The London Radio Service is the Foreign Office’s least known propaganda unit, supplying foreign stations with government “facts”. David Miller tunes in on the US. One of its highest PR priorities has been and remains the conflict in Northern Ireland. This was evident in attempts to counter the publicity generated by Gerry Adams on his recent US tour, where the London Radio Service distributed news items featuring ministers trying to play down the significance of Adams’ visit.

Many radio stations, say COI sources, unaware that the LRS is a British government operation. Economics also inhibits radio stations from inquiring too closely about the origins of “free” news. As one LRS journalist put it: “Radio is the Cinderella of broadcasting. If it’s free they’ll take it.”

Most significantly, the COI tries to disguise the source of the news items that it places in radio bulletin. According to an official pamphlet outlining the service: “The distinguishing feature of COI radio as compared with other radio services is that material...is then broadcast by a station as if it were its own.”

However, under the US Foreign Agents Registration Act, all publicity and propaganda material emanating from a “foreign principal” is required to be identified as such. All written or printed information distributed by British Information Services in New York features a standard form of words: “This material is prepared, edited, issued, or circulated by British Information Services...registered under the Foreign Agents Registration Act as an agent of the British government.” Yet the products of the London Radio Service are not so identified, nor are copies lodged with the US Department of Justice as required. This constitutes a criminal offence under US law.

It is not clear whether the US government will act to require the Foreign Office to label the London Radio Service, or if penalties will be imposed. If this did happen, the irony would be that one of the last covert propaganda operations run by the FCO will have effectively been closed down by the actions of one of Britain’s closest allies.

David Miller’s “Don’t Mention the War: Northern Ireland, propaganda and the media” is now available, published by Pluto Press. He is lecturer in media studies at Stirling University.