

Ulster: Reported Or Distorted?

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THE LONDON shop assistant gave me a withering look and exclaimed, "I'm sorry sir, we can't accept foreign currency here." Patiently I plucked the five-pound note from her reluctant grasp and pointed out the word Belfast on it. She was unimpressed. "That's in Ireland, isn't it? Nothing to do with us."

Unfortunately Northern Ireland is very much to do with us. But since the recent conflict began in 1969 a lot of people feel that the government and the media have consistently misled the British public about events across the water.

By not telling the whole story, the media has put the public into a position where a little knowledge has become a dangerous thing. So although the shop assistant went on to condemn members of the IRA as murderers, she had no idea what they were "murdering" for. Likewise she could not understand why British soldiers were serving in a "foreign country."

This may be an extreme example, but it clearly illustrates the situation. With a few notable exceptions, news coverage of the conflict has favoured the government, the army, and the police. Censorship may be a dirty word in our democratic society, but no other word adequately describes the way successive administrations have controlled the press.

This apparent mis-representation of the conflict angers many who live in Northern Ireland. Some feel that the news coverage exaggerates levels of violence. "We're not all bloody terrorists, you know", is the usual retort to any paranoid Brit.

But a more frequent and serious complaint is that the media has distorted the situation by failing to report objectively. This distortion is instantly recognisable to those who live in the troubled areas, but to the British public it is accepted as the gospel truth. The resulting mixture of ignorance and prejudice make it difficult for British people, who after all sanction government policy with their votes, to participate in rational discussions about how to resolve the situation.

Not only are the facts distorted, or given out of context, they often seem to have been invented to fuel a propaganda machine. After the death of hunger-striker, Bobby Sands, in May 1981, Christopher Thomas began his



front page *Times* report about Sands' funeral with the implication that the IRA had been responsible for the deaths of over 2,000 Protestants in the previous 12 years.

This was not the case. In a letter to *The Times*, Donald Kennedy pointed out that among Ulster's 2,100 dead were hundreds of Catholics killed in sectarian murders by loyalist para-militaries, as well as others (including IRA members) killed by the army and the RUC. These figures were confirmed by a New Ireland Forum report in November 1983. In August 1982 the Press Council finally reprimanded *The Times*.

While maximum news coverage is given to atrocities perpetrated by the IRA (particularly in mainland Britain), the media generally avoids reporting army or police violence. Even when it does, the accounts are usually sparse and devoid of the inflammatory language which often characterises references to the IRA.

When 26-year-old Angela D'Arcy was shot dead by a drunken British soldier in Enniskillen in November 1981 after she refused his demand for money, *The Guardian* managed just one column inch two days later. The report merely stated that a soldier had been charged with murder. After his conviction, *The Guardian* gave only four-and-a-half column inches to the account of his trial. The other national dailies did not report his conviction

at all.

In contrast to such minimal coverage, the British media goes to the other extreme when reporting Republican violence. The Guildford pub bombings proved to be the stimulus for copy long after the news value of the story had been exhausted. The same was true of the Harrods bombing in 1983.

But by far the biggest story was focussed on a horse called Sefton -- injured by an IRA bomb in July 1982.

The day after the bombing, which incidentally killed 12 people, the popular press spotted the potential of the story to highlight the savage nature of the attack. The *Daily Express*, the *Sun*, the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Mirror* each ran more than half-a-page devoted to a detailed account of the horse's wounds.

The story picked up momentum, and soon Sefton achieved symbolic status. "SEFTON - THE HORSE THEY COULDN'T KILL" said the *Sun*. Racing correspondent Brough Scott wrote in the *Sunday Times* how "Old Sefton stood bravely in his box, battered but unbowed, a superb dumb symbol of suffering."

The publicity given to Sefton seemed hypocritical to some observers. Following closely after the Falklands war, it dawned on some members of the public that the media might be us-

ing dual standards. In a letter to *The Guardian*, one writer concluded: "What confuses me is the logic that is being used to praise one action and condemn the other. What concerns me is the way in which the British are being manipulated into accepting the contorted logic by suppressing pictures of dead and dying Argentine soldiers publishing pictures of dead and dying horses."

Unfortunately, this paradox was, for the most part, unnoticed.

But quite apart from these deceptions and distortions the journalists employ (or are forced to employ) an approved vocabulary. Marshall McLuhan's observation that the medium is the message may be a cliché, but is nevertheless true.

For example, "terrorist" and "terrorism" are words used when dealing with the IRA or the INLA, while loyalist para-military organisations such as the UVF are usually referred to as "extremist". Likewise, victims of the IRA have been "murdered", while civilians are "killed" or "shot dead" by the army or the RUC. In 1978 an Ulster TV announcer said in a broad cast that a man, Pauty Duffy, had been "murdered" by the SAS. In a later bulletin the announcer apologised for the earlier "inadvertant phraseology" and stated that Duffy had been "shot dead".

In a conflict already exaggerated by bigotry and ignorance, the media has done little to redress the balance. Attempts have been made by a few journalists to tell the whole story -- but their efforts have gone largely unnoticed. Successive governments appear to have pursued policies of media censorship in order to prevent what they call the sapping of moral fibre.

Last year, we saw how pressure from the Cabinet prevented a documentary dealing with political extremism in Northern Ireland from being screened in its unedited form. The BBC's board of governors patronisingly claimed that the "programme's intention would continue to be misread and mis-interpreted." *Daily Telegraph*, (July 31, 1985) Mrs. Thatcher was reported as saying that she would utterly condemn any programme on television about a leading member of the IRA.

The signing of the Anglo-Irish agreement may change the way in which the media reports Northern Ireland. But some believe that even the recent outbreaks of Unionist violence were not reported with the same emotive attention to detail as many smaller republican rallies have been in the past.

On April 26 of this year, Seamus McElwaine was "shot dead" by an SAS patrol near the border with the Irish Republic. The headline in the *Sunday Express* was "SAS KILL IRA THUG".