

## News at any price

**P**ossibly, in an imperfect world, changing Radio 5 into a mass-market news and sports channel aimed at youngish males is a reasonably good idea, writes *Maggie Brown*. Sport and news are a more compatible mix than sport, youth and children's programmes.

But the suspicion with which the news has been greeted speaks volumes about the BBC's low public standing. Its misguided attempt to switch Radio 4 long wave into a rolling news service last year has created a huge wall of mistrust.

Liz Forgan, the managing director of BBC Radio, said yesterday that the public should allow broadcasters to be creative, to have a free hand in devising new services. But, on past performance, why should they be trusted? It rings hollow when Phil Harding, an executive who spent eight months studying how to retrieve the BBC from the rolling news mess, confirmed that research showed the project would make Radio 4 inaccessible to 1.5 million long-wave listeners — 17 per cent of its audience.

Only last December, John Birt, the director-general, was adamant that he would not back down from rolling news, despite the public outcry. Why didn't the BBC do its number-crunching first? As the nation's premier broadcaster, it can behave in a surprisingly amateur manner.

And can we be sure that the research commissioned by Mr Harding, which has led to this latest shake-up, points the way to success? The BBC has not published the findings, but we are told that only one in nine Radio 5 sports listeners are women.

The second worrying aspect is the way children's radio has been abruptly brushed aside. It is true that Radio 5 did not score large

David Miller argues that the five-year-old broadcasting ban has failed to halt terrorist bombings and killings. Instead it has succeeded in hampering Sinn Fein, a legal political party

# Northern Ireland: a story stifled

**I**t is five years since the broadcasting of direct interviews with 11 Irish organisations was banned — one of a number of measures taken after a series of IRA attacks.

According to Douglas Hurd, then Home Secretary, the notice was introduced, on 19 October 1988, because "the terrorists themselves draw support and sustenance from access to radio and television... The Government has decided that the time has come to deny this easy platform to those who use it to propagate terrorism".

The use of violence by the IRA, however, does not seem to have been affected by broadcasting censorship: the bombings and killings continue. And it is hard to see how terrorists managed to draw support and sustenance from access to television before the ban was introduced, since active members of the IRA or the Irish National Liberation Army (Inla) had not appeared on British television since 1979, nine years before the ban. Interviews with members of the IRA and the Inla, which were in any case rare, stopped immediately the organisations were pronounced illegal in 1974.

In fact, the ban is not aimed at the activities of the IRA (or any of the other illegal groups named in the notice), but specifically at the ability of Sinn Fein, a legal political party, to operate in a normal democratic manner. The notice forbids the broadcast of words that "support or solicit or invite support" for one of the listed organisations, or any words by "a person who represents or purports to represent" one of the organisations.

This covers any statement by any person who supports the use of political violence by any paramilitary organisation, and as such might be regarded as corresponding to the Government's stated aims in combating terrorism. But it was already



Lack of information, surfeit of killings: RUC officers cover the body of a soldier killed in Belfast

Photograph: Dario Mitidieri/Select

illegal under the Emergency Provisions Act to utter support for an illegal paramilitary organisation.

On top of this, broadcasters are bound under statutory and charter duties not to broadcast material that could encourage crime, and Sinn Fein candidates are required to sign a declaration renouncing violence

before they can stand for election.

The single sense in which the ban goes further than existing law is that it specifically prohibits statements, which may have nothing to do with terrorism, in support of or by representatives of legal organisations. Thus a statement supporting Sinn Fein policy on women's rights

or post offices is prohibited. The impact of the notice has been quite marked. In the 12 months from October 1988, Sinn Fein appearances on British television news declined by 63 per cent; and in the four years since then, such interviews seem to have become even scarcer.

This is a product of the notice's

vague and confusing wording and of a broadcasting establishment under siege by the Government. Thus, the easiest time-saver in a busy newsroom is simply to leave Sinn Fein out. And a ripple effect has resulted in the exclusion of other critical voices on Northern Ireland issues, even where they do not

express support for terrorism or Sinn Fein. The best-known example is the banning of the Pogues' song "Streets of Sorrow/Birmingham Six" for containing a "general disagreement with the way in which the British government responds to, and the courts deal with, the terrorist threat in the UK".

Perhaps the most serious extension of the ban occurred in an edition of the BBC programme *Nation*, which featured a discussion on justifications for political violence. The programme featured the activist and former MP Bernadette Devlin McAliskey, but almost her entire contribution was subtitled.

Rejection of her request for a judicial review of the BBC's decision was overturned by the Court of Appeal in July, and the case will now go to a full hearing. Mrs McAliskey is opposing the ban at the European Court of Human Rights, and two other attempts to challenge it — by the Sinn Fein councillor Mitchel McLaughlin and the National Union of Journalists — are pending.

The ban is only a small part of the repertoire of government information management techniques. Before the ban, successive governments had been increasing the pressure on the broadcasting institutions not to give all sides of the Northern Ireland story.

Allied with this is the routine use of misinformation by official bodies, such as the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the Army, and attempts by the Northern Ireland Office to pretend that things are getting "back to normal".

So, even if the broadcasting ban is lifted, the British public will still not be given enough information to make sense of the conflict in Northern Ireland.

The author is a member of the Glasgow University Media Group.

TONY HALL