston 1991a:170)

Official government policy precluded talking to "terrorists," yet in 1990, barely a year after Hurd's statement, secret contact with Sinn Féin was initiated

and continued until November 1993, when details were leaked to the media. The enormity of the apparent change in government thinking is underlined in a report from the *Observer*. According to "a key British source,"

The Provisional IRA was imbued with an ideology and a theology. He then added the breathtaking statement that its ideology included an "ethical dimension"—that members would not continue killing for the sake of it. He went on to argue that the Provisionals did not kill "for no purpose," and that if that purpose was removed, there was no reason why they should not stop killing.<sup>2</sup>

This was a dramatic departure for a government spokesperson,<sup>3</sup> yet the news media, television news especially, continued to view government pronouncements as consistent and reliable.

### **Mood Swings: The Success of Impression Management**

Part of the reason for this is the continued success of the lobby system of mass unattributable briefings (Cockerell et al. 1984; Harris 1990; Hennessy 1987; Jones 1995). A more fundamental reason is that for the British media, Northern Ireland is beyond the pale of the routine criticism and commentary that is required for other topics. In the margins of the press or in more open formats, such as editorials (Miller 1994), journalists can acknowledge that there is more to the political process than official statements. Following the revelation of government talks with Sinn Féin, the *Guardian* recognized that

the world of political propaganda still says that British governments can never talk to men of violence until they throw in their hand and lay down their arms. In the world of political reality, however, we now have confirmation that life is very different indeed.<sup>4</sup>

However, such a recognition did not become part of television news accounts. When John Hume (SDLP) and Gerry Adams (Sinn Féin) released details of their talks on September 25, television news reporters seemed unsure what to make of it. The BBC's Ireland correspondent, Denis Murray, thought that John Hume's optimism about the talks had to be taken seriously because he "doesn't say things like that lightly" (BBC1, Sept. 25, 10:20 P.M.). Two days later, ITN reported on a bomb in Belfast and concluded that "this new peace process seems only to have aggravated tension" (ITN, Sept. 27, 10:00 P.M.). On October 23, an IRA bomb on the Shankill Road, Belfast, killed nine people, including one of the bombers. The response of television news was to condemn to death not just the Hume-Adams initiative, but the whole peace process. ITN reported that the attack cast "a shadow on the future of talks aimed at bringing peace to the Prov-

ince" and that the Hume-Adams initiative "left the sides more polarized than ever" (Oct. 23, 4:40 P.M.). It later deemed the initiative "very close to extinction" (Oct. 23, 8:45 P.M.). On October 25, its early evening bulletin led with the following: "The government made it clear today that it regarded the . . . peace initiative . . . as buried in the rubble of the Shankill Road bomb." Its Downing Street correspondent, Michael Brunson, remarked that "from today, in Mr. Major's view, [the] talks are stone dead" (ITN, Oct. 25, 5:40 P.M.).

The BBC seemed reluctant at first to fall in behind the public outcry, reckoning that the bombing made it "imperative for Mr. Hume to try and keep going with his efforts, as he sees them, to get peace" (BBC1, Oct. 23, 5:15 P.M.). The tone hardened the following week, however, when Gerry Adams helped carry the coffin of the IRA bomber, Thomas Begley. Ireland correspondent Denis Murray reported that the gesture "makes any chance of success from the Hume-Adams talks very slight indeed" (Oct. 27, 9:00 P.M.) and later declared that the talks were "finished" (Oct. 28, 9:00 P.M.). The headline on *Newsnight* asked if the funeral procession might "trample the Hume-Adams so-called peace process into the ground" (BBC2, Oct. 27). *Channel Four News* reported that negative public reaction put the peace process "beyond recovery" (Oct. 27) and "destroyed completely any hopes remaining for the Hume-Adams initiative" (Oct. 28). With hindsight, however, *Channel Four News* reported six months later that the Shankill bombing had "increased the momentum behind the Downing Street Declaration" (May 19, 1994).

This pattern of reporting continued in the buildup to the Anglo-Irish Summit in Dublin on December 3 and the Downing Street Declaration on December 15. When British and Irish officials met on December 1 before the summit, BBC News pointed to "fundamental differences over the future of Ulster" and referred to "a definite scaling down of expectations" (9:00 P.M.). ITN led with the headline, "Reynolds and Major struggle to agree on Northern Ireland," and reported that "optimism about the . . . peace process was dented . . . when the differences between the British and Irish positions began to sink in." ITN's political editor, Michael Brunson, betrayed the real source of the doom and gloom when he exclaimed, "No wonder a Downing Street source said tonight, 'The further you go down this road, the harder it gets'" (10:00 P.M.).

The following day, the *News at Ten* gave the very opposite impression of progress. Once again, the report hinged on government briefings. Suddenly, the foreign secretary, Douglas Hurd, was hinting at "the possibility . . . of a real breakthrough," and Irish officials were said to be in "a rather upbeat mood" (Dec. 2, 1993). The main bulletins followed suit with almost identical headlines: "Some progress in the talks on Northern Ireland—the search for peace goes on" (BBC1, 9:00 P.M.) and "Progress in Dublin — the struggle for peace goes on" (ITN, 10:00 P.M.). However, there was an alternative view of the summit. Referring to the revelation of secret contacts with the Republicans, *Chan-*

nel Four News's diplomatic editor, Nik Gowing, talked of "a bitter whiff of British double-dealing, even of British deceit" at the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs (7:00 P.M.). *Newsnight* led with the headline, "No breakthrough as seven hours of Anglo-Irish talks are overshadowed by bitterness about British contacts with the IRA." The reporter suggested that the day was "a complete disaster in Anglo-Irish terms" (BBC2, 10:30 P.M.).

The mood swings continued in the buildup to the Downing Street Declaration. One day, news bulletins led with Albert Reynolds's statement from Dublin that the talks were "firmly on course" (BBC1, Dec. 5, 9:55 P.M., and ITN, Dec. 5, 10:30 P.M.). The next day, BBC reported that the murder of two Catholics in Belfast "undermined the hope that is needed for any peace process" (Dec. 6, 9:00 P.M.). When Major and Reynolds met again on December 10 at the European Summit in Brussels, the main headlines hailed "More progress in the talks to find a peace formula" (BBC1, 9:00 P.M.) and declared that "the peace process is back on track" (ITN, 10:00 P.M.). BBC's political editor, Robin Oakley, spoke to "senior officials from both . . . governments" and reported

the growing feeling on both sides that they can now agree on a political declaration which will bring about a cessation of violence and lead to a political settlement. . . . And, significantly, the British side has now joined Mr. Albert Reynolds in talking of a possible deal before Christmas, something they were reluctant to do before they came here to Brussels. (9:00 P.M.)

Two days later, ITN reported that "hopes for peace . . . by Christmas were dealt another blow today after two policemen were shot dead by the IRA" (ITN, Dec. 12, 10:30 P.M.). There was also a sharp contrast in mood between the BBC and ITN when they covered the diplomatic buildup to the Downing Street Declaration. On December 13, the BBC's *Nine O'Clock News* reported from the House of Commons, where "the prime minister has given his strongest indication yet that his peace initiative . . . may end in failure." Only an hour later, however, ITN headlines declared that "the search for peace . . . seems firmly back on track tonight . . . because officials have been able to make good progress." By the eve of the Downing Street Declaration (December 14), news reports were hailing "an historic deal" (ITN, 5:40 P.M.) and "a breakthrough" (BBC1, 9:00 P.M.). Once again, we have to turn to minority-viewing news programs to hear journalists ask questions and point up the contradictions and shortcuts in the negotiations. *Channel Four News* questioned the speed with which major differences were resolved and suggested it was possible only because "some of the most difficult issues . . . are unlikely to be included in the declaration" (Dec. 14, 7:00 P.M.).

Throughout this whole period, lobby journalists rarely showed critical awareness of official mood management. Two days before the Downing Street

Declaration, Robin Oakley reported the rise and fall of expectations as a matter of fact:

Hopes rose at the weekend when the British talked for the first time of a deal before Christmas. They flopped again with Mr. Reynolds hinting the document was too cautious in recognizing Nationalist aspirations for him to sign. And today Mr. Major was at his gloomiest yet about their prospects of reaching agreement. (Dec. 13, 9:00 P.M.)

Here we are very firmly in the world of political propaganda via the Downing Street briefing.

### **The Unbelievable Truth: Talking to Sinn Féin**

A similar lack of self-awareness was evident when television news reported the revelation of government contacts with Sinn Féin going back several years. The story trickled out slowly following leaks rumored to be from intelligence or civil service sources to Unionist politicians. On November 1, 1993, John Major said in Parliament that talking with Sinn Féin "would turn my stomach." The Downing Street Press Office added, "We have made clear on many occasions that we don't speak to those who carry out or advocate or condone violence to further their political aims" (Nov. 7). On November 11, the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) dismissed renewed suggestions, saying, "No such meetings have taken place." The Head of Information at the NIO, Andy Wood, scoffed that such reports belonged "more properly in the fantasy of spy thrillers than in real life."<sup>5</sup> Truth in Northern Ireland is stranger than fiction, and the story was then confirmed by Sinn Féin on November 15 in face of insistent government denials.<sup>6</sup>

When Sinn Féin revealed the first details of the contacts and the government denied it outright, reporters were in no doubt whom to believe. ITN referred to "a senior government source . . . who denied privately that these meetings took place. He said categorically no, without any question" (Nov. 15, 10:00 P.M.). *Newsnight* reported that the contacts were "vigorously and emphatically denied by Downing Street sources, . . . and indeed the Northern Ireland Office . . . has told us that no such meetings have taken place" (Nov. 15). The briefings held good for quite some time after. The next evening, the BBC's political editor said that the claim was "vigorously denied by Downing Street sources" (Nov. 16, 9:00 P.M.), but Vincent Kearney of the *Belfast Telegraph* spoke with a "good source" in Sinn Féin and told *Newsnight* that when he "put it to him that the [NIO] were denying these claims, he says they were perfectly entitled to do so because they probably wouldn't know about them. As far as he was concerned, they had been bypassed. Downing Street . . . had actually initiated the discussions" (Nov. 16).

So was the government telling lies? Journalists certainly seemed to struggle with the unbelievable truth about the contacts. A BBC reporter thought that "the best interpretation you can put on the government's statement is that they're simply playing with words" (Nov. 27, 9:55 P.M.). He went farther to say that it "could well be that both sides are convinced they're telling the truth. . . . The nuances can get changed as things go along so it's possible that neither side actually feels it's telling lies" (BBC1, Nov. 29, 1:00 P.M.). ITN could only say that the government was being "economical with the truth" (Nov. 28, 6:20 P.M.), that there were "still question marks," and that "the whole truth has yet to come out" (Nov. 29, 10:00 P.M.).

Only when Sinn Féin hinted that it had documentary evidence of contacts did the government own up. It sought to limit the damage with the claim that it was all in the cause of peace and that it would have been unforgivable to turn the opportunity down. Television news played a key role in helping the effort. Reporters successfully negotiated the awkward fact of John Major's statement that it would "turn his stomach" to talk to the IRA (Nov. 1). The BBC's Denis Murray remarked, "I think the government feels it has a defensible position" (BBC1, Nov. 27, 9:55 P.M.) and that "of course there's been embarrassment, but the government's position is that if they hadn't taken up this offer then that really would be a resignation matter" (Nov. 28, 8:50 P.M.).

The government's efforts to turn vice into virtue got a further boost when ITN's Michael Brunson watched their defense in Parliament. He reported, "By the time Sir Patrick Mayhew got to his feet he was already out of political trouble. . . . And so [he] was able to set out the record of a serious bid for peace" (ITN, Nov. 29, 10:00 P.M.). *Channel Four News* reported from the Anglo-Irish Summit in Dublin that "British sources said the issue of Britain's contact with the IRA had not been an issue today: 'Irrelevant,' said one source" (Dec. 3).

Each side produced documents to support its version of the contacts, but again there was little doubt that the government line carried the most weight in television news analyses. For example, *Channel Four News* thought that the government documents "did seem to bear out the government's claim that at no point had the IRA been offered anything in private it hadn't been offered in public." Furthermore, said the reporter, it "showed the extent of the IRA's anxiety for a formula it could sell to its supporters" (Nov. 29). *Newsnight* pointed out that although verbal messages "may be open to question, . . . we must accept the government version" (Nov. 29). It soon emerged that the government documents were, as ITN put it, "riddled with errors," and that "to Whitehall's embarrassment it seems Sinn Féin's published account of what happened may be more accurate" (ITN, Dec. 2, 10:00 P.M.).

Yet despite further revelations about the contacts, reporters continued to attach credence to government denials and to treat Sinn Féin's claims as mere propaganda. For example, on December 2, the eve of the Dublin Summit, Sinn



Féin revealed that the government was on the verge of talks with the IRA in return for a fourteen-day cease-fire. News bulletins reported that Sinn Féin had "stepped up the propaganda war" to "win some of the presummit spotlight" (BBC1, 9:00 P.M.), and that the party was "clearly determined to cause the government maximum discomfort" at the summit (ITN, 10:00 P.M.). Both channels reported a Downing Street statement refuting the evidence without offering a similar analysis of government motives (BBC1, Dec. 2, 9:00 P.M., and ITN, Dec. 2, 10:00 P.M.). *Newsnight's* anchor asked reporter Mark Urban, "What are the IRA's motives in giving out these conflicting versions of events over these meetings?" The IRA, he thought, was trying to prevent a split in the ranks with

the big figures in Sinn Féin trying desperately to reassure their own people, . . . You can see their sensitivity, and this is why I think they're denying the really salient points, *certainly that the government would argue*, and that is that they sought some form of cessation of hostilities, . . . and so naturally now they're not prepared to admit that they were seeking such a secret unannounced cessation of hostilities [emphasis added]. (Dec. 3)

This could easily have applied to the government, but that would have been beyond the limits of "objective" reporting. In all of this, television journalists refrained from asking the hard questions about British government strategy and how it contradicted previous policy. This is significant because it is evident, especially from Sinn Féin's account, that the possibility of media interest in the secret contacts was of real concern. The republicans, in particular, were anxious that elements within the British establishment might try to sabotage the process by leaking details to the media. On May 11, 1993, the day after the crucial document outlining the basis for a republican entry into dialogue was lodged with the British government representative, Sinn Féin raised the first query in an oral message: "We are reliably informed that an English reporter in USA has picked up a story about talks between you and us. May be working for the *Sunday Times*. We are told he was briefed by your people in Washington?" (Sinn Féin 1994:34).<sup>7</sup>

Two days later, the British responded in a semicoded written message in which the "Bank" refers to the government and the "loan business" to the negotiations:

I was very concerned to hear about the alarming press story you told me. I've checked on this with the Bank's press department who said, "Oh that old story from Washington? It's all gibberish. We'd heard it was going to be in last Sunday's papers, but we think that the editors must have realised that it didn't make sense." Please reassure your friends that this is the last thing that we would do or want. We believe that somebody visiting Washington

from Stormont who was *not* privy to the loan business was shooting his mouth off and a journalist embellished it out of all proportion. If asked, our press people will deny it [emphasis in original]. (Sinn Féin 1994:34)

The exchange of messages continued through July and August. On August 30, Sinn Féin sent this message:

We reiterate our concern at the continuing leaks from your side. The *Sunday Times* story of 22nd August 1993<sup>8</sup> was but the latest in a recent series which include a previous *Sunday Times* article and several informed references in public statements by a number of Unionist spokesmen. We are also convinced and concerned that the recent *Cook Report*<sup>9</sup> is connected to the above revelations. (Northern Ireland Office 1993:28; Sinn Féin 1994:39)

In reply, the British denied that the leaks were their doing:

Recent media reports and speculation do not result from authorised briefing. Nor do they serve the interests of anybody seeking to bring these exchanges to a successful conclusion. As both sides recognise, that depends on maintaining maximum confidentiality. Recent reports are certainly not being inspired, let alone orchestrated by the government side to which they are most unwelcome. Accordingly the government side will continue to respect the confidentiality of these exchanges. (Northern Ireland Office 1993:31; Sinn Féin 1994:40–41)

Whether the leaks were deliberate or whether they betray serious division within official circles is unclear. What these messages do show is the importance both sides attributed to secrecy. However, this does not mean that either side maintained media silence. It was important for them to maintain an attitude of "business as usual" and to prepare the ground for a potential settlement. Thus, from about 1990, successive Northern Ireland secretaries (Peter Brooke and Patrick Mayhew) had made conciliatory speeches spelling out that Britain no longer had any strategic military or economic interest in remaining in Ireland. Sinn Féin leaders had also softened their public position. Both sides tailored their overtures for public and private consumption and exchanged advance copies of keynote speeches. This public limbering-up was accompanied by other behind-the-scenes exchanges.

The problem for the British was to sell the idea of talks with a party that they consistently excoriated. There is some evidence that the government was anxious to create a climate in the media in favor of talks with Sinn Féin, to which they would then apparently accede. In one extraordinary passage (not included in the official British version), the British gave Sinn Féin advice on

public relations strategy. The republicans are told to emphasize that it is the British government that is holding up the peace process. The message, received on September 6, 1993, suggested that

Sinn Féin should comment in as major way as possible on the PLO/Rabin deal; that Sinn Féin should be saying "If they can come to an agreement in Israel, why not here? We are standing at the altar why won't they come and join us." It is also said that a full frontal publicity offensive from Sinn Féin is expected, pointing out that various contingencies and defensive positions are already in place. (Sinn Féin 1994:41)

In fact, only twelve days later the *Guardian* carried a full page interview with Martin McGuinness of Sinn Féin, titled "The Time to Talk Is Now," in which McGuinness is quoted as saying, "If the British government was prepared to learn from South Africa and Israel, then we could see a solution within six to twelve months."<sup>10</sup> We have no evidence that the two are connected, but it is interesting that the government should apparently want to give Sinn Féin public relations advice.

At a theoretical level, this type of conspiracy between enemies raises problems about defining "official" sources and about the concept of "primary definition." Is McGuinness potentially acting as an official source by carrying out British government recommendations? We need to understand that winning definitional battles in the media may be entirely irrelevant to the exercise of power or the implementation of particular policy options. In the current case, the government's difficulties arise precisely because of its previous success in *winning* the definitional battle over "terrorism" in the media. The problem now was this: How could government officials meet the enemy halfway while at the same time give the public impression that they were standing firm on a point of principle? We can see them work through the problem during their public dispute with Sinn Féin over the meaning and detail of the Downing Street Declaration. This shows once again how a dramatic change of policy is likely to make it harder for the government to win the definitional battle for the new policy—unless, that is, it can prime public opinion using techniques of mood management.

### **Clarification, Commentary, Exposition, and Explanation**

The government persistently refused to clarify the Downing Street Declaration for Sinn Féin. It gave some "explanation" on May 19, 1994, but that did not mean "clarification." The main Sinn Féin response to the Downing Street Declaration was to call for "clarification" of its main points. At a press conference on December 21, Gerry Adams stated, "We have a document here which in its ambiguity, in its lack of mechanism and in its lack of clear process needs

to be clarified."<sup>11</sup> John Major replied through a Belfast newspaper that Adams ought to "stop the violence, . . . [and then] the questions Mr. Adams wants answered will be answered."<sup>12</sup>

"It's all come down to a stark problem of language," said ITN's Michael Brunson of the peace process (ITN, Dec. 1, 10:00 P.M.). This was certainly true of the "clarification" issue and the way it was reported in the news. The language problem is that all along news accounts have accepted that the two words *explanation* and *clarification* mean completely different things, thus easing the effective government U-turn. ITN thought the government's refusal to clarify the declaration seemed quite understandable. With no regard to the history of official contacts with Sinn Féin and the IRA, or of the declaration, Tom Bradby remarked that "of course . . . the governments don't want to go down a road where they'll actually be talking to Sinn Féin, where they're engaged in dialogue whilst the violence continues" (December 21, 10:00 P.M.). Thus, the refusals were seen as principled and were reported without question.

In early January 1994, the BBC reported that "Sinn Féin leaders have again asked for more explanation of the Downing Street Declaration . . . though the government has already said that no further clarification will be given" (BBC1, Jan. 8, 9:00 P.M.). Later in the month, Gerry Adams wrote to John Major, again asking for clarification. The reply made headline news: "John Major has told Gerry Adams he won't clarify the Downing Street Declaration—'Take it or leave it!'" (BBC1, Jan. 21, 9:00 P.M.) and "The prime minister gave a firm 'No' . . . to Sinn Féin's request for clarification" (ITN, Jan. 21, 10:00 P.M.). The government had spoken. The position was clear. However, as the month closed, ITN reported that "the secretary of state's position appeared to have shifted. Clarification might not be possible but explanation could be" (Jan. 28).

Even as it compromised on clarification, the government continued to stick to its public policy of "no negotiation" until after a cease-fire. Because it had suggested all along that clarification equaled negotiation, it expressed its responses to Sinn Féin in euphemisms. When John Major wrote a piece in the nationalist *Irish News* (Belfast), the paper described it as "clarification."<sup>13</sup> Sir Patrick Mayhew insisted, however, that it was only "exposition." The reply to Sinn Féin's queries in May was also the subject of euphemism. "Commentary" was one description by British officials. Patrick Mayhew referred to the response as "explanation," and the twenty-one page document from the NIO used the term "elucidation" (Northern Ireland Office 1994:2). British officials also played down the response to Sinn Féin by suggesting that only one question from Sinn Féin genuinely involved "explanation" of the text of the declaration. BBC television news dutifully played along with this line. Political correspondent John Pienaar commented, "The Northern Ireland secretary had clarified one point only, what he called the obvious fact that any vote on the future of the province would be decided by majority" (BBC1, May 19, 9:00 P.M.).

However, the government response to Sinn Féin, which reprinted Sinn Féin's original questions, runs to twenty-one pages and departs from previous policy in replies to questions that were previously derided as spurious. For example, the government stated for the first time that the Government of Ireland Act would be on the table for renegotiation. More importantly, for the first time since Sinn Féin contested elections in 1982, the government explicitly recognized the integrity of Sinn Féin's electoral mandate. This was one of the key Sinn Féin demands emphasized by senior party figures in early April. While the Dublin government was briefing the Irish media that the response included these significant departures, British journalists were being briefed that Downing Street had given Sinn Féin short shrift.<sup>14</sup>

Over the next five months, ministers repeatedly stated that there was no need for clarification. Yet in off-the-record briefings, in ministerial speeches, and in John Major's article in the *Irish News*, hints were dropped and threats made about what could be expected if Sinn Féin accepted the declaration. As Britons were told night after night that the peace initiative was dead or still on track, it became evident that the government was indeed engaged in clarification and negotiation via a kind of megaphone diplomacy in the media. It was exceptionally rare for television journalists to acknowledge that the briefings they were given were not a transparent reflection of government thinking but actually part of the negotiation process.

Despite the reasons for the apparent shifts in British government policy and despite the myriad underlying motives, hidden agendas, and ultimate goals, the prevailing practice on television news was to report the latest government line without reference to previous statements. All that was needed was a caveat or "health warning," such as, "The government has shown its readiness to shift its position throughout this peace process, so we must view this latest statement with caution."

### Discussion

The central problem throughout television news coverage of the process has been a lack of perspective. Simply repeating the latest briefings from the government, even though these are used to put a particular spin on events, is especially hard to defend when the government has been caught misleading the media and the public. Either the government is engaged in an honest attempt to progress the peace process by political propaganda and news management, or they are using these techniques to cover up their duplicity. In either case, an unreflective parroting of government propaganda lines as if they were straightforward insights into government thinking (in phrases such as "the government believes") is less than adequate for journalists supposedly bound by legislative

demands for objectivity. The role of British television news has been to defend the government for its principled or astute action even as the government slips farther toward negotiations with the "terrorists." A London broadsheet leader writer summed it up like this:

The media tend to declare sotto voce that there must be no compromise with the IRA, yet many newspapers are clearly prepared to accept the government shifting its position over negotiations and clarification of the Downing Street declaration. The media tend to hold the line while allowing it to shift gradually by sleight of hand. Journalists are prepared to accept being lied to even as they castigate the government for lying over other sensitive issues such as arms sales to Iraq.<sup>15</sup>

As the peace process advances, there will be more shifts in government positions, and the media will probably continue to fall in behind. There are historical precedents for this, in the Irish settlement of the early 1920s and in the more recent settlements in South Africa and Palestine. Robert Fisk, a Middle East correspondent, records a similar process in the agreement between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Israeli government:

So it is "Chairman Arafat" now. Just as "terrorist leader" Kenyatta became "Mr. President." Just as "terrorists" Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir both became "Mr. Prime Minister." From "terrorist mastermind" to "statesman" in the length of time it took Yitzhak Rabin to write his name on a piece of paper. How swiftly are we reprogrammed.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, television journalists had stopped referring to Sinn Féin as "the political wing of the IRA," and had tentatively started to attribute the term "terrorist" rather than endorse it themselves (Miller 1995). By March 1995, following Gerry Adams's second visit to the United States, the *Observer* referred to the "elevation of Adams into a statesman of international stature."<sup>17</sup> Here was real evidence of the process of "Mandelization" in which Adams is transformed in the manner of Nelson Mandela from "terrorist" to legitimate politician. The British media had a key part to play in constructing Adams as the "terrorist" in the first place. Now, albeit with some reluctance, they were helping to transform perceptions once again.

The British government and the Northern Ireland Office evidently regard the media and sections of their audiences as very important in the success of their efforts, hence the efforts to manage media coverage. The republicans, too, see the media as crucial. On the one hand, they are wary of British manipulation and disinformation, and on the other, they are conscious of the pressures they can

exert on the government via the media. The British, the republicans, and the Irish government have all used the media to engage in megaphone diplomacy, by flying kites, floating suggestions, giving clarifications, or issuing threats.

#### **Primary Definition**

All this raises questions for the still-influential concept of primary definition (Hall et al. 1978) by which definitions are assumed to originate in the centers of political power and be faithfully transmitted by the mass media. Yet how are we to account for the apparent dramatic shift in government thinking outlined here? Do we discount a connection with the troubles of the last twenty-five years and, in particular, the armed struggle of the IRA? The government has tried to present its initiatives on peace as being fundamentally different from those put forward in the Hume-Adams agreement, yet at least part of the momentum behind the Downing Street Declaration has been an attempt to regain the public relations initiative from Sinn Féin. Even if the government is able to secure complete dominance in media coverage of the peace process (which it has not), this would not indicate that the state was the "primary definer" of mass media coverage because the construction of the primary definition is the result of political struggle, not the simple product of dominant interests (Miller 1993).

#### **The Media and Policy Making**

It is more adequate to think of the relationship between the media and the state in the context of the promotional strategies of competing social groups and organizations (including state agencies) and their outcomes. All organizations now have to think in promotional terms to pursue legitimacy and resources. Lobbying may have as its focus news management. Influencing the news may in turn be desired for its influence on public opinion in general or on the beliefs of particular opinion constituencies. It may then be hoped that such influence affects outcomes in the forms of political action or policy change. This is a very long and complex process in which the media play an integral part (Linsky 1986).

In the Irish peace process, British television news has provided an unacknowledged forum for the conduct of negotiations by a form of megaphone diplomacy. At the same time, it has repeatedly legitimated government initiatives, even when these have represented stark breaches with previous policy or announcements. Sometimes changes in the government line have come within hours of the line being set. Moreover, the media have simultaneously been responsible for transforming the image of the republican movement while still not according them anything like the same status as other politicians, such as the British government.

Nevertheless the twists and turns of the process have been intimately related to the interlocking promotional strategies of all sides. It is very difficult to decode the precise objectives or strategy of the various parties, but it is rea-

sonably clear that much of the information emanating from the British and Irish governments, the Unionist parties, and the republican movement is tactical. Public statements are made to promote or inhibit particular responses in opposing camps. The study of the relationship between promotional strategies, media coverage and policy outcomes is currently underdeveloped in social science (Cook 1989; Deacon and Golding 1994; Raboy and Bruck 1989; Schlesinger and Tumber 1994). It has the potential to open up new areas of inquiry in media studies, sociology, and political science. It can also help bring the disparate approaches under these headings closer together.

Promotional strategies are directed at many and various opinion constituencies. Above all these constituencies are those involved in the negotiations. For the rest of us, that is the public, we can "listen in to the passing messages if we are so inclined" (Schlesinger and Tumber 1994:272). This draws our attention to the relationship between public opinion and policy outcomes, studies of which also have been somewhat underdeveloped. In the case of Ireland, the British government has been able over the last twenty-five years (some would say much longer) to ignore British public opinion, which has consistently been in favor of British withdrawal (Miller 1994). In the peace process, although it is clear that certain opinion constituencies are regarded as important, public opinion still seems to have little impact on policy (cf. Page and Shapiro 1983; Gowing 1994). Today, politics in liberal democracies are becoming ever more promotional, presenting us with the opportunity to explore the conditions under which mass opinion may influence both promotional strategies and policy, and vice versa, especially in relation to the mediation of politics (Bennett 1996; O'Heffernan 1994; Zaller 1994).

We have tried to show the impact of government public relations on television news in relation to the Irish peace process and the way in which such coverage is an integral part of the process itself. We look forward to seeing comparable analyses of the media politics of peace negotiations in South Africa and Palestine, together with further material on the relations between the media and policy (or societal) outcomes. We think that such analysis is essential for a better understanding of the extent to which liberal democracies are in fact liberal and democratic.

## Notes

1. We included all main bulletins from BBC News (BBC1 1:00, 6:00, 9:00 P.M.; and BBC2, *Newsnight*, 10:30 P.M.) and ITN (12:30, 5:40, 10:00 P.M.; *Channel Four News*, 7:00 P.M.) on the following dates:

September 25 to 27, 1993 (Hume and Adams send report to Irish government)

October 7 (John Hume meets Albert Reynolds)

October 23 to November 2 (Shankill bomb; Greysteel shootings; Anglo-Irish process)

November 15 to 16 (revelations of Sinn Féin contacts with British government)



December 6 to 27 ("document war"; Anglo-Irish summit, Dublin)  
 December 10 to 31 (Downing Street Declaration; clarification)  
 January 1 to February 28, 1994 (clarification)  
 May 19 (government clarifies Downing Street Declaration)  
 This period precedes the IRA cease-fire of August 31, 1994, and its eventual breakdown on February 9, 1996.

2. Anthony Bevins, "IRA Has an Ethical Dimension," *Observer*, Nov. 28, 1993:3.
3. It should be noted that the statement was made anonymously on lobby terms and is therefore deniable. For a full account of this period in the process, see McKittrick 1996; McKittrick and Mallie 1996; Colin Brown and David McKittrick, "Leak Puts Major on Rack," *Independent*, Nov. 29:1; David McKittrick, "Disbelief in Britain's Words," *Independent on Sunday*, Dec. 5, 1993:6; and Ed Moloney, "The Battle of the Documents," *Sunday Tribune*, Dec. 5, 1993:A12-13.
4. "The Journey Is Worth the Secrecy," editorial, *Guardian*, Nov. 29, 1993.
5. McKittrick, "Disbelief in Britain's Words."
6. On Radio Four's *Today* program (Nov. 16), Mayhew said, "Nobody has been authorised to talk or negotiate on behalf of the British Government with Sinn Féin. We have always made it clear that there will be no talking or negotiating with Sinn Féin or any other organisation that justifies violence" (cited in Bevins, "IRA Has an Ethical Dimension," p. 3). However, in addition to "negotiations," statements by both the prime minister and the secretary of state for Northern Ireland (such as those cited above) also referred to "talks," "contacts," and "meetings." These statements are deniable because they were off the record. The director of the Northern Ireland Information Service, Andy Wood, has, however, defended his initial denial of the secret contacts, claiming that he really was unaware that they had taken place (David Sharrock, "Selling the Peace," *Guardian*, July 14, 1995: sec. 2, p. 14). If true, this suggests that even senior civil servants were being misled by those with knowledge of the contacts. Giving evidence at the Scott ("Arms to Iraq") Inquiry, one of Britain's most senior and powerful civil servants, Sir Robin Butler, conceded that the government's denial that there had been negotiations with the republicans did not give "a complete picture," but he denied that they were "misleading": "It was a half-answer, if you like, but it was an accurate answer, and to the point of what people were concerned about. . . . It did not deny that there had been contacts. It simply did not cover the point. [It was an answer] which was true but not complete, not designed to mislead" (Norton-Taylor 1995:89).
7. This message and the response to it are missing from the British account.
8. See *Sunday Times*, Aug. 22, 1993:A1, A18.
9. The *Cook Report* is an investigative TV series. This particular edition claimed that Martin McGuinness was a leader of the IRA.
10. Paul Johnson, "The Time to Talk Is Now," *Guardian*, Sept. 18, 1993:25.
11. Dick Grogan, "Adams Seeks Direct Talks with Governments on Declaration," *Irish Times*, Dec. 22, 1993:4.
12. John Major, "Major: 'I Won't Wait Forever,'" *Newsletter*, Dec. 23, 1993:1. The *Newsletter* is a Unionist daily newspaper in Belfast.
13. John Major, "John Major: 'SF Cannot Argue for Peace and Frustrate It,'" *Irish News*, Feb. 25, 1994:6.
14. See Geraldine Kennedy, "Government Warmly Welcomes British Response to SF Questions," *Irish Times*, May 20, 1994:5.
15. Interview, June 1994. On arms sales to Iraq and the government-appointed inquiry into them under Lord Justice Scott, see Norton-Taylor 1995.

16. Robert Fisk, "And lo, the Terrorist Mastermind Cast Off His Cliches and Was a Statesman," *Independent*, Sept. 12, 1993: 1.
17. "Statesman Adams Is Here to Stay," editorial, *Observer*, Mar. 19, 1995:26.

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