

Diplomatic vacuity

Both sides in the media war are gasping for the oxygen of publicity, says David Miller

THE BAN ON BROADCASTING DIRECT INTERVIEWS WITH Sinn Fein and other groups has been frighteningly effective in curtailing Irish Republican perspectives in the media. Although Sinn Fein were never given the "easy platform" alleged by Home Secretary Douglas Hurd, interviews with the party declined dramatically after the ban — by 63 per cent in the first year.

It was only with the emergence of the Hume-Adams process that the basics of political reporting required a glimpse of Republican perspectives. Gerry Adams suddenly started to appear regularly on British TVs, so enraging some Tory MPs that Dame Jill Knight asked John Major to tighten the restrictions. The bone of contention was that the lip synchronisation between the Sinn Fein leader's mouth and the actor speaking his words was so close as to give the impression that Adams himself was speaking. However, it is clear that such interviews are explicitly allowed by the ban. In any case, a reasonable period was allowed to elapse before the Department of National Heritage review quietly announced that the ban should stay as it was.

The ban is only the most obvious and most recent way in which media coverage of the conflict in Northern Ireland is constrained. The Government has increasingly felt it necessary to use the law — and intimidation — to censor the media. In the last ten years, government attacks on current affairs coverage have reached a crescendo. Attempts to have programmes stopped have a high chance of success, as the withdrawing of a Real Lives documentary in 1985 after pressure from Home Secretary Leon Brittan shows.

The Government was less successful with Thames TV's *Death on the Rock* in 1988, which raised the possibility that the SAS killings in Gibraltar were extra-judicial executions. But the subsequent loss of Thames' franchise was widely seen as retribution for it.

The way forward? Before the results of the

Broadcasting Ban review were announced the Government had given hints (in off-the-record briefings) that the ban could be lifted if Sinn Fein accepted the Downing Street declaration. The Government's current mood is unclear.

The use of censorship in public relations manoeuvring has also been widespread in the South of Ireland, although Section 31, the equivalent of the British ban, was lifted in January. This move was widely interpreted, following briefings from Dublin, as an Irish government carrot to Sinn Fein to accept the declaration. It was less widely noted that the Irish government was more or less obliged to lift Section 31 following a report by the United Nations Human Rights Committee which condemned it as a breach of free speech.

The success of public relations is also

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evident in coverage of the Hume-Adams process and the subsequent Downing Street declaration. Ministers have repeatedly said they will not negotiate on the declaration. Yet, in off-the-record briefings, hints have been dropped about what can be expected if Sinn Fein accept the declaration. As we have heard, night after night, that the peace initiative is dead or still on track, it has become evident that the Government is engaged in clarification and negotiation — via a kind of megaphone diplomacy in the media.

Rarely do journalists acknowledge that the briefings they are given are actually part of the negotiation process, and this is one of the key



THE CAR THAT CLOSED HEATHROW, COMPLETE WITH MORTAR BOMB TUBES — JUST THE LATEST WEAPON IN TERRORISM'S PR ARMOURY?

blind spots of mainstream British journalism's coverage of Northern Ireland. It is routine for journalists to evaluate events in Northern Ireland in terms of the "propaganda victory" they might offer the Republicans, but similar phrases are never used to describe British tactics. A credit to governmental media management, this is a key way in which the tentacles of censorship shape how we perceive the conflict.

The IRA mortar attacks on Heathrow provide an illustrative example. After the first attack, the runway on which the bombs had landed was not closed for 45 minutes. Good PR evidently played a part in this decision, with Commander David Tucker of the anti-terrorist squad stressing that "the airport is open". In fact, it was clear flights had been severely disrupted and one terminal closed.

Following further IRA warnings the next day, the authorities left the airport open for seven hours — even allowing the Queen to land — before the mortars were launched. Commander Tucker said, "We can't allow the airport to be closed down by a terrorist whose weapon is a telephone." The safety of passengers and even the economic well-being of Heathrow provide one rationale for keeping the airport open, but it is clear that PR priorities were a factor in the decision. The IRA are (rightly) condemned by the media when they put civilians at risk. Yet there was no comparable condemnation of the authorities for risking civilian safety for propaganda advantage. Instead, television journalists summarised and justified the official reaction. ITN declared: "The



Programmes about Ireland sometimes employ subtitles to beat the Broadcasting Ban. How does it feel to have your opinions reduced to captions?

Former Ulster MP Bernadette McAliskey was asked by the BBC in 1992 whether she supported Republican violence. Her answer was subtitled. "I feel numbed, violated, humiliated," she commented later. "I feel as if my house has been burgled. My own words have been stolen from my own mouth." She's not the only one. An H-block inmate complained to the BBC about his prison food. "The thing about the sausage rolls ... they're getting smaller. In terms of size and all that. The quality's still all right. But they're getting a bit small." His words were subtitled.



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authorities are understandably unwilling to allow the terrorists to disrupt normal life," But surely the risk to civilians deserves a mention.

This is one of the central dilemmas for the Government. They want to play down the impact of the conflict while asserting a determined resolve. The strategy of successive governments has been to present the conflict as slowly declining, as getting "back to normal". To this end, they have spent millions of pounds presenting Northern Ireland as a tourist paradise and attractive business

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proposition. The Northern Ireland Office has condemned the media focus on the conflict as counter-productive. Spirited resolve is the real story of Northern Ireland, they say. More and more, there is an acceptance that this, rather than the media image of the masked terrorist, is the true face of Northern Ireland.

Yet at the same time the Office is engaged in producing its own images of masked terrorists. TV commercials for confidential telephone tip-off lines use ultra-dramatic footage of terrorists. Ironically, they sometimes get censored. One commercial used a photo for a fraction of a second. The IBA blocked the ad until the shot was increased from four frames to eight to remove its subliminal power.

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The things you've never heard

THE ADVERT

In 1992, Gerry Adams had a book of short stories published. The radio advert in the south of Ireland began, "This is Gerry Adams speaking." Well, that was the plan. Sadly, the ad was never allowed to be broadcast.

THE DJS

Radio Free Sinn Fein has been the only public way to hear Sinn Fein representa-

HOW DANGEROUS IS A DEAD TERRORIST? GRANADA DROPPED ITS JUNE 1981 EDITION OF WORLD IN ACTION RATHER THAN CUT A 27-SECOND SEQUENCE SHOWING HUNGER STRIKER PATSY O'HARA'S CORPSE LYING IN STATE WITH AN INLA GUARD.



tives talk about their policies — and their tastes in music — for the last six years. Operating as a pirate on 106FM, Radio Free Sinn Fein was audible across most of Belfast on the fourth anniversary of the Ban.

THE PLAY

We've Got Tonite, a radio play by Sinn Fein's publicity director Danny Morrison was banned by the BBC in 1992. But not because of the Broadcasting Ban. The play contained no reference to Northern Ireland or to any other political issue. Controller of Editorial Policy John Wilson wrote to Morrison: "The problem is your close connection with terrorism ... a broadcast for entertainment purposes based on your work when so many people are victims of terrorism and so many more detest and fear it would deeply offend many people. In view of that your short story should never have been accepted and in the existing circumstances you should forget any encouragement from anywhere in the BBC to write a play or other creative work for entertainment purposes".

THE SONG

In 1988 the IBA banned the song Streets of Sorrow/Birmingham Six by The Pogues for "supporting or soliciting or inviting support" for a listed organisation and containing "general disagreement with the way in which the

British government responds to and the courts deal with the terrorist threat in the UK." You decide: "There were six men in Birmingham/In Guildford there's four/That were picked up and tortured/And framed by the law/And the filth got promotion/But they're still doing time/For being Irish in the wrong place/And at the wrong time."

THE TRUTH

Last year the British government denied it had been engaged in secret talks with Sinn Fein and the IRA. The Northern Ireland Office dismissed the reports as "the stuff of spy thrillers and fantasies". John Major said that talking to Sinn Fein would turn his stomach. They were both lying.

THE FACTS

When the police or army are involved in controversial killings, false information is commonly fed to the media. Government ministers have acknowledged that misinformation is part of their policy, but have maintained that it is done for "absolutely honourable security reasons". The most celebrated examples of disinformation include the six RUC killings investigated by John Stalker in 1982 and the SAS killings in Gibraltar. However, between 1982 and 1991 there were at least 67 killings by security forces in disputed circumstances, and nearly two thirds of the victims were not directly involved in violence when they died.



THE BBC HAS SIX ACTORS WHO DO GERRY ADAMS VOICEOVERS. THEY ARE PAID £120 A TIME, AND NEVER NAMED. HOWEVER, STEPHEN REA, OF THE CRYING GAME FAME, DID ADAM'S VOICE FOR CHANNEL 4 IN 1990. AS REA IS MARRIED TO DOLOURS PRICE, WHO WAS JAILED FOR AN IRA CARBOMB ATTACK OUTSIDE THE OLD BAILEY IN 1973 WHICH KILLED ONE AND INJURED 250, THIS WAS A CONTROVERSIAL CHOICE. ADAMS ONCE ASKED WHO WOULD BE "DOING" HIM THAT NIGHT. HEARING THE ACTOR'S NAME, HE SAID, "DEAD ON. HE DOES IT FAR BETTER THAN ME."

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