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Why the public needs to know

The UK broadcasting ban has signally failed to do its job. Ending it will not turn the tide of public apathy, but it may foster a much needed debate.

It is five years since the UK ban on broadcasting direct interviews with 11 Irish organisations was introduced on 19 October 1988. It was one of a number of measures taken after a series of IRA (Irish Republican Army) attacks. According to Douglas Hurd, then Home Secretary, the notice was introduced because 'the terrorists themselves draw support and sustenance from access to radio and television. The Government have decided that the time has come to deny this easy platform to those who use it to propagate terrorism'.

Has the ban been effective in its intention of keeping 'terrorists' off television and has this meant increased difficulties for the propagation of 'terrorism'? The first point to note is that the armed struggle of the IRA has not been noticeably affected by broadcasting censorship: bombings and killings continue. It is also difficult to see how 'terrorists' drew support and sustenance from access to radio and television before the ban was introduced, since active professing members of the IRA or INLA (Irish National Liberation Army) had not appeared on British television since 1979, nine years before the ban.

The ban, in fact, is not aimed at the activities of the IRA (or any of the other illegal groups named in the notice) but specifically at the ability of Sinn Fein, a legal political party, to operate in a normal democratic manner. Since the introduction of the notice, in an effort to appear even-handed, the government has proscribed the other major legal organisation listed on the notice, the UDA (Ulster Defence Association).

The notice forbids the broadcast of words which 'support or solicit or invite support' for one of the organisations or any words by 'a person who represents or purports to represent' one of the listed organisations. This covers any statement made by any person which 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’. This prohibition might also fairly be regarded as irrelevant since it was already illegal under the Emergency Provisions Act to utter support for an illegal paramilitary organisation.

In addition, broadcasters are bound under statutory and charter duties not to broadcast material which could encourage crime; Sinn Fein election candidates are required to sign a declara
tion renouncing violence before they can stand for election. The only sense in which the ban goes further than existing law is that it specifically prohibits statements in support of or by representa
tives of legal organisations even when they have nothing to do with ‘terrorism’. Its effect goes much further than simply outlawing support for ‘terrorism’ on the airwaves.

While it is still technically possible to interview members of Sinn Fein or the IRA, to broadcast direct interviews if they speak in a personal capacity, to subtitle or voice-over if they ‘represent’ Sinn Fein and to broadcast indirectly any other person who expresses support for one of the banned organisations, the number of interviews with Sinn Fein has declined substantially since the intro
duction of the ban. In the year after October 1988, Sinn Fein appearances on British network television news declined by 63%. In the four years since then, such interviews have become even more scarce. This is a result of the vague and confusing wording of the notice, time pressures and a broadcasting establishment under siege from the government. The easiest time-saver in a busy news room is simply to leave Sinn Fein out. In addition, there is evidence that these factors have caused a ripple effect which has resulted in excluding other critical voices on Northern Ireland, even where these do not express support for ‘terrorism’ or Sinn Fein. Perhaps the most famous example of this is the banning of the Pogues’ song ‘Streets of Sorrow/Birmingham Six’ for containing “terrorism”.

The ban is only a small part of the repertoire of British government information techniques. Prior to the direct intervention which the ban signalled, successive governments had put escalating pressure on broadcasting institutions to stop them giving all sides of the story in Northern Ireland. This pressure, including the use of the law and intimidation, mounted noticeably under the series of Thatcher governments in the 1980s. Allied with this is the routine use of misinformation by bodies such as the RUC and the Army, and attempts by the Northern Ireland Office to pretend things are getting ‘back to normal’.

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

Interference on the Airwaves: the Broadcasting Ban, the Media and Ireland by Mike Jempson and Liz Curtis will be published on 19 October by the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom.