



The reel crisis in Ireland

With censorship lifted, TV news coverage of Northern Ireland ought to be even-handed. It isn't, says **David Miller**

The emergence of the "peace process" in Ireland seems to have caught television journalists on the hop. For 25 years Northern Ireland has been covered from within the "anti-terrorism" paradigm, which singled out "terrorism" as the sole cause of the conflict and defeating the IRA as the only way to achieve peace. Now it seems that the official view has changed. Sinn Fein is to be regarded as having at least some sort of a legitimate electoral mandate, and, soon, a place at the negotiating table. The apolitical paradigm is plainly in crisis, and TV news especially is finding it hard to cope.

There have been some real changes in television reporting. The Broadcasting Ban is gone, and the changed political circumstances, together with the weakness of the Major government, make the kind of intimidation broadcasters faced over the Irish Question in the 1980s a thing of the past. Who can imagine a *Death on the Rock*-style attack in the current climate?

The most dramatic changes have been in current affairs programming. For the first time since 1974, extended interviews with IRA volunteers were broadcast in Ros Franey's *Talking to the Enemy*. This was followed by *Panorama's* "The Man we Hate to Love", which profiled Gerry Adams. The programme's presenter, John Ware, announced: "Tonight *Panorama* reveals how the man we hate to love has become the best hope for peace since Ireland was divided" (January 1995). Here was real evidence of "Mandelisation", the process by which Adams was transformed Mandela-style from "terrorist godfather" into "legitimate peacemaking politician".

Current BBC guidelines still encourage journalists to refer to the IRA as "terrorists" and, almost universally, they do. Yet, in discussing the possible release of republican and loyalist prisoners, the

BBC attributed the term "terrorist" to Tory backbenchers in the phrase "what they regard as terrorists" (13 July 1995). This is an extraordinary development.

Since the Hume-Adams agreement two years ago, television journalists have found it exceptionally hard to accept that they had been misled by the government over the denial of secret talks with the republicans. Even after Sir Patrick Mayhew acknowledged the contacts, TV news continued to report government statements as truthful. The BBC, for example, stated that while some of the oral messages exchanged "may be open to question... we must accept the government version" (*Newsnight*, November 1993).

In fact, the government version was false: even the *Sunday Telegraph* acknowledged: "Perhaps the strangest consequence of the process has been that the IRA have now become more believable than the government." Remarkably, TV news continued to accord government a high level of credibility, frequently basing its bulletins on official briefings.

The repetition of government briefings has been complimented by the occasional reliance on the old "terrorist" paradigm, and unionism is seen as more benign by default. This was especially clear during the marching season in the three-way confrontations between local nationalists, the Orange Order and the RUC. TV news tended to contextualise the demonstrations as quaint, even absurd, traditions to which there could be no serious objection, except, perhaps, from people with strong (nationalist) political views. Thus the BBC endorsed the Orange argument by reporting that they were "insisting on their right to march a traditional route" (10 July 1995). ITN was anxious to point out that the "Orangemen" on the Ormeau Road were "marching with their wives and families" (12 July 1995). Such a scenario makes it

hard to see why ordinary nationalists might object to, or fear, a carnivalesque family procession gracing their streets. ITN made no mention of the sectarian killing of five Catholics at an Ormeau Road betting shop that made the Orange marches so sensitive.

As Pamela Clayton argues in *Enemies and Passing Friends* (Pluto, forthcoming), the "settler" ideologies of Ulster Loyalism, suffused with sectarianism and racism, have altered little in the course of this century. Yet such perspectives continue to be marginalised by TV news. The closest the BBC got was a reference to the potential of Orange marches to turn into a "symbol of dominance" (10 July 1995).

The impulse to explain Orange demonstrations as "tradition" contrasts with a reticence to describe nationalist objections in a similar way. However, when it comes to a clash between the Orange Order and the RUC, there is little contest. Apart from minority programmes, TV news is with the police. An extraordinary example of this occurred during the Portadown stand-off in the run up to the 12 July parades. As police and demonstrators squared up to one another for a second night, the RUC fired plastic bullets at the crowd. The BBC's on-scene reporter opined that the confrontation must be serious because "the RUC fire plastic bullets only when things are getting quite serious" (10 July 1995). Such a view merely parrots RUC press office accounts. In fact, plastic and rubber bullets fired by the police and Army have killed 16 people in the past 25 years.

On the Twelfth itself *Channel Four News*, alone on British TV, reported the RUC arriving in the Ormeau Road at 6am and "beating residents into the side streets then sealing them off". By contrast both BBC and ITN reports blamed nationalists for outbreaks of violence: the BBC said "bottles were thrown" by Catholics but "generally the day passed off peacefully". Meanwhile, ITN had the police "trying to keep the sides apart".

The central problem in reporting the peace in Ireland has been a lack of perspective. Slavishly regurgitating government briefings while barely indicating that these might put a particular spin on events is especially hard to defend when the government has been caught out misleading the media and the public. And it is a less than adequate practice for journalists supposedly bound by legislative demands for objectivity.

Television news needs to throw off more decisively the legacy of the war and report the peace process as an exercise in politics in which all participants have interests. Simply repeating the latest briefing from RUC HQ, Stormont or Downing Street was unacceptable during the war. During the peace, it should disappear for good. ☐

David Miller's book, "Don't Mention the War: Northern Ireland, propaganda and the media", is published by Pluto