News at any price

Possibly, in an imperfect world, changing Radio 5 into a mass-market news and sports channel aimed at youngish males is a reasonably good idea, writer Maggie Brown. Sport and news are a more compatible mix than sport, youth and children's programmes. But the suspicion with which the news has been greeted speaks volumes about the BBC's low public standing. Its misguided attempt to switch Radio 4 long wave into a rolling news service last year has created a huge wall of mistrust.

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

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

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

The worry to the right-wing agencies is that the way children's radio has been abruptly brushed aside. Is it true that Radio 5 did not secure large

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

Northern Ireland: a story stifled

It is five years since the broadcasting of direct interviews with Irish organisations was banned - one of a number of measures taken after a series of IRA attacks.

According to Douglas Hurd, then Home Secretary, the news was introduced, on 19 October 1988, because "the terrorists themselves draw support and sustenance from access to radio and television ... The Government has decided to take action to deny them this information platform to those who use it to propagandise terrorism".

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

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

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

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

The single thing which has gone further than existing law is the easiest thing: to utter support for Sinn Fein appears on British television news declined by 63 per cent; and in the four years since then, such interviews seem to have become even scarcer. This is a product of the notice's vague and confusing wording and of a broadcasting establishment under siege by the Government. Thus, the easiest time-saver in a busy newsroom is simply to leave Sinn Fein out. A ripple effect has resulted in the exclusion of other critical voices on Northern Ireland issues, even where they do not express support for terrorism or Sinn Fein. The best-known example is the banning of the Pogues' song "Streets of Sion/November 1916" for containing a "general disapprobation with the way in which the British Government responds to, and the course dealt with, the terrorist threat in the UK".

Perhaps the most serious extension of the ban occurred in an edition of the BBC's programme "Nation", which featured a discussion on justifying the use of violence.

The programme featured the activists and former MP Bernadette Devlin McAliskey, but almost her entire contribution was deleted.

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

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

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

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

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