

NEWS & MEDIA REVIEW

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Auntie gets a whiff of glasnost

A dismal retrospective of 25 years of television coverage of Northern Ireland had a happy ending: the IRA renounced violence and the government lifted the broadcasting ban

I think this was one of the BBC's darkest hours — what happened in August 1969. It was the case then that Catholics were being driven out of their homes in certain areas of West Belfast. There's no doubt about it. They were burned out, all one night. The next day we had all the pictures of them having been burned out. We had pictures of them fleeing. The Controller, Northern Ireland at the time, who had great power in these things, ordered me — because I was the reporter on the ground — that I was not allowed to identify the refugees as Catholics. He said that would be inflammatory and provoke more trouble. I was too green, too inexperienced and just probably didn't know enough at the time to stand my ground.

Martin Bell, BBC reporter, 16 August 1994

The sectarian riots [in 1969] led to the biggest movement of population western

Europe had seen since the Second World War. Catholics were put out of their homes by Protestants. Protestants were forced out by Catholics and, in some rare cases, people were even ordered to leave by their own side.

BBC reporter, 9 O'clock News, BBC
19 August 1994

In 1969 Martin Bell had to be instructed by the Unionist-inclined Controller of BBC Northern Ireland, Waldo Maguire, to omit the sectarian character of the Protestant assault on Catholic homes. In 1994 no such pressure was required for a BBC journalist to indulge in rewriting history.

Bell was speaking on a *Late Show* special, part of the BBC's series *25 Bloody Years*. Billed as a season of programmes marking 25 years of the Troubles, it was, as *Fortnight* magazine's Paul Nolan observed, 'a history of British television in the troubles'. The series included three of the most controversial programmes of the Troubles: Kenneth Griffith's *Hang Out Your Brightest Colours*, about the life and death of IRA commander Michael Collins; Paul Hamman's *Real Lives* programme 'At the Edge of the Union', which aroused controversy over the appearance of Sinn Féin's Martin McGuinness; and Thames Television's 'Death on the Rock', which challenged the British

government's version of the SAS killings of IRA operatives in Gibraltar. This was the first British television screening of *Hang Out Your Brightest Colours*, which had spent most of the previous 20 years locked in a safe after being banned in 1973.

At the time of 'Death on the Rock', BBC Northern Ireland also made a programme on the Gibraltar killings, but cautious senior BBC managers denied it a network showing. Throughout the 1980s, mounting government intimidation created an atmosphere of extreme caution in broadcasting, and particularly in the BBC. The screening of these three films alone, therefore, is suggestive of the thaw within the Corporation.

The series also included people from all sides — nationalist, unionist and British army — talking of their experiences in the troubles. There were moving accounts of the death of a relative in 'The Dead', and not only those killed by the 'terrorists' were featured. Peter Taylor presented 'A Soldier's Tale', in which British army personnel talked candidly of the suffering they had faced, but also the suffering they had inflicted, including beating up and torturing suspects. One more or less admitted to murder. Taylor also presented a personal compilation of the history of the troubles, which included many archive interviews with key players on the republican and loyalist side, such as 'Sean MacStiofain, a former IRA chief of staff.

Their appearance (their words spoken by actors to comply with the broadcasting ban) was a reminder

that, if there is *glasnost* inside the BBC, it does not mean that journalists are as free to report as they were in the early 1970s. As Taylor pointed out, interviews with active current members of the IRA could not have been filmed for the series. Taylor also acknowledged, in a closing comment after Griffiths' film, that the likelihood of programmes such as *Hang Out Your Brightest Colours* 'being made and transmitted in 1994 is — to say the least — slim'.

In fact, there were also potential problems in screening the three controversial programmes in the series. The whole series had to be referred up to director-general John Birt and the inclusion of the three programmes did, according to BBC sources, 'raise the temperature'. Another problem was that Lord Howe, the former Foreign Secretary who had tried to have 'Death on the Rock' banned, wrote to the director-general complaining about the Corporation organising a 'fiesta of terrorism'. Birt, however, apparently wrote back dismissing his complaint.

The relatively more liberal atmosphere in the BBC might in part be due to broadcasters who take a long-term interest in covering Northern Ireland now occupying fairly senior positions in the Corporation, such as reporter Peter Taylor, head of documentaries Paul Hamman and executive producer of the *25 Bloody Years* series Steve Hewlett. The new atmosphere also seems to be related to the departure of Margaret Thatcher as prime minister, the more benign approach to the BBC of the

post-Thatcher Conservative Party and the current weakness of the Major government.

The changing relationship between the government and the BBC has been described by John Naughton, the *Observer's* television critic, using the example of *Panorama*, the BBC's flagship current affairs programme: 'Panorama functions as a weathervane indicating how the wind blows in the BBC. Under Alasdair Milne it was a cheeky, nose-thumbing, fuck you kind of outfit. Under the early Birt regime it was a spavined hack kept under a tight leash lest it offend Mrs Hacksaw. It is significant that virtually the only seriously embarrassing *Panorama* investigation to reach the screen in that period was [a] report on [Robert] Maxwell — a well-

known Labour supporter who funded Neil Kinnock's private office. Anything which might have been embarrassing to the Tories... was held back until the moment of maximum impact had passed. But now the wind has changed. The Charter is in the bag and the government is in disarray. After years of relentless sucking up to the Tories, John Birt is suddenly seen dancing the night away at Mrs Tony Blair's birthday party. Labour front-benchers can henceforth look forward to an endless round of BBC boxes at Ascot and Wimbledon.'

The lifting of the ban does not mean the media will take on the role of fourth estate watchdog... other methods of control remain

The climate for covering Northern Ireland has also been shifted by the emergence of the peace process (although *25 Bloody Years* was commissioned before the peace process became even a whisper). The *25 Bloody Years* series was quickly followed by the IRA ceasefire on 31 August; and then, two weeks later, by the lifting of the broadcasting ban. The ban had been made untenable by the emergence of the peace process in which Sinn Féin had a central role. Sinn Féin's *de facto* exclusion from the news under the ban was ended and Gerry Adams and other Sinn Féin representatives appeared extensively. For the first time the ban began to look unsustainable.

It also began to be counterproductive for the government. John Major acknowledged as much when he lifted the ban: 'I believe the restrictions are *no longer* serving the purpose for which they were intended' (emphasis added). Major went on to state the other major reason for the lifting of the ban, which is the changed relationship between Sinn Féin and the government. 'Most importantly', he said, 'we are now in very different circumstances from those of 1988 when the restrictions originally came in.'

However, the lifting of the ban does not mean that the media will suddenly take on the role of fourth estate watchdog. Direct censorship

may be gone but other methods of control — public relations, intimidation, the use of the law and self-censorship — remain. As the BBC news history of the 1969 riots quoted above shows, selective memory continues to afflict television news coverage of Northern Ireland. □

BASSEM EÏD

Open letter to Yasser Arafat

A Palestinian journalist warns the PLO leader against setting a dangerous precedent

'Without the freedom to express our opinions there can be no human dignity. If this freedom is not respected, then the very foundations of human dignity are flouted. The recent decision by the president of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, Yasser Arafat, to halt the circulation of the paper *An-Nahar* in the Palestinian trust territories represents a serious attack on human rights and a heavy blow to the prospects of democracy in the future Palestinian state. This decision is all the more worrying because, in our modern society, the press plays an essential part in the struggle for human rights.

The reasons for the banning of

An-Nahar are still to be fully explained. From high up on the balcony of his home, President Arafat looks down on the town of Gaza. It is, he explains, an administrative problem which will be cured once *An-Nahar* has a licence to circulate. On the other side of the mountains, in the town of Jericho, Jibril Rajoub, Palestinian security chief, claims that *An-Nahar* will never be allowed to print again. Yasser 'Abd Rabbo, communications minister for the Palestine National Authority, has tried to pacify critics of the ban with a series of nonsensical claims that he wasn't consulted about it. The other key characters in this drama are Nabil



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