BBC Northern Ireland

chronicle

The Story of BBC News in Northern Ireland
Issues, Dilemmas and Opportunities

“The future is not just an extension of the past: something new enters in.”

(John Updike: Due Considerations)

The appointment of the BBC’s first television journalist at Broadcasting House in Belfast was a significant development in 1955. In those days, Northern Ireland was seen as something of a provincial backwater where not very much happened. Within a relatively short period of time that image and everyday life were to change in ways which would have far-reaching social, political and editorial consequences.

Throughout the Troubles the BBC’s Belfast newsroom was a crowded, and sometimes chaotic, hub from which a story of international interest was being told. A generation of young journalists, many of them now major figures in broadcasting, would learn their craft in the most difficult circumstances, reporting local events to network audiences and the world, but also providing a vital and reliable source of information for troubled viewers and listeners in Northern Ireland.

This booklet is not intended to be a definitive history. Its limited ambition is to provide an overview of some key issues and developments in the history of BBC Northern Ireland based on the experiences of journalists, commentators and BBC managers. It also makes use of archive documents – many of them reproduced here for the first time. All of this material is complemented by a dedicated website which includes fuller versions of our essay contributions, film recordings and a collection of photographs which depict the changing look, style and mechanics of BBC newsgathering.

The existence of an online accompaniment to this initiative is an indication of how much has changed in recent decades. Our platforms for communication are now vastly different and significantly more diverse. We have made the transition from black and white to colour pictures and from mute film to high definition digital images. Limited local programming on the Home Service has been succeeded by BBC Radio Ulster and Radio Foyle and Ceefax is today complemented by a range of interactive television services. Satellite connections, mobile telephony and the internet have become almost commonplace and citizen journalism (in all its different forms) is an increasing part of the BBC’s output.

Chronicle highlights some of the issues and dilemmas which have shaped BBC journalism and the audience it serves. It’s a story of change and readjustment – both radical and incremental. Much of what follows is about the BBC’s role in a divided society and the wider effects of our programming. This is an important and continuing debate and we hope that this booklet will assist understanding of lessons learned in the development of the BBC’s work in Northern Ireland and our role in reflecting and explaining all aspects of community life and diversity.

Peter Johnston
Controller – BBC Northern Ireland
1950s

BBC cameraman Bob Unsworth 1959
The Coronation in 1953 opened our eyes to the power of television. Live pictures of the event were beamed into thousands of households. All at once there was an appetite for what the emerging television service had to offer. In 1954, BBC network television news bulletins began and viewers in Northern Ireland saw their first local magazine programme, the fortnightly Ulster Mirror.

In 1955, the BBC in Northern Ireland appointed its first television news journalist. In 1957, local television news bulletins began with Today in Northern Ireland. Ulster Television went on air in 1959 and BBCNI expanded its output with the news magazine Studio 8. It would have a number of titles in the years to come – Six O’Clock, Six-Five, Six-Ten – before Scene Around Six arrived in 1969.
The young journalists who use satellite communications to report for BBC Newsline, in sound and vision, from Colombia or Cookstown, New York or Newtownards, work in an industry that has been transformed by technical developments in the last 20 years.
The growth of the BBC in the region parallels its development elsewhere. What has made it different in Northern Ireland is the political context within which it has operated. Northern Ireland was created at the behest of two thirds of its population and against the expressed wishes of the remaining third... The BBC has had to cope with this divided society. The manner in which it has done so at any one time has been determined in part by the changing nature of broadcasting and in part by the varying stances of the broadcasters in Belfast and in London towards the political system in Northern Ireland ...

Rex Cathcart - The Most Contrary Region

 BBC Northern Ireland Advisory Council Minutes, January, 1958
Robert McCall, the BBC’s Regional Controller was asked in 1958 by the BBC Board of Governors to describe his region:

Broadcasting in Northern Ireland has a number of special stresses with which to contend. The majority and minority of the population are divided by fixed ideas based on religious belief and political ideal. Both belief and ideal are strongly held and ingrained. As a result, an impartial BBC comes under scrutiny from both sides since open discussion of two sides of problems, except in Northern Ireland parliament, is rare outside of broadcasting.

The first live television transmissions from Northern Ireland were made possible by the visit of a mobile Outside Broadcasting Unit in November 1955. The development of a permanent live transmission facility had to wait two years, when a small sound studio was adapted for the purpose. From it a five-minute programme, Today in Northern Ireland, was produced on weekday evenings. The slot was solemnly divided in two; the newsroom produced two-and-a-half minutes and the general producers were responsible for two-and-a-half-minute features. The precedent set lasted for more than a decade. The sharing remained as the length of the programme increased. There was at first no film, only still photographs...

Robert McCall, BBC Regional Controller - Report to Board of Governors, 1957

Broadcasting in Northern Ireland has been working under some difficulty since the outbreak of the IRA campaign of violence in December. The majority of our listeners are quick to take offence if the BBC attempts to ‘inform or educate’ on the problem of the Partition of Ireland. Even Irish music has become suspect to the Unionist part of the population, and the reflection of some factual news has been described as propaganda for the Republic. Complaints on television coverage of news or inclusion of Irish items – unless they emanate from Northern Ireland – are also a matter of comment. In the circumstances, with an audience quick to take offence – suffering perhaps from rather stretched nerves – the BBC in Northern Ireland has tried to preserve a sense of balance, and on the whole has, with the assistance of the other departments of the Corporation who seek our advice, steered a reasonable course. It is not easy, when tempers are high, to induce a sense of proportion in an audience anxious to find some way of expressing its irritation.

Robert McCall, BBC Regional Controller - Report to Board of Governors, 1957

Extract from The Most Contrary Region: The BBC In Northern Ireland 1924 – 1984 by Rex Cathcart
CECIL TAYLOR

The Early Days

Cecil Taylor was the first television journalist appointed by BBC Northern Ireland. He became news editor and later Head of Programmes. He retired in 1985. Here he reflects on the birth of the news operation – and the beginning of the IRA’s 1956 campaign.

…To its surprise, network news got a steady flow of film stories from Northern Ireland and of great variety. I still remember some of them. A ship ran aground at Torr Head and another became a wreck on the Maidens rocks off Larne. A Royal Navy plane crashed on take-off at Sydenham. The British amateur women’s golf championship was played at Royal Portrush. A cardinal from Boston was a guest preacher at St. Patrick’s Cathedral in Armagh and the Cathedral clergy were astonished that the BBC wanted to film part of the service. And there was a big parade at Palace Barracks, Holywood, to mark St. George’s Day in April 1956. Brief coverage of that was to pay dividends later.

On December 12 that year, at about 3.30 in the morning, my home phone rang and an excited man’s voice said, ‘They’ve blew up the Derry transmitter.’ The caller was the night watchman at Broadcasting House in Belfast. The BBC radio transmitter in Derry had been bombed. It was one of the targets on the opening night of an IRA campaign of violence launched across the border by units based in the south. Soon I had a comprehensive list - bombings and shootings at Toome, Magherafelt, Derry, Omagh and Armagh. I phoned a story to radio news in London, although the big problem was to persuade the duty editor that I was who I said I was. His newsroom wasn’t used to getting stories from Belfast, especially at 5 am.

The story led the early network bulletins. I heard the 7am news in the car and a quick drive around Northern Ireland provided film from all the places mentioned. It was sent to London on an early-afternoon plane and led the network television bulletins that evening.

Some months into the IRA campaign, the Belfast Telegraph carried four lines saying that an Army unit from Palace Barracks was moving to Armagh to assist the civil power. Curious to know what that meant, I phoned a senior officer who had been helpful at the St. George’s Day parade. I was invited to Holywood, taken to the operations room and shown a large map of the border areas in Down and Armagh. Several red circles had been marked. I was told that the next day, the Army were going to blow craters in unapproved roads being used by IRA units crossing into the North to carry out attacks.
At 8am the next morning I was parked outside Armagh police station. A convoy of police and Army vehicles headed south with me following. Before lunch-time, the Army unit had blown craters in half a dozen roads, from hedge to hedge, making them impassable. Army co-operation was total and the first two explosions were filmed, through all the preparatory stages, right to the eruption of tons of earth and boulders. This was another lead story on the 1pm network radio bulletin and the evening television news.

There was a political storm for a few days, partly because RUC men in uniform crossed the border to warn people living close by on the southern side about what was going to happen. The irony is that the whole operation was largely a waste of time. Local residents, including farmers with tractors, filled in the craters and the roads re-opened. If the IRA were inconvenienced at all, it wasn’t for long...
1960s

Film Editor prepares report for news bulletin, 1966
BBCNI programmes began to spend more time exploring the sources of community division. Issues examined included discrimination in employment, housing and cross-border co-operation. New faces arrived in the newsroom, including W.D. Flackes, Eric Waugh and Alan Reid - all of whom had been successful newspaper journalists. In 1968 images of confrontations at a civil rights demonstration in Londonderry brought the problems of Northern Ireland to the attention of an international audience.

1968 was also the year in which the NI Prime Minister, Captain Terence O’Neill, broadcast his 'Ulster at the Crossroads' address. In August 1969, in response to widespread violence, troops were deployed on the streets for the first time. In September, BBC1 introduced the network news magazine Nationwide and Scene Around Six began. Other major BBC developments in this decade included the introduction of BBC 2 in 1964, the first colour broadcasts in 1967 and the BBC’s first local radio station the same year...

From 1956 onwards into the early 1960s Northern Ireland was subject to an IRA campaign. News coverage of the acts of violence was limited on the broadcast media: news bulletins were short and current affairs broadcasting in the region did not exist. Ulster Television did not have a newsroom until October 1962, eight months after the IRA had called off its campaign.

Rex Cathcart - The Most Contrary Region
Mr. Taylor felt however that the greatest of all worries was the effect that colour would have on news values; emphasis’s professional preference for good pictures might have to be overruled by the need for coverage because it was news; or it might be that a news item must be included even though it was in black and white.

Desmond Taylor, Editor Network Television News - BBC Northern Ireland Advisory Council, 1966


By far the most controversial broadcast of the period was the E95-2 live transmission (in colour and monochrome) of the Oxford Union Debate on the motion “That the Roman Catholic Church has no place in the Twentieth Century”. The main speakers were the Rev. Ian Paisley and Mr. Norman G. John Stevens. The broadcast, suggested by us to the Controller of E95-2, attracted a large audience on E95-2 (our local research indicated 10% of the Northern Ireland public) and led to considerable communal viewing here; some organisations hired halls and rented colour receivers for the occasion, and in one instance attracted an audience of some 5,000.

The announcement of the broadcast also brought a flood of protests of unfairness to E95-1 only viewers. We therefore decided to transmit a shortened version (about one third of the total length) on E95-1 Northern Ireland the following night. The decision taken by the Controller to make the shortened version an incident involving Mr. Paisley’s display of, and remarks about, the sacramental waiver, became the subject of sharp controversy; attracting many letters, telephone calls and correspondence in the Press.

The views of members of the Council on this incident would be welcomed by the Controller.


The first quarter of 1968 has been busy but relatively placid. Local television production remained at the high level of over 4 hours a week, and radio at over 33 hours - much of it for network. But in contrast to the controversies of the previous quarter, the only subject attracting public comment and criticism on a large scale was our inability to get agreement to televise the Rugby Internationals against Wales and Scotland.
...As public order deteriorated, O’Neill would be interviewed more and more often, frequently on the steps of Stormont Castle, for local, national or foreign television. But as the storm clouds grew ever more threatening in late 1968 the Prime Minister concluded that he ought to speak to the people at large about the nature of the growing crisis, and its implications for the future of Northern Ireland. All day long, in my modest office adjacent to the Cabinet Room, I polished and re-polished an unprecedented appeal to public opinion. Such was the pressure of time and events that I had to take a text festooned with late amendments to Broadcasting House in central Belfast and there dictate it to a BBC typist for transcription onto the long paper roll inserted into the primitive autocue of the day. On arrival at the studio, O’Neill inserted an introductory sentence drawing on an image used in an earlier speech. ‘Ulster stands at the crossroads’, he began, in his strange pseudo-Churchillian mode of speech … The outcome was a fascinating and informative demonstration of the power of television and the limits of that power. The immediate impact was a huge manifestation of support, but that support was to prove flimsy and short-lived in the face of new developments and tactical mistakes …

BBC and other media interest grew exponentially as the Northern Ireland ‘Troubles’ persisted and deepened. Household names began to make regular forays to Belfast and Derry. On two significant occasions in particular BBC coverage played a critical part in shifting the focus of decision-making from Belfast to London. The pictures of a British MP, Gerry Fitt, batoned and bloody as the RUC confronted a civil rights march in Derry, flushed down the plughole of history a decades-old convention of non-intervention in Northern Ireland’s domestic affairs. Still more dramatic were the pictures from Bloody Sunday in the same turbulent city …

Sir Kenneth Bloomfield - The BBC at the Watershed
Glenn Patterson

If I had a great big medal, I’d pin it on the person who dreamt up Scene Around Six. I’m sure the play on ‘seen’ was intentional. From that first syllable – sibilant – it was unmistakably of this place, where most of us are only ever an excited slip of the tongue away from the wrong end of the seen-saw. (And though Scene Around Six was grammatically correct, I half expected London to give us a collective slap: ‘You saw it around six.’)

I don’t remember news programmes before SAS came along, although I’m told they were much briefer. It must have seemed a gamble in 1968 to give Northern Ireland twenty minutes of nightly news to fill, but, credit where credit’s due, Northern Ireland rose to the challenge, serving up, in Scene Around Six’s sixteen years, a constant diet of murder and mayhem for its cameras to feed off; feed us on.

It was on Scene Around Six I saw the car bomb explode. Maybe you saw it yourself. Yes, that one: a soldier in the foreground ducks just before the vehicle becomes less and more than the sum of its suddenly lethal parts. I saw worse things back then, on screen and off, but that seemed to me the perfect symbol of a society where everyday objects, and the lives they furnished, were no longer reliable.

Novelist Glenn Patterson - from The Living Air

Gloria Hunniford

…Dan Gilbert provided me with my passport to broadcasting. He was in charge of Round-Up Reports, which was the fore-runner of Good Morning Ulster. It was 1969 and I was trying to make my way as a singer at the time. I did an interview for the programme about a record of mine which had reached number seven in the local charts and he thought – ‘Here’s a woman who can string a few words together.’ So he rang me that night and asked me if I’d come in for a chat.

…I remember the first time I ever saw a murder victim – the body of a woman who’d been shot not far from Broadcasting House. I also did a piece for the Today programme in the aftermath of the Abercorn bombing. A room had been set aside for people’s belongings, their lost property. I’ll never get over the sight of leather handbags which had been simply flattened to a strip by the explosion. There was a charred teddy bear, a driving licence, one half of it burned, which had belonged to a young girl, one of the victims…

Gloria Hunniford is a writer and broadcaster
Swiftly moving political events, attracting national and international attention, continued to keep editorial, production and technical staff under pressure. The sudden resignation of Captain O’Neill and his farewell broadcast to the people; the victory of Major Chichester-Clark by the narrowest possible majority in the ballot for the succession; the formation of the new Cabinet; the political amnesty and the release from prison of the Reverend Ian Paisley and Major Bunting; the election to Westminster of Miss Bernadette Devlin and her maiden speech: all these events were covered in detail by camera and microphone and men-on-the-spot, and their implications discussed in magazines and current affairs programmes.

Happily, for the first time since last October, there were no serious disturbances in the streets. However, the series of acts of sabotage against water and electricity installations called for increased security arrangements at our transmitters - and even in Broadcasting House we took the precaution of restoring guards and guard dogs at night.

Controller’s Report, June, 1969

All over the world the BBC have given extensive coverage of riots and civil unrest, but, having photographed, recorded, reported and analysed the scene, they have been able to go home and forget it. For the staff of the N.I. Region, this was not possible. When they left the building they did not turn their backs on a state of civil strife, they went home to live with it. There were barricades, petrol bombs, and armed patrols in the streets. There were vigilantes and barbed-wire entanglements along their routes to and from work …

From BBC magazine Ariel - October, 1969
Martin Bell

I have what the police call ‘form’ in Northern Ireland. I was in the first wave of metropolitan reporters to hit the Province in the late 60s and early 70s, witnessing pitched battles between the British Army and loyalists on one side and republicans on the other that seemed indistinguishable from outright war.

If you survive firefights like those, you remember them, and the dates of some of them, too - the Shankill on 11 October 1969 and Lenadoon Avenue on 9 July 1972. They were a crash course in what the Army calls FIBUA - fighting in a built-up area; and they were but a part of it.

Over the years I was spat at, abused, physically set upon and threatened with being sent home in a box - by both sides, which was a sort of badge of neutrality if not a consolation. And it was in Belfast that I first acquired my taste for the company of warlords. Andy Tyrie and Billy McCarroll of the Ulster Defence Association, where are you now in these quieter, gentler times?

Writer and broadcaster Martin Bell is a former BBC correspondent and a former MP

Main control room, Broadcasting House, Belfast

… For more than forty years the BBC’s efforts in Northern Ireland attracted little attention outside the region. The British national press occasionally took notice of unionist protests against the network coverage of Northern Ireland, but that was all. An indication of the slight significance attached to the Northern Ireland region was the fact that Asa Briggs in his monumental history of the BBC devoted 200 lines in all to the region in 2926 pages. The upsurge of agitation and violence in 1968, however, changed perceptions when Britain’s political backwater suddenly thrust itself onto the television screens of the world …

Rex Cathcart - The Most Contrary Region
1970s
This was a violent decade during which Northern Ireland remained the focus of international media attention. A generation of young journalists, many of whom went on to become household names on the BBC and elsewhere, learned their craft covering some of the most horrific events of the Troubles. At the beginning of the decade, the BBC broadcast the first Nine O’Clock News.

Later came Ceefax, the world’s first teletext service. BBC Radio Ulster began broadcasting in 1975 and BBC Radio Foyle followed in 1979. Also in 1979, a team from Panorama filmed an IRA roadblock at Carrickmore. The footage was never shown but it led to a political row and to a tightening by the BBC of managerial referral on issues relating to Northern Ireland.

The Question of Ulster
...It was inevitable that there should be some tension between the political correspondent and the Government; the correspondent after all had a vested interest in disclosure while the Government often wished to keep certain things away from the public. Though there had been an increase in the number of Stormont press officers, the result was not an increase in the flow of the hard news, but rather to insulate senior civil servants from reporters so that it often took more time to follow up an enquiry. Another consequence had been to time announcements more carefully – either to achieve the maximum impact or so that they should pass almost unnoticed...

W.D. Flackes - report to BBC Northern Ireland Advisory Council, July, 1970
Firemen tackle blaze after bomb explodes beside Broadcasting House, Belfast

Controller's Report - BBC Northern Ireland Advisory Council Minutes, October, 1971
The serious increase in terrorist activity in late July and early August, followed by the introduction of internment; the subsequent further increase in bombings and shootings; and the intense political activity which resulted, with these developments Northern Ireland became once more a world news centre.

Yet again our local resources - staff, equipment and accommodation - were severely over-stretched. Substantial reinforcements were provided by the main television and radio news and current affairs departments in London to meet the requirements of network programmes - the numbers of which have increased considerably since the previous large-scale troubles in August 1969.

In times like these, the local demand for information in installable, so “Scene around Six” was regularly extended - sometimes to forty-five minutes. Late-night news summaries on television and radio were also extended frequently to almost full-length bulletins. Even our severe critics admit that they regard the 11.45 p.m. news on Radio 1, Northern Ireland, as compulsory listening. Regular Sunday radio news bulletins were introduced, and are likely to continue indefinitely.

The change in tactics by the Provisional IRA, from late August - when office blocks and other public buildings became targets for daylight bombings - brought serious problems. On 3rd September, an explosion at Bedford House caused extensive damage. Staff who occupy our offices on the fourth floor were severely shaken, and some were cut by flying glass, but fortunately there were no serious after-effects. As a result of the terrorist’s new tactics, stringent security measures were introduced at all BBC premises, and steps taken to counteract the disruptive effects of the numerous telephone calls which we receive, saying that time-bombs have been planted.

Various other measures have been taken to ensure the maintenance of a broadcasting service in any emergency.

Controller’s Report - BBC Northern Ireland Advisory Council Minutes, October, 1971
Robert Fisk: The Point Of No Return

During the strike, the BBC could call on the resources of sixteen news reporters and nine copy-takers and secretaries as well as six producers, nine freelance reporters and five secretaries in its current affairs department in Northern Ireland. But, with almost hourly bulletins and at one time five magazine programmes each day, this small staff could hardly keep pace with the amount of work that was required of them. One freelance made 72 broadcasts in just twelve days while another earned a total of £800 in the same period of time.
Nearly all were Northern Ireland reporters, born and brought up in the province and - for this needs to be remembered - there is not a scrap of evidence to suggest that any deliberately tried to bias their reports in favour of one side or another. What did happen, however, was that the staff were forced by circumstances - principally the sheer amount of time devoted to live broadcasting - to abandon any attempt at examining the political and constitutional implications of the strike. They used up their talents in composing the unending stream of special news bulletins which detailed the location of road blocks, the political statements, the problems of the social services, the availability of bread and transport; constantly trying to keep this information up to date and searching for a new angle to make their summaries more informative, they could do no more than scratch the surface when it came to analysing the causes of the strike and the intentions of the men behind it...

**BBC NI Controller, James Hawthorne:**

*Reporting violence - Lessons from Northern Ireland?*

...It was the strike which brought the province to a standstill and all we did was tell the public what was happening, what was not happening, where important supplies could be obtained etcetera, trying to meet the needs of those people whom the strike had completely cut off. In so doing, it is alleged that we underscored the reality of the strike and brought down the government. It is simply one example of the sort of blame we receive when we are, in fact, trying to meet an important public need...

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**Controller’s Report - BBC Northern Ireland Advisory Council Minutes, June, 1974**
FLATMAN'S GUIDE TO ANTI- TERRORISM LEGISLATION

Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act, 1974

Advice to News & Current Affairs Staff

(1) No broadcast involving members or supporters of the Provisional or Official I.R.A. will be allowed to go out "live".

(2) No reporter should interview a known member or supporter of the I.R.A., except with clearance from R.M.C.I.

(3) Clearance will not, as a general rule, be given for such interviews, except for the purpose of providing "background" information (even if in depth) rather than for the purpose of an actual interview.

(4) In cases of grave doubt about a programme or projected interview involving the possible involvement of the commission of offences under the Act and the Corporation's public duty the advice of senior Home Office officials may be sought through R.M.C.I.

(5) No money, expenses, donations, or goods of any kind or description should be given for an interview with or in return for any information passed from or by a member of the I.R.A. or its sympathisers.

(6) The accent should be on reporting of fact rather than of views. This should not however prevent a reporter taking a statement or the broadcasting of a statement on a particular topic made by a member or supporter of a prohibited organisation - i.e., at present the I.R.A.

(7) In general the same degree of caution should be shared with members and supporters of organisations which are not prohibited but are known to be sympathetic to prohibited organisations.

(8) Journalists should preferably and if at all possible avoid interviewing persons against whom an exclusion order has been made but who have not yet left Great Britain. If this cannot be avoided it should preferably take place at ports of entry and exit while any time limit which would have to be complied with by the order has not yet run out. Under no circumstances should money or other assistance be given to such persons.

(9) Journalists should in general not present new reports on incidents which have been particularly "staged" for the BBC or other news media. This does not prevent the reporting of fights, riots, or unlawful assemblies or isolated or bombings as an item of news.

(10) Every effort should be made to avoid the turning of any interview into an excuse for propaganda. Hence it is desirable that any interview should also be pre-recorded and edited if appropriate.
...The first problem arose because people in Northern Ireland were unused to seeing their opponents on television. For many years the BBC followed a policy of broadcasting only such material as would emphasise what the two communities had in common; divisive broadcasting was avoided.

To digress, anyone can judge for himself if this policy was successful in uniting Ulster – and draw conclusions as to how a similar policy of ignoring reality would work for the rest of us now...

Desmond Taylor,
Network Editor, News and Current Affairs, 1975
In 1977, an edition of the Tonight programme about the situation in Northern Ireland led to an exchange of letters between Airey Neave MP and the BBC’s Director General, Ian Trethowan.

...I consider this far the most dangerous programme shown to Northern Ireland viewers for many years.

I am obliged to ask the question: do the BBC want to prolong the “armed struggle” in Northern Ireland? This programme may well permit the Provisional IRA to renew their campaign of murder by glorifying violence and fostering a new generation of killers.

The extraordinary statement by the Producer, Sean Hardie that it was essentially an “explanatory piece”, demonstrates an air of total irresponsibility for the consequences to the people of Northern Ireland. The terrorists are using your Corporation for their own propaganda. I feel therefore that it is time the House of Commons had an opportunity to study this film on an all-Party basis, so that they can form a judgement on BBC policy in Northern Ireland as a whole.

I have asked Philip Goodhart to make the necessary arrangements and I hope you will make it available.

It is a matter of great regret to me personally that you should have reached a decision which will inevitably give new encouragement to terrorism.

I am sending a copy of this letter to the Press...
What is really at issue is what the public can be trusted to be shown. You seem to take the view that the public should not be shown, in any serious form, what is happening among the Republican groups, even at a moment of change. We disagree. We believe that the public can be trusted to make its own judgment, even in Northern Ireland. It is sending 14,000 of its sons to risk disablement, even death, on the streets of Belfast and in the hedgerows of South Armagh. It is certainly entitled to know - a point you have often made, and fairly - that the British media will not give active encouragement to the terrorists. The public is entitled to expect that we recognise that reporting in Northern Ireland is very different from reporting in Norfolk.

But at the end of the day, the public is also surely entitled to be shown something of the people who have been causing the violence. It should be done within context, and not frequently - this programme was in fact, the first to cover this ground for two years. But to argue that, particularly in a period of change, we should avoid any serious analysis of what is happening within the Republican movement seems a negation of the spirit of informed public discussion on which the democratic process depends.

I stress "within context". I am, of course, more than willing to let you have a recording, but that on its own will not enable you or any other M.P. to make a judgment about the BBC's policy in covering Northern Ireland. By the nature of their work, M.P.'s see little television, and they therefore find it difficult to put themselves in to the position of the average viewer, who will have seen not only last Thursday's programme, but much of the other coverage in our news bulletins, current affairs and features programmes. The impression left in the mind of average viewers comes from that totality of coverage. This may be why, despite the much publicised condemnation of yourself and Roy Mason, so very few viewers have reacted against this one programme, even in Northern Ireland.

The experience in Northern Ireland, where communities and governments are in conflict but not in a state of emergency or a state of war, suggests a greater need than ever for the media to function as the 'fourth estate,' distinct from the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. But if the functions are to remain separate, it must be left to the media themselves to take the decisions (within the limits of responsibility) as to what to publish, as to when, and as to how. That puts a lot of responsibility on all of us to answer these questions wisely. Not, I submit, by adopting special criteria for Northern Ireland, but by deploying the best available professional skills and by scrupulously fair dealing.

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Extract - BBC Director General's reply to Airey Neave MP about the Tonight programme

Broadcasting to a Community in Conflict - BBCNI Controller, Richard Francis, 1977
Do we give the violence too much prominence on regional programmes? Do radio and television concentrate on violence because of its immediacy or its visual impact? I doubt it. The people in the worst affected areas invariably accuse us of underplaying their plight. To give you one example: between 13 and 16 February last year, Northern Ireland had one of its worst weekends of violence. There were eight deaths, 87 shootings, 36 hijackings, 17 bombs and 126 arrests. The regional television news programmes over that weekend totalled exactly one hour. The reporting of all this violence amounted to no more than 15 minutes (25 per cent), politics amounted to 20 minutes (one-third), and the rest of the time, 25 minutes or just under half the total, was devoted to news of other peaceful matters - plans for a new power station; cheaper petrol; the Arts Council annual report; cheap bus fares to London; a fashion-show; sport and weather, etc.

Broadcasting to a Community in Conflict - BBCNI Controller, Richard Francis, 1977

In later conversation with Mason he consistently warned me about giving a platform to the I.R.A. And on leaving me, he said "Stay away from these killers, Bernard, remember the licence fee, get sharp ass." Again my own feelings are that Mason himself resents any kind of opposite point of view from his own and believes that we should aid him and the Government in Ulster - in fact that we should be a propaganda arm to the Northern Ireland Office.

Memo from Tonight reporter Bernard Falk about a conversation with Roy Mason MP, January, 1978

3. "You've joined the BBC (Jimmy boy) and it's just about to crack." "Bloody gentlemen of the BBC think they are above criticism." "How can you possibly control what they say about Northern Ireland in London?" "Alkey Neave and Margaret Thatcher have come to see me and we've absolutely agreed that there should be no increase in your licence unless you put things right." "It doesn't matter what the others are doing, it's the BBC's handling of Northern Ireland that counts." "De Gaulle knew how to handle the media."

BBC NI Controller James Hawthorne, memo on his meeting with Roy Mason MP, January, 1978

Generally speaking, the Pope's visit to Ireland was undoubtedly the biggest story of the past few months. Our reporters followed the Pope to all his major engagements and splendid OB facilities made it possible for "up to the second" coverage.

"Scenes Around Six" transmitted a series of special films during the week leading to the visit and the variety and quality of them gave rise to considerable comment of a favourable nature. The "Irish Times" wrote in laudatory fashion on a series which ended with a major interview with Cardinal @Flitch on the eve of the visit.

BBC Northern Ireland Advisory Council Minutes, 1979
Bernard Cornwell

We worked on Spotlight. Jack Watson ran it then and Jack had assembled an extraordinary team. It was not, perhaps, a very Irish team for we were fronted by Jeremy Paxman and Gavin Esler but that shows what an eye Jack had for talent. I was to take over from Jack and I inherited that talent which was supplemented by Roisin McAuley who made up in Irishness what our Englishman and Scotsman lacked.

We were lively. I forget many of the programmes now. They were mostly the quotidien business of current affairs – whither education in Ulster; that sort of thing – though quite how we managed to work a Porsche Carrera into the education programme I can’t remember but it was fun.

A lot of it was fun. Jeremy, I recall, did a film about tourism in the six counties, much of it dwelling on the large number of Germans who had discovered the fishing and, wanting some oompah German music to cover a sequence, inadvertently (he swears) chose the Horst Wessel song. The West German consul gravely objected and we just as gravely apologised.

It was tourism that ended my stay. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board, in its ineffable wisdom, brought a group of American travel agents to explore Ulster. It was, and may it remain, the second worst year of the Troubles and the Tourist Board was plainly whistling in the wind (or else ridding itself of surplus budget). We filmed the visit, which cleverly managed to avoid any place where a uniform might be seen, and we milked it for amusement.

But the point of the story is that on the first day, as we filmed the travel agents arriving, I was struck. She was blonde and still is. ‘I’m going to marry that one,’ I told Gavin Esler, and so I did, and these days she and I live in Cape Cod and I write books because the US Government would not give me a work permit when I pursued her to the States and I did not need Washington’s permission to write. It was a happy ending to three happy years.

Bernard Cornwell is a best-selling novelist.
**Nick Witchell**

It was 1978. I was another of those wet-behind-the-ears products of some BBC training scheme in London who'd come, by choice, to the BBC’s busiest newsroom outside the capital. I'd never had ambitions to join the airy-fairy world of 'current affairs.' News was what attracted me and – for all the most self-evident reasons – the operation then run by the BBC in Northern Ireland was the place where someone like me could learn how to do it or be made to realise that I couldn’t.

The Belfast newsroom was home to some formidable characters in those days. Editors, correspondents, cameramen (most definitely no women), many of whom lived life pretty hard. The physical space was cramped (one long desk handling TV; a second, radio); the atmosphere was colourful (smoke-filled, occasionally expletive-ridden), and the activity was frequently urgent as the newsdesks absorbed details of the latest violent incident, marshalling the often sparse facts with great care and deploying reporters and camera crews to the scene.

They were the days long before the ‘digital revolution.’ No computers. No mobile phones. There wasn’t even videotape. We operated with 16mm film which was rushed into the BBC’s processing department where the wizards could run a 400-ft roll of colour ‘commag’ through the tanks of super-heated chemicals in about 12 minutes flat. (Fortunately there didn’t seem to be too much ‘health and safety’ in those days either; otherwise rather less would have reached the air than did.)

My particular memories? Of the August Bank Holiday in 1979 when, as a very junior journalist, I took the first call alerting us that there’d been an explosion in a place called Mullaghmore and, some minutes later, hearing a Garda officer at Dublin Castle confirm that Earl Mountbatten and others aboard his boat had been killed; of going later that afternoon up onto the Falls road to meet a Republican contact to receive, by hand, the IRA’s statement saying it had placed the bomb on the boat; and of returning to the newsroom just as we started to learn of the explosions at Warrenpoint which killed 19 British soldiers.

In nearly 30 years with BBC News, that, I think, remains one of the longest days I have known...

**Nicholas Witchell was a BBC reporter in Belfast. He is a former Ireland Correspondent and is now BBC’s Royal Correspondent.**

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**BBC Ceefax 1976**

**Nicholas Witchell**
Noel Thompson reflects on the nightly news programmes and their presenters.

When I started at Broadcasting House at the tail end of the seventies, with the Troubles at their height, Barry Cowan was in full flight on Scene Around Six. Every night there was emotional and angry debate on the programme, Barry in the thick of it, doling out or taking the verbal blows, giving as good as he got, or keeping the peace between two warring factions, but always in complete control. Barry loved it and had a proper sense of the important role he was playing in explaining to this community what was going on.

It was seat-of-the-pants journalism. The Scene Around Six running order would change a dozen times in the course of an afternoon. Indeed there was rarely a night when it didn’t change on air, with political and security developments going off like popcorn all the time.

It had been a very different world that saw the birth of a local evening BBC television news programme in the 1960s. One of the first to tell us how it was was Walter Love, one of three station radio announcers at the time. When it was decided that television news was the next big thing in Northern Ireland, one of the three was deemed unsuitable, another wasn’t interested, and so it fell to Walter. What began as a news bulletin gradually expanded to include interviews, with Michael Baguley the presenter. Walter recalls how Michael, in those pre-Autocue days, taught him to mark up a script so that a quick glance down would remind him where commas and sentences were placed.

Fame and recognition were less instant then. One night Walter, who’d been on the screen every night for eight years, went into his local garage for petrol. ‘Here,’ says the cashier, ‘did I see you on the telly last night?’

The next face of TV news in Northern Ireland was Larry McCoubrey. Larry was an engineer by trade but his real interest was writing and performing. He spent years in and around the BBC, including a short stint as an announcer, but he was on the verge of moving to England when the management in Belfast offered him the chance to present Scene Around Six.

He became an instant success when on one of his first nights technical failure left him with a large stretch of empty air to fill. He told a joke, and Broadcasting House was besieged with letters asking for more. So it became his trademark, a joke a night, with the blessings of the bosses. Even through the dark days of the early Troubles, Larry’s wit lightened the nightly load of horror.

Larry died of a brain haemorrhage in 1974. He was just 38. It was a huge loss to the BBC, and his name is still uttered in reverential terms by those who worked with him and remember his impact on the community.

I left Northern Ireland in the early eighties for stints in London, Bristol and Manchester. When I returned, the news anchorman was Sean Rafferty.

If Larry, Barry and Sean were the mainstays of television news for three decades, they were well supported. Presenters like Wendy Austin, Seamus McKee, Rose Neill and Conor Bradford all made their own individual mark and helped to build and maintain the BBC’s reputation in Northern Ireland.
Robin Walsh was News Editor for BBCNI in the Seventies. He became Editor of the Network Nine O’Clock News and later the BBC’s Controller in Northern Ireland. He pays tribute to a group of people whose work is sometimes overlooked – the cameramen.

The Bogside, Derry, January 30, 1972. Bloody Sunday - members of the Parachute Regiment shoot dead 13 civilians. Cameraman: Cyril Cave; sound recordist: Jim Deeney. Lasting image: priest waving a white handkerchief as a wounded civilian is carried away.

Oxford Street Bus Station, Belfast, July 21, 1972. Bloody Friday – six people are killed as part of a Provincial IRA bombing blitz of Belfast which costs nine lives. Cameraman: Patsy Hill. Lasting image: body parts being put in plastic bags.


This is the stuff of television news, the medium whose lifeblood is the moving picture - brought to the screen, not by the instantly recognisable reporter, but by the anonymous cameraman.

In all three instances – as in countless others down the past four decades – there was much that was simply taken for granted.

There was courage. Cave could not have stayed hidden behind a protective wall as the Army bullets whistled by and manage to capture that image of Father Edward Daly any more than Cooper could have kept his camera behind the headstone as Stone approached with his lethal weapons. And although his life was not in danger, it took no little fortitude on Hill’s part to capture the images that showed the real consequences of terrorism.

There was, as time went by, the virtual acceptance on the part of the camera crews that the abnormal was normal. No war-zone training. Limited protective clothing. No stress counselling on return to base – job done, where to next?...
Playing by the Rules

Richard Ayre began his journalistic career with BBCNI. He went on to hold a number of senior posts in Network News before becoming Controller Editorial Policy. He has a unique understanding of the difficulties that have been involved for newsgathering in Northern Ireland.

I was sitting with Maire Drumm in her West Belfast semi, drinking Nescafe. It was 1976 and the Vice President of Sinn Fein, who had promised to send British soldiers home in their coffins, was on an NHS waiting list. Her eyesight was failing, but her problems were not just physical. She could see no end to the Troubles and told me that all she really wanted was to get out of the North, go down to Galway or Kerry, live a quiet life and find time to read some poetry. Three days later she went into hospital but never came out. The operation was a success but the patient died – shot at point blank range in her bed in the Mater Hospital.

Maire Drumm left a lasting impression on me. She was astute and quick-witted; she was a visceral Republican but much more pragmatic than her public utterances suggested; and she would have been a critical player in Northern Ireland’s future – if she had lived. How much more so her successor, Gerry Adams - a man always hard to fathom, never saying an unguarded word, but even in those days calculating, always calculating.

But, working in the BBC of the mid 70s, there was enormous pressure on us not to talk to people like this and certainly not to interview them. The British public, and the Ulster public in particular, were thought too vulnerable, too volatile, to be allowed to hear; even to hear challenged, the ideas and ideologies of the very people whose supporters were bringing the country to the brink of civil war. The fact that we did go on reporting the views of Sinn Fein – and of the ‘political’ representatives of Loyalist paramilitaries like the UDA and the UVF – was largely thanks to the determination of one journalist. Robin Walsh was young, driven, driving, and rigorously non-partisan: he took command of the Belfast newsroom in 1973 and shook it to its foundations. He had little or no interest in the traditional stuff of regional TV news – chit-chat, features cut to music, heart-warming tales of local do-goodery. Walsh was interested in forensically dissecting the sectarian politics that were driving his country to self-destruct. The nightly TV news programme, Scene Around Six, became compulsive viewing for the beleaguered people of Northern Ireland and Walsh’s office became a regular watering-hole (literally, in the case of Ian Paisley) for every politician, prelate and proto-paramilitary in the Province. As a young journalist, it seemed to me that this exposure to the realities of raw Irish argument served the people of Ireland, North and South, well – though it was rarely comfortable, sometimes deeply disturbing, and regularly dispiriting.

The Troubles, as they developed in the Seventies, called for new disciplines, new rigour, sustained courage. They also called for a lot of new rules – or, to be more precise, a lot of new rules grew out of the lessons learned by BBC journalists as they tried to steer a straight course through very turbulent times.
First there were rules about sources. If you tell the audience that a bomb has gone off in the next town you had better be right. Then there were rules about rumours – the need not to propagate them but to dispel them rapidly with accurate information. There were rules about anonymity; some of the best testimony came from people who could never be identified but anonymity can also be an easy way of spreading lies.

We had rules about bomb warnings and different rules about hoaxes. And there were rules about language – a growing realisation that words like ‘terrorism’, ‘volunteer’, ‘execution’ carried different meanings for different people and using them almost always looked like taking sides.

Depicting violence – what to show and what not to show – became a critical daily judgement. Show too little and you sanitise, you censor. Show too much and you risk doing the work of the terrorist for him. (In 1972 BBC Northern Ireland took one of the most courageous journalistic decisions of the Troubles, showing ambulancemen in Oxford Street on Bloody Friday shovelling chunks of corpses and their entrails into plastic bags.)

There were rules about balance, of course. When do you talk to one party, or two, or three, or to all of them at once? Whether, when and how to talk to the paramilitaries was a bigger conundrum still. It often outraged governments, sometimes angered audiences, but it served to expose to the world the ignorance, the prejudice and the passions that were tearing Ulster society apart...
1980s

Technicians monitoring BBC radio discussion programme, 1981
Political and security issues continued to dominate the news agenda. This was the decade of the Hunger Strikes, the Brighton bombing, the Anglo-Irish Agreement, and the Enniskillen bombing. The BBC made headlines again, this time when the Board of Governors banned an edition of a programme in the Real Lives series, which featured Martin McGuinness and Gregory Campbell. The Government also introduced the Broadcasting Ban.
BBC Northern Ireland Advisory Council Minutes, November, 1980

Radio Foyle: For the second time in six months a car bomb exploded outside the offices of Radio Foyle in Londonderry in the early hours of Sunday morning, 8th June.

The offices which are housed on the second floor of the Northern Counties Building were extensively damaged. The sheer resilience of the staff ensured that no output was lost despite operating from a studio area which was open to the elements.
The past three months have been exceptionally busy for the BBC in Northern Ireland as the Province once again became headline news around the world. The Fermanagh/South Tyrone by-election, the hunger strikers’ deaths and funerals and the renewal of street violence attracted journalists in unprecedented numbers from as far away as Australia and Brazil. Our own coverage of these events aroused a volume of public reaction and criticism the like of which we haven’t experienced for many years.

Apart from providing our own local programmes of news and current affairs, we were also playing host to BBC national networks. Broadcasting House (along with the Europe Hotel) became the centre for the world’s broadcasters. Journalists, film crews and technicians from more than 40 radio and television companies sought our assistance for information and briefings, as well as processing and editing film and transmitting live programmes. Looking back on it now it seems almost miraculous that so far as we know all those customers went away satisfied with the service they had received. This is a great tribute to the patience, tact and generosity of staff at all levels who rose to the occasion in a quite remarkable way.
...When I started as a television critic, Northern Ireland was a frightening and intractable issue. As I cease to be a television critic, Northern Ireland is still a frightening and intractable issue. For ten years I have done, in this respect, what everyone else has had to do – look on helplessly while the screen fills with masked men, angry young faces, broken bodies and loops of flame. For a long time there were complaints that television was not telling enough of the story. The complaints were justified. Programmes were indeed suppressed, whether because it was thought they would exacerbate bitterness and abet the terror, or because it was thought that they would simply help the IRA to win. Gradually more and more programmes were screened, telling more and more of the truth...To know what one had not known before was an absolute good. But, apart from the educational aspect, there was no denying that the increased television coverage of Northern Ireland did little which was observable to affect the struggle either way. There were frequent complaints that the presence of television cameras made young people more inclined to throw petrol bombs, but this was wishful thinking...Both sides in Northern Ireland will make propaganda if there are cameras around: they would be foolish not to. But they also go on making war in the dark...

Clive James

Glued To The Box - 1982
Since 1969 more than 2,300 people have been killed in Northern Ireland. If violence on that scale afflicted the rest of the U.K. the proportionate death toll would be over 100,000. Despite periods of calm the army has been needed in the region since 1969 to support the civil authorities. In such a situation a national broadcasting organisation has particular responsibilities. The public looks to the BBC for an accurate and objective account of what is happening. That responsibility brings its own special problems:

how to report challenges to public order without advertising or promoting them?

how to cover the constitutional issues involved without promoting the aims of the men of violence or seeming to become a mouthpiece of government?

how to ensure the same reports make sense to those caught up in the conflict and to those in Britain and elsewhere who are geographically or mentally remote?

how to report continuing violence while offering a fair perspective on “normal” life?

There are no complete answers to those questions. There are important general principles of accuracy, independence and balance. There are also thousands of individual editorial decisions made over the years, many of them under the pressure of dramatic and dreadful events. Inevitably there have been mistakes. But the BBC’s achievement is that its news service has retained credibility - within a divided community, in the United Kingdom as a whole and throughout the world.

Discussion paper - BBC General Advisory Council, 1984

Report by Editor News and Current Affairs - Broadcasting Council for Northern Ireland Minutes, April, 1984
In June 1985, under pressure from the Home Secretary, the BBC Board of Governors banned the showing of the documentary *Real Lives – At The Edge of the Union*, a profile of Martin McGuinness and Gregory Campbell. The decision brought a crisis in relations between the Governors and BBC management. The film was later shown.

**BBC Board of Governors’ Meeting**

... The Chairman said he would not comment on the programme, but felt he had to express his surprise and consternation at that stage of the discussion. If the Board were to go against the advice of management and decide not to show the film, they would be perceived as acting for the wrong reasons, and succumbing to government pressure. The consequences for the BBC would be “immeasurable” ...

... Richard Francis reminded Governors that during the previous decade he had been involved with coverage of Northern Ireland as a producer, as CNI and as DNCA. Throughout that time, he had sought to establish a responsible editorial framework against which interviews with members, and supporters, of terrorist organisations might be conducted on occasion. Any decision not to show the programme would change the criteria against which James Hawthorne and his senior colleagues in Belfast took their decisions ...

... The Chairman then established who among the Governors were “implacably opposed” to showing the film, and who felt it might be shown after amendment. He concluded that the majority of the Board were against the programme’s transmission. Alwyn Roberts asked, with great regret, that his dissent from this decision should be recorded. He said he believed it would be a “grievous error” not to show the programme.

**National Governor’s Report**

Dr Kincade had gone to his first ‘normal’ meeting of the Board of Governors with three important issues on his mind: 1) a decision on the showing of ‘Real Lives’; 2) vetting procedures; and 3) future cuts in expenditure. The last, in his view, was the most important.

...Dr Kincade believed it was important now, when so much blame had been spread and such a welter of words written and spoken, to dwell on some of the positive factors surrounding the whole sorry affair. First of all, the Government will think twice before it ever interferes again with the BBC – and that it will help the Governors. Secondly, it will be a very long time before the Governors ever preview a programme again – and that should strengthen Management’s hand. He believed that it had been demonstrated that the BBC was anything but a Government lap dog. What other broadcasting system would have reacted so fiercely to official attempts to influence its programmes? Listeners around the world must have marvelled at the independence of a radio service which is free to strike in protest against Government interference, and then to report on it. The tremendous wave of support which CNI had received from journalists and others he thought could have positive and lasting effects.

**Broadcasting Council for Northern Ireland Minutes - September, 1985**

In June 1985, under pressure from the Home Secretary, the BBC Board of Governors banned the showing of the documentary *Real Lives – At The Edge of the Union*, a profile of Martin McGuinness and Gregory Campbell. The decision brought a crisis in relations between the Governors and BBC management. The film was later shown.
In 1988, the Northern Ireland Office produced a video advertisement about the Troubles which it asked the BBC and other broadcasters to transmit. The BBC refused...

Many of you will realise that part of an editor’s job in Northern Ireland involves a lot of behind-the-scenes dealings with government, with politicians, with the security forces and, sometimes, with paramilitary organisations. A lot of those dealings are aimed at finding out what particular sections of society are thinking at a given time or with testing the validity of information we have in our possession. Part of my purpose in all such negotiations is to ensure that the BBC as messenger gets it in the neck as rarely as possible and that political hostility does not undermine our newsgathering.

There have been many occasions over the years when it has been apparent that we were involved in situations in which the BBC simply could not win. One need only think back to the UWC stoppage in 1974 or to the Republican hunger-strikes in 1981 for two vivid examples. In both instances, whatever we did was perceived as wrong by nationalists who saw us as being pro-unionist and a mouthpiece for the government. At the same time, many unionists and the government felt we had been hijacked by the republican propaganda machine and, in the case of the hunger-strikes were more concerned about the welfare of convicted terrorists than we were about their thousands of victims ....

... The difference with most of the issues that we see as our public duty to raise is that they are generally treated within the context of BBC programmes. In this instance, we are being asked to effectively hand over our airwaves for a message which we have not compiled. It is a government approach unprecedented in nearly 20 years of violence, although both UTV and the newspapers have previously carried anti-terrorist advertisements...

If we asked them, probably a majority of programme-makers and journalists in this building would be opposed to showing the film. They would feel it could put them at risk on the streets and many would disagree with the BBC being used as a vehicle for such overt government propaganda. Citizens at large would probably wonder what our reservations were and might assume they stemmed from pro-republican sympathies which many in the unionist community believe we have anyway. Showing the film could undoubtedly expose us to hostile reaction from Sinn Fein, the British Left and others. The government could still accuse us of not showing it frequently enough and of not putting it in what they regard as the proper slots. And what happens when the advertising campaign funds run out? Will they expect the BBC alone to continue to show the film for free?

Many people feel that our showing this film will create a dangerous precedent both here and in Britain. Locally, what is to stop the government coming back a year later with another commercial with a narrower message like “Join the UDR” or “Help the RUC”?

John Conway (Editor, News & Current Affairs, BBC Northern Ireland) - Report to Broadcasting Council, January, 1988
Controller's nine points for not showing the NIO Video - January, 1988

1. The video is cast in the form of a commercial; will be shown as such on Ulster Television and is therefore inappropriate for the BBC's schedule.

2. The BBC was not involved at any stage in its production and therefore it is an independent production. As such, it does not meet any of the criteria which the BBC has laid down for such productions.

3. The type of programme does not fit any of the BBC's three criteria to inform, educate or entertain. It is strictly propaganda which is not the BBC's business.

4. The content is sufficiently contentious to warrant news and current affairs analysis. How then, if it is criticised in 'Inside Ulster', can it be shown dead-gam later in the evening?

5. If the advertisement proves counter-productive, and all propaganda has unpredictable results, then the BBC’s credibility is eroded.

6. You can not determine the decision by an attitude towards content. The sentiments expressed in the video may be warmly applauded, but even indisputable truths must still go through the BBC's editorial filter - that is what the BBC's independence is about.

7. It is quite different from the usual CMI announcement which is accepted in other parts of the UK as see-contentious politically: merely sponsored by the government. Here, the government and its legitimacy is part of the political argument. Hence, CMI type announcements are not necessarily seen as see-political.

8. The AIDS argument which has been cited as a precedent concerns the end with the means: there is a national consensus about the end - controlling AIDS. The means - condoms are thought to be morally objectionable to some religious groups including a sizeable majority in Northern Ireland. We do not want to go further down that road.

9. This is the first time in 20 years that the government has asked the BBC to show such an advertisement. If we were in a state of emergency the Secretary of State is empowered to insist that the BBC carries propaganda. But the Secretary of State cannot at one and the same time insist that terrorism is being defeated and life getting back to normal (and be critical of the BBC if this view is not reflected in its programmes) and alternatively expect the BBC to accept war-time images such as propaganda messages.
The shooting dead of three IRA members in Gibraltar in 1988 by an SAS team was a hugely controversial event. Two current affairs programmes sought to get to the truth of what happened. One was a This Week programme, Death On The Rock, made by Thames Television; the other was an edition of BBC Northern Ireland's Spotlight. The programmes were broadcast in the face of opposition from Government.
The independence of the BBC and the impartiality of its programmes are inextricably linked and this link was most recently at issue in the row over the showing of the BBC Northern Ireland’s Spotlight programme about the Gibraltar shootings. Many of our critics took the view that the BBC was acting anything but impartially in transmitting the programme; that we were in fact down right biased in favour of the terrorists. I happen to believe that this incident was an acid test of the BBC’s commitment to impartiality.

Consider…here was an extraordinary event which took place in broad daylight on a busy street in front of witnesses. Not one but two senior Cabinet Ministers described publicly what had happened – the Foreign Secretary in the House of Commons and the Defence Secretary on BBCTV’s Question Time. The Ministers did not confine themselves to a bare announcement of the deaths or suggest that to make any further comment might prejudice the Coroner’s Inquest. Had they done so, the moral pressure on the media to match their reticence would have been irresistible. But both ministers went on to give some details about the shootings, referring to such matters as the challenges by the security forces, the terrorists’ possibly reaching for their weapons, the presumption of a bomb in the car and so on. In other words, they placed the Government’s version of events squarely in the political domain. And it is the duty of the media in a democracy to subject to scrutiny any aspect of a controversial event in the public domain about which there is widespread concern, provided there is no legal inhibition on their doing so …

…It was perfectly proper for Government Ministers to appeal to the BBC and Thames Television not to transmit their programmes – talk about Ministerial blackmail and arm-twisting is nonsense. But it was also perfectly proper for the broadcasting authorities, once they had made sure they were acting within the law, to go ahead – which they did only after the most searching deliberation, for these are grave matters, and any appeal from Ministers of the Crown must be treated with great respect and earnest consideration.

So we went ahead…this time to the Government’s discomfiture. But next time, should our commitment to the truth lead us to support the official position in a contentious issue, then our account will have added authority because we have been consistent in the exercise of our impartiality. Had we withdrawn a programme we conscientiously believed should be transmitted, why should the public have any faith next time round that our impartiality is still intact?...

BBCNI Controller Colin Morris - May, 1988

Relief came from an unexpected quarter.

The BBC Northern Ireland current affairs programme Spotlight had done its own investigation into the events in Gibraltar and intended to transmit it a week after our programme. Sir Geoffrey Howe tried to stop that one too. The new regime in the BBC were in a tight corner. They decided to let the programme go ahead but restricted its transmission to the audience in Northern Ireland, for which it was intended. Usually in such a case the programme, or significant chunks of it,
would be repeated on the network. When Alex Thomson, the reporter, pointed out that the issues were clearly of national interest and therefore that the programme should get a network transmission he was told, ‘Look, you’ve won one battle, don’t push your luck.’ The preservation of the institution came before its journalistic duty. Can you imagine a national newspaper not reprinting such a story from one of the regional newspapers in the same group as itself? Sir Geoffrey Howe called the BBC’s decision a tragedy which went against twenty years of high standards. We saw it rather differently. The Spotlight film fully confirmed what we had reported and went rather further, if anything...

Roger Bolton - Death On The Rock

The National Governor agreed that sympathy should be expressed for the journalists.

After some discussion and argument the following statement was agreed:

"The Broadcasting Council for Northern Ireland fully supports the joint statement by the Chairman and Director-General of the BBC which was issued following the Notice from the Home Office banning certain groups from broadcasting. The ICNI said the broadcasting restrictions imposed by the Home Secretary set a damaging precedent and urged the Government to keep them under constant review.

The Council expressed its concern for the job of broadcasters, already working under difficult circumstances, to provide full and impartial coverage of the situation in Northern Ireland.

In addition, the Broadcasting Council believed that these new restrictions would be counter-productive in Northern Ireland."

The Voices that were Silenced

Richard Ayre reflects on the Broadcasting Ban.

The IRA remained a murderously potent and pitiless force. Eleven people died in 1987 when the Provos bombed a Remembrance Day service at Enniskillen – ‘a blot on mankind’ Mrs Thatcher called it and few could disagree. The following summer more than two dozen soldiers died in bombings at Lisburn, at Ballygawley and at Deal in Kent. The British military could offer no solution that they had not already tried in the previous twenty years and found wanting. Then someone, somewhere, came up with a brainwave. If the Government couldn’t stop the IRA they could at least stop them talking.

So, without so much as a debate in Parliament, in 1988 the Home Secretary Douglas Hurd banned Sinn Feiners from the airwaves. For some of the British press it seemed Christmas had come – a blow against both the IRA and the BBC was too good to be true. And of course it was. The Broadcasting Ban did nothing to curb Republican violence: the IRA went on killing around fifty people each year, as it had done from the start of the 1980s. But Britain’s worldwide reputation as a bastion of freedom of speech was in tatters. Every despotic government from Tripoli to Pyongyang cited Britain as its template for suppressing political opposition.

The BBC and other broadcasters were reduced to paraphrasing or subtitling the words of every paramilitary and anyone who spoke in support of them. That meant that, each time there was a new atrocity, these people could not even be held publicly to account for it. Audiences could no longer hear their evasions, their equivocations. The Belfast newsroom did its best to go on interrogating Sinn Fein spokesmen in the same way as before, subtitling all their contributions. In reality the pressures of time, the ponderous pace of subtitling technology, and the audience’s low tolerance for captioning - all combined to limit the exposure of both Loyalists and Republicans to the airwaves. The killings went on and while the people were denied the authentic voice of Sinn Fein, the British Government started secret talks with them.
In 1993 I took on a new role in London in charge of the BBC’s editorial policies – a job with little power but a deal of influence. I read and re-read the Government’s regulations to look for a way out – and found one. It was the actual voices that were banned – not what they said nor how they said it. So we decided to stop subtitling and use instead a sound-alike to catch not just the words spoken, but how they were spoken – every pause, stammer, double-take or bluster. Thus the Actor’s Voice was born, and for the next year voice-overs became big business for the thespians of Northern Ireland. We even managed a ‘live’ discussion programme with most of the parties in one studio, Adams in another, and an actor doing simultaneous non-translation as he spoke. In a matter of weeks the other news broadcasters started to follow suit and the Government’s regulations were clearly shown for what they were – ridiculous as well as anti-democratic.

**Quentin Crisp**

...My first real shock was finding that the façades of both the television stations were ironclad like the sides of battleships. Once, presumably, they were resplendent with wide glass doors, a few marble steps and a long enquiry desk. Now there was an opening no wider than the front door of an ordinary house. When this was unlocked I saw almost immediately behind it another door. In between the two there was just room for me, my escort and the janitor. If we had shot him, the second door would not have been opened. Except that the small space was not filled with water; it was like the Davis device of a submarine. I realized then how great was the city’s fear of inflammatory propaganda. If any unauthorized person could have reached the microphones to say that the pope was infallible and that the city had fallen, panic would have set in. In London we would know that it was Mr Welles having us on but there the effect would be disastrous.

**Mark Devenport**

Michael Stone’s attack on the funerals at Milltown Cemetery in 1988 of the three IRA members killed in Gibraltar provided some of the most shocking images of the Troubles. In his memoir, *Flash Frames*, Mark Devenport gives this account:

BBC cameraman Peter Cooper ... stood his ground. Peter is known as being ‘steady as a rock’ amongst the most trying circumstances and as a result he captured the terrifyingly vivid footage of Stone firing carefully aimed shots at the mourners from his handgun whilst a group of apparently insanely brave youths kept chasing after him. They caught Stone just as he got to the nearby M1 motorway and would almost certainly have killed him if the loyalist hadn’t been freed by a group of RUC officers. Later in jail Stone passed a message back to Peter Cooper which froze the blood in his veins. Peter had been under the impression that Stone had been firing in his general direction but not that he was the target. But Stone told a couple of my colleagues, ‘Say sorry to Peter Cooper for me – I shouldn’t have aimed at him. I thought that thing on his shoulder was a weapon.’

Days later, Corporals Wood and Howe were murdered in West Belfast after they drove into the funeral of one of Stone’s victims. Television pictures of what happened that day were shown across the world but the police wanted to get their hands on any material which had not been transmitted: To avoid being seen in republican areas as a willing arm of the RUC’s intelligence gathering, the BBC took the view that it should oppose the use of any film until
forced to hand it over. The Director General, Michael Checkland, told the newspapers that ‘If we allow automatic free access to our material, the next victims could be our staff.’ Given the gravity of the crimes under consideration it seemed inevitable the police would pursue the matter further. On 23 March 1988 RUC detectives seized the material from the BBC and ITN quoting two pieces of anti-terrorism legislation, the Prevention of Terrorism Act and the Emergency Provisions Act, as their legal basis for the raids. The BBC believed the stance it had taken, although short-lived, was correct in principle . . .

. . . Associates of the many accused decided the prosecution might be derailed if the video evidence could be rendered ineligible. The only way to do that was to mount a campaign of intimidation against the journalists who, under a subpoena, had to testify the video was genuine. A chillingly well-organised campaign of intimidation took place, as several of my colleagues were told over the telephone that it wasn’t in their interests to testify. Some BBC staff left Northern Ireland and never returned.

Mark Devenport is BBC Northern Ireland’s Political Editor

Meeting the Masked Men

Brian Rowan

As security correspondent for BBC Northern Ireland, much of my working life involved secret meetings and whispered conversations. It was a role in which I talked to the IRA and the loyalist paramilitaries during the grim days of violence and which finally saw me tracking the remarkable transition from war to peace.

I watched and listened as republicans and loyalists told their stories from behind their balaclavas and I met the IRA’s ‘P. O’Neill’ on scores of occasions as the organisation gradually wound down its armed campaign.

P. O’Neill is the nom-de-plume which has always been used by whoever is the current spokesman for the IRA leadership. My first contact with him was twenty years ago, after the Enniskillen bomb in 1987, and my last conversation – this time with a different P. O’Neill – was on September 26, 2005. It was then that the IRA said it had completed the process of putting its arms beyond use.

But talking to the IRA hasn’t always been about the business of peace. In July 1992 I was taken on a car journey with my eyes masked by sticky tape and thick dark glasses. A journalist colleague, Eamonn Mallie, was with me and our driver was someone we had never met before. The previous night the IRA had murdered three of its own men and dumped their bodies in south Armagh. We were on our way to meet the P. O’Neill of 1992 and to be told the story of these latest ‘executions.’
Inside a house somewhere in Belfast, we were searched before being told to remove the glasses and the tape. Two men in balaclavas stood in front of us. The IRA statement was written on toilet paper and as it was read to us we copied it into our notebooks. Then our eyes were covered again, we were put back into a car and dropped off where our journey had begun.

This now seems like a nightmare but in those days it was all too real. In a period of 24 hours, I had reported on the killings on the border and then I had met the men who knew why the shootings had happened. Indeed, they probably knew much more than that.

Denis Murray

...Covering the Anglo-Irish Agreement and its aftermath was an extremely difficult time for the BBC. We were seen by some as the paid mouthpieces of the Northern Ireland Office, propagandists on behalf of the Agreement. The Ulster Clubs were set up, a public and legal but somewhat shady organisation. Its Chairman, Alan Wright, said to me before one of his news conferences – ‘You people are so biased.’ I told him I couldn’t say that every report was internally and exactly balanced but that the broad wash of the coverage overall was. I suggested that he should monitor a month of our news programmes and make his findings public. He said – ‘We started recording you last week.’ I met him about six weeks after that and asked what had happened to his survey. He said – ‘You had a lucky month’...

Denis Murray is a former BBC Ireland Correspondent

Brian Rowan is the former Chief Security Correspondent for BBC NI
Kevin Connolly

Kevin Connolly is a former BBC Ireland Correspondent. He is now the BBC's North America Correspondent.

I’ve reported from quite a few countries around the world since I got my first job as a reporter with Radio Ulster back in the middle of the 1980s. I’m not sure exactly how many but it’s certainly more than a hundred. That’s not quite as glamorous as it sounds, of course; when I first went to Eastern Europe the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia were a total of two countries. Then they suddenly became 21 or even more, depending on your view of things in Chechnya and Kosova.

But whichever landscapes I travelled through, Northern Ireland was always there as a kind of backdrop. In the minds of many foreigners, after all, Belfast remains frozen in a violent past, rather as Beirut is to us. At one level, people might know that there’s been enormous political progress but when they hear the words ‘Northern Ireland’ they find themselves automatically looking through a prism where it’s still 1972 and probably always will be.

So I have stood in the shattered wreckage of an apartment block in Grozny under sustained gunfire while a Russian tank commander, hearing that I was heading home to Belfast for a break, urged me to be careful back in Northern Ireland.

And the news from home has always provided a grim counterpoint to whatever news I was reporting.

I followed the story of the Shankill bombing as I reported the bloody climax to Boris Yeltsin’s battle with the parliamentary Old Guard in the Moscow White House in 1993.

As I stood on the Champs Elysees, waiting to go live into a late bulletin to describe the celebrations when France won the World Cup, I heard Denis Murray in my earpiece explaining how the terrible deaths of the three Quinn children had sobered and horrified a province torn apart – once again – by Drumcree.

Once, as I was being wired with secret filming equipment in a hotel room in Tel Aviv where I was filming a documentary about the Russian Mafia, I even saw a fleeting shot of my own house in a local television news bulletin. The IRA had shot someone they’d accused of drug-dealing as he returned to his car which he’d parked in my street.

So I suppose it was inevitable that I’d be back one day. I’m not pretending that this is entirely a matter of pre-destination, of course – I had family reasons for coming home, too – but Northern Ireland and its news has a grip on me rather like the grip Professor Moriarty had on Sherlock Holmes as they rolled over the Reichenbach Falls together.

The political landscape to which I returned in 2000 was barely recognisable from the blood-soaked stalemate I’d left in the Eighties. Northern Ireland wasn’t yet a fully-functioning democracy and the business of maintaining momentum in the local political process made the Secretary of State look like one of those circus clowns who keeps fifty plates on top of fifty poles by running frantically from one to the other, delivering a series of judicious tweaks and nudges. But the grim cycle of murder and revenge that had once been my stock in trade as a reporter working to London and the world beyond it was broken.
Margaret Gilmore

I had a lucky professional break just two weeks in. I was sent to do a night shift outside the home of a woman who had been kidnapped. The world’s press had been there earlier but they’d eventually drifted off. I arrived and knocked on the door and to my shock it was opened by the woman herself. She’d just been released. I got an exclusive interview and some early respect, which I didn’t deserve, from my colleagues. As is so often the case in this job, it was down to luck and timing.

Things were pretty dire in those days. Belfast city centre was fenced inside a steel structure ten feet high, armed soldiers on the little gates, guards searching you as you went into shops and pubs which had no windows. I remember bombs which brought down the fittings in the BBC. I also remember the IRA warnings we used to receive which sometimes meant we got to a bomb before it went off. I will never forget the flash and the split-second silence before the deafening sound of the explosion and the fear on the faces of people running away.

Worse still, I remember the deaths and the mutilations, the widows, the coffins of children, the mourners at funerals miles from the cities, snaking through glorious countryside. There was a rawness to life but the dignity and strength of so many people I met was staggering.

Margaret Gilmore was a reporter in Northern Ireland in the 1980s. She was later the BBC’s Home Affairs Correspondent.
1990s

BBC Northern Ireland Newsroom 1990s
The faltering progress towards peace dominated the news agenda. President Bill Clinton’s visit to Belfast in 1995 led to the most extensive outside broadcast coverage ever mounted in Northern Ireland. In 1998, the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement was signed but that year also saw the Omagh bombing by the Real IRA. The 1990s was a decade of innovation and transformation for the BBC. The arrival of digital technology and the internet marked a new era for broadcasting.

During this decade BBC World was launched and the BBC began its online news service. A twenty-four hour news channel was also introduced.

On local television Inside Ulster was replaced by a new nightly programme, BBC Newsline which was broadcast at 6.30 each evening. The late 1990s also saw significant additional BBC investment in news and current affairs programming in Northern Ireland.

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An important part of the last three years for all programmes had been the strong emphasis on proper ethical values for BBC programmes. Extensive producer guidelines, covering all aspects of broadcasting, had been drawn up for the first time. DDG regarded it as a public statement of the BBC’s acceptance of its obligation to its audience. He thought he detected a keener awareness and pride in the basic editorial values of accuracy, fairness, impartiality, decency, straightforwardness. He had, at the outset, been concerned particularly about impartiality and, whilst considerable progress had been made, much remained to be done. Special guidelines had been published in advance of the Gulf War and output, from the editorial policy perspective, had been monitored every day. The careful preparation had been worthwhile and news teams had given a sure-footed performance throughout the war. Mr Birt expressed determination that BBC journalistic ethical codes should reflect the highest possible standards.

In conclusion DDG spoke to Council of the importance attached to the referral system in making sure that programmes or items relating to Northern Ireland were given proper consideration by experienced and expert journalists before being broadcast. He thanked the National Governor for his care and support throughout the difficult days of change. He had often benefited from his and BBC NI’s insight and shrewdness in Northern Ireland matters.

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John Birt, the BBC’s Deputy Director General - Broadcasting Council for Northern Ireland March, 1991
CNI noted that the marching season, and particularly Drumcree, had been a demanding time for BBC NI and, indeed, the whole community. The new NCA structure had been vigorously tested and CNI was pleased to report that it had performed effectively. Audience response had been pleasing and research illustrated that those who had switched to the BBC had tended to stay. Additional nightly news bulletins had been incorporated into the television schedule and Talk Back had returned early from its summer break to provide an important forum for public debate. The policy regarding coverage of the Twelfth of July parades had been maintained without ignoring the context in which they had taken place.

CNI drew Council’s attention to the log of viewer and listener phone calls: it clearly illustrated the polarisation of the two communities which had tended to be alternately satisfied and dissatisfied with coverage in direct contradiction to the other community. Over the period as a whole, the phone log did not suggest partiality towards one community or tradition.

Broadcasting Council for Northern Ireland Minutes - September, 1996

We are, however, quite clear that BBC Northern Ireland, if it is to cover adequately the increasingly comprehensive news agenda arising from devolution, must find in the schedule a good deal more space to provide a truly first-rate and competitive service. With our news and current affairs output commonly regarded as one of the most important centres of excellence at the BBC, we would argue strongly for measures which would build upon the great professional and technical strengths of the operation here.

Broadcasting Council for Northern Ireland Minutes - December, 1998
The Journey towards Peace

Anna Carragher reflects on the challenges faced by BBC journalism in reflecting the changing mood of the Nineties

When I returned to my native Belfast in early 1995 as Head of Programmes for BBC Northern Ireland I found it a transformed place from the one I had left two decades earlier and which I had covered from London as a journalist during that time. The ceasefires were a few months old, optimism was in the air and regeneration projects underway across Northern Ireland. Our journalistic challenge would be covering the forging of peace and the new social, economic and political agenda for Northern Ireland.

During the year we decided that Inside Ulster, the programme which had chronicled the long and bloody years of the Troubles, should be transformed into a new programme, BBC Newsline, for the new era. The last edition of Inside Ulster was broadcast on February 9th 1996, coming off air just before six o’clock that evening. But less than an hour later a blast at Canary Wharf killed two people and shattered the IRA ceasefire.

In the following decade our journalism faced many challenges and new and intense pressures. The IRA ceasefire was restored 17 months later but Canary Wharf starkly highlighted the continued existence of the IRA and the very real threat of a complete breakdown of the peace process. In hindsight it may be that in looking ahead to a peaceful society and exploring the work being done to bring it about we did not probe deeply enough the underlying tensions in both communities, particularly the divisions within the IRA in the period between August 1994 and February 1996.

The next ten years were to prove how intractable and deep-seated those tensions and divisions were. While there was not the relentless daily agenda of death from bomb and bullet with which the newsroom had dealt for a quarter of the century, these last years of the 90s saw continued violence, including the Omagh bomb, the worst single atrocity of the Troubles. Those years, too, saw the murder of the three little Quinn boys in Ballymoney, bitter anger and, for many years, annual turmoil at Drumcree, the Holy Cross dispute, Orange halls attacked, and innocent people dying as a result of sectarian violence. The peace process unfolded against this angry and bitter canvas and the job of BBC journalists and programme makers was to report and analyse it all.

In May 1997, when the Labour government was elected, the new Prime Minister, Tony Blair, immediately made it clear that he put Northern Ireland at the top of his agenda. The euphoria with which the election result was greeted in some quarters in the rest of the UK had its echo here as the new Secretary of State, Mo Mowlam, went walkabout in Belfast city centre, hugged and kissed politicians and people alike and brought a down-to-earth, even earthy, tone to the political discourse. It was at this point that the term ‘helpful to the peace process’ entered the political and broadcasting phrase book, nowhere more so than in the aftermath of the signing of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement and the subsequent referendum and election.

The view of the Government was that peace was a good thing which all right-minded people would support. In BBC Northern Ireland we saw that a new era was at hand, promising much, but that within Northern Ireland there were many people, particularly from the Unionist community, who questioned whether this Agreement would deliver peace. It was right and proper that their voices were heard.

On the eve of the referendum the pro-Agreement parties staged a concert in the Waterfront Hall where Bono famously led John Hume and David Trimble onto the stage, arms aloft. Mo was extremely keen that we televise this concert – and it is not very often one gets the offer of U2 for prime time – but we pointed out that this was part of a campaign, that the BBC could not be seen to support one side over another and that in any case...
televising it would probably break electoral law. She accepted my decision but expressed deep disappointment that the BBC was being ‘unhelpful’.

Over the next decade there were many stops and starts on the political journey, including terrible events like Omagh. There were also three state visits by President Bill Clinton, a succession of crisis talks – Weston Park, Hillsborough, St Andrews; there were three sets of Assembly elections, two General elections, three suspensions of the Assembly. Our journalists, led by Keith Baker, Tony Maddox and, for the last number of years, Andrew Colman, are among the most skilled and experienced in the world when it comes to live, reactive coverage of unfolding events and there were numerous marathon broadcasts as OBs were deployed, studios fired up, with people working round the clock existing on a few hours sleep and a diet of BBC coffee and sandwiches. The tense hours leading up to the Agreement itself culminated in a tired but exultant Stephen Grimason, our then Political Editor, brandishing the document to the camera – a genuine television ‘first.’

Throughout it all pressures on the BBC came from the political parties and from the Government, all of whom at some time or other accused us of bias and bad faith. There were also pressures on individual members of staff, some of whom were threatened and bullied directly or indirectly both by politicians and by more shadowy figures. I suspect that the majority of our staff did, with whatever reservations they may have had, support the Agreement but I am equally sure that they hung their personal convictions up at the door and got on with their jobs fairly and impartially.

Reporting the past became increasingly important as the political process continued. For many, the prospect of peace would never erase the pain. There were fears that what they had suffered and sacrificed in the long years of the Troubles would be swept aside, airbrushed out of history.

In 1999 we made the series Legacy. It ran every day that year: two-minute broadcasts just before the nine am news on BBC Radio Ulster. It was a simple but effective concept - men, women, children, members of the security services, ex-prisoners, members of paramilitary organisations telling their story of events large and small during the Troubles. It was impossible to listen to it without being moved and the idea has since been emulated in other conflict areas throughout the world.

A few years later Archbishop Desmond Tutu came to Northern Ireland to take part in the Spotlight special, Facing the Truth, a landmark and deeply-affecting series which brought together victims and those who had inflicted injury on them, including the loyalist gunman Michael Stone and the widow and brother of one of the men he shot in Milltown Cemetery.

Quite rightly there is much debate about how a society such as ours can come to terms with what it has endured. As Northern Ireland finds a way forward, I am convinced that broadcasting has a vital role in this, perhaps above all in giving individuals an opportunity to bear testament to the past that has made the present and which shapes and informs the future.

Anna Carragher was Head of Programmes with BBC Northern Ireland and Controller from 2000 - 2006.
When I took up my job as BBC Northern Ireland’s Dublin correspondent in 1992 Fianna Fail were in their first coalition government with the Progressive Democrats. Many in Fianna Fail resented what they regarded as the PDs’ high moral tone – the party’s belief that it was in government to keep an eye on Fianna Fail shenanigans. But I used to joke that while the Progressive Democrats may have occupied the high moral ground of Irish politics, the BBC, which shared a building with them in South Frederick Street, was one floor higher and I lived even higher than that – in the flat above.

However the BBC’s presence in Dublin wasn’t always a matter for humour; I had begun reporting from Dublin in the late 1980s. I stood in as correspondent when whoever had the job at the time was on leave. Charles Haughey was Taoiseach then and he, reportedly, had a great dislike of the BBC and the British media. Some of my colleagues even warned me that he regarded us all British spies. This was totally untrue, of course, but the violence and history of Northern Ireland cast a shadow over British-Irish relations.

Mr. Haughey’s attitude to the BBC reflected the far-from-cordial relations which existed at the time between the two governments. Charles Haughey and Margaret Thatcher may have respected each other but that didn’t mean they had to like one another.

The journey undertaken by the Provisional leadership was a huge one – perhaps the most significant and far-reaching in the history of Ireland’s search for independence, yet it is also one of the least investigated and most un-probed stories of all time.

Shane Harrison

Ed Moloney is a journalist and author. This extract is taken from his book Political Censorship and the Democratic State.

Ed Moloney

Formal censorship of the media had ended by 1995 but its informal manifestation lived on. By this stage, self-censorship had existed for nearly twenty-five years; it had become an organic and institutionalised part of Irish journalism and could not be removed by the stroke of a ministerial pen, as Section 31 and the broadcasting ban had been.

The practice of not delving too deeply into controversial stories, of asking first what the political and career downside was before pursuing a story or an angle on a story was by now as instinctive to journalists in Ireland as riding a bicycle. But now it was the turn of the peace process rather than the war process to benefit from it.

Before, when the IRA’s war was raging, a journalist would worry about being regarded as a fellow-traveller for writing or wanting to broadcast a story that, for instance, critiques government policy. Now they worried about being regarded by officialdom as being ‘unhelpful to the peace process,’ as the phrase had it, for asking hard questions about its genesis and direction, questions the Sinn Fein leadership would rather weren’t asked. In the past, Republicans, the IRA and Sinn Fein were the principal victims of censorship; now they became its main beneficiary. The journey from war into peace involved, from the Republican viewpoint, enormous ideological flip-flops. These included, to name but one example, accepting the idea that unionist consent was a precondition for Irish unity and independence, and that amounted to a rejection of one of the foundation stones of republican philosophy.

The peace process meant Republicans accepting institutions they had died and killed for to overthrow, from the local parliament at Stormont to the policing and criminal justice system. It meant embracing a system they had once angrily proclaimed was rotten with corruption and beyond reform.
And so the BBC correspondent during those years often had a difficult job working not just as a foreign correspondent, but as a foreign correspondent whose motives were sometimes suspected and whose reporting was analysed for bias.

When I took up the job full-time there had been a bit of a thaw in British-Irish relations. Albert Reynolds and John Major had taken over their respective helms and the Peace Process was in its infancy. Unlike Charles Haughey, Albert – everybody called him by his Christian name - was very keen to talk to the BBC. He had his peace process message to sell and he wasn’t shy about doing it.

This was also a period when there were few broadcasters operating in Dublin. There were just RTE and the BBC along with a couple of independent local radio stations. Everybody knew everybody and there was great camaraderie among journalists as we waited in a group, sipping our take-away coffees and ready to door-step our interviewees as they got out of their cars on their way to meetings.

These were the days before 24-hour rolling news, when many senior people in the Irish Government watched the BBC almost as much as they watched RTE. Frequently they would make a point of telling me how keen they were on the BBC’s output. People thought highly of it and of my predecessors and contemporaries from both BBC London and Belfast, including John Simpson, John Thorne, Leo Enright, Denis Murray, Anne Cadwallader, Kevin Connolly, Mike Philpott and Adrian Horsman.

But the broadcasting environment was changing and becoming more crowded. Sky, UTV, tv3, TG4 and even more local radio stations arrived on the Dublin scene. The BBC had become part of a broadening of choice for the Republic’s viewers and listeners. Technological changes have made a difference to how we go about our business. We live in the era of the video-journalist – with reporters filming and editing their own material. And we live in a very different news environment. No longer do I spend most of my time reporting on British-Irish relations and security matters. For the republic, like the rest of the world, the long term issue is the economy.

Shane Harrison has been a reporter for Spotlight and is now the BBC’s Dublin Correspondent

... It is an extraordinary fact that, as the senior local permanent official in Northern Ireland, I had joined the BBC unaware of, and uninformed about, the existence of guidelines of extensive advice relating specifically to Northern Ireland. The place in those days was a semantic minefield. Whether one referred to ‘Derry’ or ‘Londonderry’; whether one referred to ‘Northern Ireland’ or the ‘six counties’ or the ‘north of Ireland’; whether one referred to ‘the Army’, ‘the British Army’, or ‘our Army’: nuances such as these were monitored to an obsessive extent. Prudently the Corporation had given extensive and well-considered guidance to the makers of all programmes touching on Northern Ireland, including the advisability of consultation with local management. Such carefulness, replicated in many other sensitive areas, should have been a reassurance to all. But if I, close as I was to the centre of our politics and administration, did not know of this, who else did? Without this reassuring knowledge we were like football spectators unaware of the offside rules or rugby fans ignorant of the implications of the forward pass ...

Sir Kenneth Bloomfield - The BBC at the Watershed
Life in the BBC Newsroom

Tony Maddox

I was chatting about a Northern Ireland story in the CNN newsroom in Atlanta when one of my colleagues asked what it was like as a place in which to live and work.

My instant response was: "A bit old fashioned." He seemed a bit surprised at my response and, to be honest, so was I.

It is not what I would have said before I arrived with my family at the end of the summer of 1995. One of the newspapers had marked my appointment with, "An Englishman with no experience of reporting the Northern Ireland story has been appointed the BBC's Head of News and Current Affairs in Belfast ..." A bit sharp, maybe, but unquestionably true.

I was what management consultants would call an agent of change and there was an awful lot of talk about change in Ulster in 1995. But it was not long before I began to wonder whether the folks who lived there had the appetite for all the change on offer.

My brief was to help change the news agenda into a post-troubles era. No one was quite sure what this would be but it would certainly be a change from what had gone before.

The Belfast newsroom of the mid-90s was a fascinating place: far more tenured than any other newsroom in the BBC, very well respected throughout the corporation, and with a group of people as ready as anyone else to see something different in Ulster.

I have never worked anywhere remotely like it, before or since.

In my first few days there I discovered that few people were likely to believe much of what I had to say. It was an action-orientated place and what you did counted for far more than what you said. By BBC standards it was old-fashioned, in that the unions had a high profile and all changes in operations would be expected to be the subject of detailed negotiation. BBC initiatives from London, and there are always plenty of those, would be treated with deep suspicion.

I sensed that the staff had developed their own protective shield. Optimism was a luxury, an enjoyable indulgence. Scepticism was a necessity. They had seen and reported on horrible things, over many years. And, crucially, they had lived in Ulster through these times. It was not an assignment from London where people flew in, witnessed something unspeakable, reported on it and then flew home again. BBC Northern Ireland staff reported on the story and then went home to live in it.

Sometimes it felt like everyone knew everyone else and if they did not know him or her directly they almost certainly knew someone who did.

And everyone seemed to be very interested in the BBC. Politicians would berate us, interest groups would implore us, and watchdogs would try to bite us. That was because the BBC in Northern Ireland really matters.

I had been used elsewhere to the BBC having to work hard to get the public to properly engage on a large scale, such as getting viewers and listeners to turn out to public meetings to discuss the licence fee. No such worries in Northern Ireland. It appeared that everyone had a view about the BBC and did not hesitate to share it with me whenever the opportunity arose.

I got some priceless pearls of wisdom from seasoned operators who knew Ulster a lot better than I did. Once before doing a press interview I was advised, "No matter what happens, resist..."
the temptation to be interesting.” Easier said than done, as I discovered the hard way.

When it came to communicating with staff, another wily campaigner warned me, “Always assume publication.” Certainly good advice, although not as timely as it could have been, coming as it did the day after one of my internal memos was printed in full in one of the local newspapers.

The reaction of folks to this kind of thing was also interesting. Many people felt genuinely awkward, as though they were embarrassed at the rudeness shown to a guest. Northern Ireland is a place where manners and correctness still have their place.

The newsroom dynamics were the same as those I had encountered before, except everything was more vivid. Big news was very big news. On our news shows tragedies were profound, protests were intense, sorrow was deep, and all too frequent.

But the humour was magnificent. It was not just a weapon, it was an entire arsenal. The wit could be razor sharp, bludgeoning or explosive. It was not politically correct but it was often extremely clever and superbly delivered.

I know why I chose the description “old-fashioned” over the obvious “traditional”. Words and symbols carry far more resonance in Ulster than they do anywhere else where I have lived or worked. I quickly learned that. In my experience “traditional” tended to come up quite a lot as an issue on the news agenda and not so often in the good news stories. So there is nothing wrong with being a bit old fashioned. As a place to live there was a clear benefit of this old fashioned side of life. My children walked to excellent state schools and afterwards played outside and unsupervised in much the same way I did as a child and in way that I would not have contemplated allowing them to do when we later moved to London.

Professionally it was a profound experience, with so much happening in Northern Ireland between 1995 and 1998. I hold the fondest memories of my time there, the work we did and the people I came to know.

It is no coincidence that so many people who have gone on to big jobs in journalism have passed through the Belfast newsroom. You simply learnt more there than you did elsewhere. You worked with people with a tremendous depth of experience, who would not hesitate to pull you down to size if you got a bit ahead of yourself.

And although the folks who worked there would be uncomfortable in admitting it, they really cared about their colleagues. They looked out for each other. A rather old-fashioned idea.

Tony Maddox was Head of News and Current Affairs for BBCNI from 1995 to 1998. He is now a senior executive with CNN

From time to time I have characterised the role of the BBC in Northern Ireland as being both a mirror and a window; a mirror in which this community can see itself clearly, and a window through which we look out upon Great Britain and the world, and through which they in turn may see us in all our diversity and variety.

Sir Kenneth Bloomfield - BBCNI Annual Review 98/99

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2000s
The United Kingdom has been transformed during the past ten or twenty years. It is not too strong to say that there is a new UK. The transformation has taken a variety of forms. One is the revival in the confidence, prosperity and vibrancy of the UK’s great cities outside London together with their hinterlands. The provinces are provincial no more...

Professor Anthony King - BBC Trust Impartiality Report, 2008

We should not be frightened of controversy – but we should always be alert to the dangers of glibness, to the idea that every problem has a simple solution.

So above all we need to be inquiring and open-minded - unafraid to surprise our audiences with a view of a story that is different – and always looking for a wide range of evidence and opinion...

Mark Damazer - About BBC News: Behind the Scenes

Since the Coronation in 1953 the power of major events, seen live on television, was demonstrated many times but never with such shocking effect as on September 11, 2001, with the destruction of the Twin Towers. In the years following, world headlines became dominated by the global terrorist threat and by Afghanistan and Iraq. And it was an interview about the invasion of Iraq that would bring the BBC and the Government into conflict, leading to the Hutton Inquiry and ultimately to fundamental changes in the way the BBC is governed.

In the latter part of the decade, BBC news would concentrate on another global issue – economic crisis. Its effects were felt no less in Northern Ireland where the local news agenda was shifting in other ways. Devolution became a reality and with it a power-sharing Executive, providing government for a changing region and with it a new focus for BBC journalism. The BBC grew the range and volume of its network programming from Northern Ireland and made increasing of new technologies to facilitate audience involvement in its work.
Bringing the Story Home

Angelina Fusco, BBC Northern Ireland Editor Television News, looks at the development of BBC newsgathering

The internet, mobile phones and digital technology have changed the face of our news journalism and given it a new sense of immediacy.

Thirty years ago it was very different. In the seventies a reporter would leave Broadcasting House in Belfast to cover a story, accompanied by a camera operator, a sound engineer and, on occasions, a lighting electrician. The group would travel to the town or village and after several hours return to base with the material. As the reporter took to the typewriter, the cameraman would drop his film into the processing laboratory. After an hour it was passed to a film editor who worked with the journalist, physically cutting and joining the film and the soundtrack into a finished report.

In the eighties videotape was introduced which had sound and vision incorporated. However the equipment was bulkier than a film camera. The sound recordist carried the tape recorder which was joined like an umbilical cord to the camera. Later, lighter cameras with smaller tapes appeared. This changed operating practices and crews started to go out with journalists or on their own.

But in the nineties a whole raft of new technologies began to force an increased pace of change in our news gathering. Nationally the BBC launched a 24-hour television news service and invested in a new service – news online. At the same time BBC Northern Ireland invested in smaller live outside broadcast vehicles for television news. Northern Ireland may be a small place, but it can seem big enough if a reporter is racing back to Belfast from Enniskillen with pictures for that night’s BBC Newsline. But with ‘live trucks’, all that panic is a thing of the past. Now a vehicle with instant real-time satellite links to our studios can be gathering vital information on a story right up to air-time. It also enables the team to do live on the spot interviews with the people at the heart of the stories.

Since 2000, the advent of digital technology has led BBCNI to invest in smaller portable cameras and edit facilities. This has allowed journalists to shoot, edit and voice stories away from base.

The small camera gives an intimacy with interviewees in every town and village and BBC Newsline now has a number of district journalists based in Londonderry, Armagh, Enniskillen, Ballymena and Downpatrick. At first reporters had to put their tapes on public transport, taxis or drive them to base. Now the tapes are sent using broadband.

The next big change will be the demise of tape, to be replaced by solid state memory.

A new server based in the newsroom in Belfast will allow same source material to be edited simultaneously in several locations. The relationship with the audience has dramatically changed too. Members of the public, with their mobile phones and digital cameras, can assist the telling of a story by capturing images or events as they happen, passing them on to our news teams via bluetooth or email. However one thing has not changed; editorial responsibility and the need for accuracy remains with the journalist.

BBC Newsline’s innovative e-panel has also been effective. Viewers are invited to register for the panel and over the course of a year,
they are sent questionnaires on topics of interest. This has been a valuable source of opinion and has helped influence programme shape and content.

Gone are the days when a family sat around one television to watch the news of the day. Now people of all ages keep up to date with local news by clicking www.bbc.co.uk/ninews or by using their mobile devices – no matter where they are.

There is also an opportunity to view special investigations, original and exclusive material and content provided by the district reporters by logging on to www.bbc.co.uk/newsline.

Twenty first century newsgathering technology will continue to develop – and with it the challenge to provide original, engaging and informative content.

The Radio Revolution

Kathleen Carragher, BBC Northern Ireland Editor Radio News reflects on the speed of technological change

Every day one or other of our reporters leaves the office carrying satellite equipment no bigger than a briefcase. The technology which this piece of kit provides enables them to broadcast in high quality sound from hundreds of places – be it a farmer’s field, a community centre or the steps of Stormont.

Every reporter wants to paint word pictures for the listener, to bring them the vivid sounds of a story, to capture the emotion of an event. Satellite equipment helps them to do so with immediacy and clarity. It enables a reporter to file a story in high quality sound, rather than on a crackly telephone or mobile line. And it is cost-effective. A reporter can work alone, instead of requiring the help of two or three engineers with boxes of equipment.

All BBC Radio Ulster current affairs programmes broadcast regular live reports using satellite. And satellite knows no boundaries. That same clarity means that a broadcast from Washington sounds no further away than the Waterfront Hall.

It’s not entirely foolproof. There have been embarrassing moments when the signal can’t be found and guests have had to be stood down – including some who have got up at the crack of dawn to be available for Good Morning Ulster. But like all technology, the equipment is improving all the time and reporters are now skilled at spotting the cloud conditions and knowing where to place the satellite dish in order to get the best signal.

Satellite is just one of several technological changes which have dramatically altered how we make and broadcast radio news programmes.
When I started as a reporter in BBC Radio Foyle, reporter-operated radio cars were a novelty. They are now used as a matter of routine and many programme guests are familiar with the process of meeting a reporter with a radio car and doing a live interview back to the studio.

Recording equipment and editing has also been transformed. I used to carry a chunky machine called a UHER – slightly smaller than a briefcase, but much thicker and heavier. We recorded interviews on reel-to-reel tape, brought them back to the studio and edited them using a razor blade and sticky tape. In the world of computers and mouse-clicking, all that sounds very primitive now.

Recording equipment gets smaller and smaller. We now have handbag-sized machines and we’ve moved from cassettes to mini-discs to sound cards. All recorded material is played into a computer and editing is done with a mouse. In the same way that the commercial market has grown 20 different kinds of MP3 player, there are now many different digital editing systems. When putting together a pre-recorded radio package or documentary, producers and reporter can cut and mix sound effects, music, archive to their heart’s content.

Radio studios haven’t escaped the revolution either. There used to be huge banks of machines to play out the reel-to-reel interviews. Now everything is controlled by flat computer screens. Skilled audio engineers have also had to adopt computer skills in order to transmit the programmes and news studios are frequently ‘self-op’ with the newsreader operating the equipment as well as reading the bulletin.

Some computer screens are used to store programme running orders which everyone in the office and the studio can see. Gone are the forests of paper which used to litter every studio desk and floor: The only hard copy now is with the presenter — just in case the computers freeze. Wire copy used to come into a BBC newsroom on a telex machine in a corner… now it is flashed up instantly on the wire services on the computer. Within seconds of a journalist filing copy, a radio producer will be chasing an interviewee and tapping out a cue for the presenter to read. A programme may start with one running order but the finished product may be entirely different.

That flexibility, the ability to make changes, has always been part of the job. But now it can be done with greater speed and ease.

The technology is there to help the programme-makers. It assists their journalistic drive and determination to bring the best, the most comprehensive news service to the listeners. And for that we rely on the basic essential of the trade — human contact between the story-makers and the story breakers and the skill of highly-professional presenters. That’s something that will never change…
...Controversy is closer to being the norm than the exception. Some of the epic struggles concerning the Corporation are in the reasonably distant past now: Carrickmore, the UWC loyalist strike, the republican hunger strike and Real Lives were in the 1970s and 1980s. It is striking how many BBC controversies involved Northern Ireland...

The BBC was accustomed to coping with political turmoil, having covered major crises and every one of the deaths of ‘The Troubles’ – more than 3,000 of them. But the pace of events, the continuation of killings alongside the new possibilities for hope and improvement, had a different character which raised different questions. Everyone, reporters and editors included, went through a jangle of emotions, including fear and hope. So much of this was deep, uncharted waters for all journalists in Northern Ireland: no one had a map. One of the points of continuity, however, is that the BBC was continually bombarded with political and community pressure. One BBC insider said after the November 2003 Assembly elections: “I think this election just past was almost as fraught as any of them in the past, in terms of dealing with the political parties.”

It is well known that nearly all those parties believe, or say they believe, that the BBC is biased against them and their cause. For some, this belief is probably genuine; for others, the complaints are more likely just a demonstration of the ‘black art’ of political public relations, all part of the business of getting more coverage.

As an ex-BBC person put it: “One lot, the loyalists, often thought we were traitors to their cause. Another lot, the republicans, thought we were the Queen’s soldiers.” All of this is familiar, with journalists and camera crews exposed since the early days of ‘The Troubles’ to anger and affront on the streets from furious individuals.

Many people, often convinced beyond all rational argument, cannot believe the entire BBC are not invertebrate liars – suspecting there is forever a sinister ulterior motive. Political representatives can often encourage them in such beliefs. DUP MP Jeffrey Donaldson, for instance, has referred to the BBC as “the broadcasting wing of the Northern Ireland Office.”

Complaints and pressure, I know from my own short time at the BBC, are a traditional feature of working there. James Hawthorne, a former Controller, wrote that the Corporation’s answering machine in the 1970s was “usually incandescent through the night with profanity and abuse”. Over the years quite a few BBC answering machines must have been worn out and seized up by such waves of aural attack. The impression is that most of the criticism comes from Unionists and loyalists. One of the elements which may affect this is that the BBC has clearly undergone major demographic changes internally. In the old days it was a Unionist-leaning, largely Protestant-staffed institution, but today things are different, with substantial changes in terms of both religious and gender balance...

David McKittrick - from A Sky Full of Voices, 2004
Lessons and Ambitions

A key element of BBCNI’s role is to describe, investigate and facilitate debate about the diversity of issues affecting people’s lives. Our news agenda should remain responsive to changing circumstance and also the continuing extent of community divisions. We are not persuaders for peace or any particular form of reconciliation. BBCNI can (and should) provide a managed space for encounter and exchange and offer a reliable source of information on which decisions can be made and assessed. Political and other developments may be influenced by BBCNI’s output, but this cannot be our motivation as programme-makers or broadcasters. Public confidence in our services is based fundamentally on our independence from government and partisan interests…

Much of BBCNI’s early history was characterised by caution in dealing with the full (and sometimes difficult) complexity of local society. Such hesitancies reflected a concern that Northern Ireland was a place where mistakes could become “a fighting matter”. Their consequence was a failure, in the words of a late 1940s report, “to use the microphone as widely as in London or other regions”. The arrival of Radio Ulster and the development of audience-led programmes such as Talkback radicalised our approach to broadcasting and provided a wholly new forum for different voices and impassioned debate. BBC programmes offered opportunities for dialogue and disagreement in a managed/shared space that simply didn’t exist elsewhere. Today, programmes such as Talkback and the Stephen Nolan Show are being used to debate health issues, public services and to hold politicians to account and generate huge levels of audience interaction. . .

New political structures, reduced security concerns, enhanced cross-border relationships and co-operation and the changing profile of local society (reflecting inward migration from Poland and elsewhere) have all impacted on our news output and allowed our programme-making to range more widely. Social and economic issues are increasingly predominant and are reflected in the job roles and reporting of our specialist correspondents. We have also (and quite properly) looked at tensions within and between local political parties in the Executive and the continuing effects of the Troubles – whether in terms of criminal justice issues, arrangements to deal with the needs of victims, or still unresolved police investigations about Troubles’ related deaths. Exploring the events and legacies of the past remains an important part of our role in fully describing present realities and understanding the differing perspectives of local communities. Examples include the landmark Legacy series on BBC Radio Ulster and more recent work to make BBC and other archive material about the Troubles period available as part of ambitious new online resource – building on the earlier (and groundbreaking success) of the television series and accompanying cd rom, A State Apart. We have also looked at community tensions in some interface areas and the experiences of people affected by recent sectarian violence in programmes for Spotlight and Panorama.

News and current affairs programming is a core element of our service offering. Its popularity reflects audience appetite for/interest in this sort of output. None of this appears to have been diminished by the emergence of new political structures and arrangements.
Audience feedback continues to reflect some of the sensitivities associated with local history and politics including: the appropriateness of news coverage of RoI stories within our local bulletins; the use of certain placenames (Derry or Londonderry and variations on same); and concerns about our coverage of the Orange Order's annual 12th July parades or GAA fixtures. All of this evidences that political and other accommodations haven’t erased differences or some of the tensions and abrasions associated with same. Our role in reflecting the totality of society’s diversity (in both its positive and negative aspects) can sometimes create discomfort for the audience and local politicians. None of this is intentional, but it is perhaps the inevitable consequence of the full and effective discharging of the BBC’s Charter remit and ambitions in what remains a still divided community. Having the editorial freedom and resource to tell the whole story and drawing on the broadest range of voices and perspectives gives BBCNI a uniquely privileged role in contributing to vitality of local civic and political life. This aspect of our work and the importance of a “strong BBC independent of government” needs to be properly understood within the wider community and not least because of the lessons of the BBC’s history within our region. We simply can’t afford to be selectively independent or to fall victim to the conceit that we can or should be reconcilers of people. We are accomplished at facilitating inclusive debate and in helping to ventilate the democratic process through information, analysis, investigation and audience engagement with our programmes – the promotion of peace and reconciliation is another matter entirely. . .

Peter Johnston - BBCNI Controller from a speech, 2008

Walking the thinnest line

...In my previous role as security editor of BBC Northern Ireland, I spoke to the IRA, the UVF and the UDA. On television and radio, I was expected to provide a commentary on those organisations. How else is that achieved other than speaking to them? It does not mean you accept everything...

Journalists are expected to provide informed analysis, reports of substance and detail that can be relied upon.

That means taking risks. It means talking to people that others can avoid and ignore. That is a luxury — that we expect and ask of others what we sometimes are not prepared to do ourselves...

Reporting a conflict, reporting a transition towards peace means you talk to all sides. Otherwise pieces of the story are missing. Do we want the whole story — or only the bits we choose to hear? …

Journalists have the right to question them, to challenge them. That is part of the work, part of the job, all part of walking that thinnest of lines.

Brian Rowan - Belfast Telegraph, March 2008
The BBC’s Editorial Values

Truth and accuracy
We strive to be accurate and establish the truth of what has happened. Accuracy is more important than speed and it is often more than a question of getting the facts right. We will weigh all relevant facts and information to get at the truth. Our output will be well sourced, based on sound evidence, thoroughly tested and presented in clear, precise language. We will be honest and open about what we don’t know and avoid unfounded speculation.

Impartiality & diversity of opinion
We strive to be fair and open minded and reflect all significant strands of opinion by exploring the range and conflict of views. We will be objective and even handed in our approach to a subject. We will provide professional judgments where appropriate, but we will never promote a particular view on controversial matters of public policy or political or industrial controversy.

Editorial integrity & independence
The BBC is independent of both state and partisan interests. Our audiences can be confident that our decisions are influenced neither by political or commercial pressures, nor by any personal interests.

Serving the public interest
We seek to report stories of significance. We will be vigorous in driving to the heart of the story and well informed when explaining it. Our specialist expertise will bring authority and analysis to the complex world in which we live. We will ask searching questions of those who hold public office and provide a comprehensive forum for public debate.

Fairness
Our output will be based on fairness, openness and straight dealing. Contributors will be treated honestly and with respect.

Privacy
We will respect privacy and will not infringe it without good reason, wherever in the world we are operating. Private behaviour, correspondence and conversation will not be brought into the public domain unless there is a clear public interest.

Harm and offence
We aim to reflect the world as it is, including all aspects of the human experience and the realities of the natural world. But we balance our right to broadcast and publish innovative and challenging content with our responsibility to protect the vulnerable.

Children
We will always seek to safeguard the welfare of children and young people who contribute to and feature in our content including their right to be heard, wherever in the world we operate. We will also schedule content which might be unsuitable for children appropriately.

Accountability
We are accountable to our audiences and will deal fairly and openly with them. Their continuing trust in the BBC is a crucial part of our contract with them. We will be open in admitting mistakes and encourage a culture of willingness to learn from them.