

# No news, bad news & BBC news

The Glasgow University Media Group (GUMG) have established a reputation for monitoring and analysing news coverage of contemporary issues. David Miller of GUMG examines recent events that have given rise to serious concern about the ability of the broadcast media to operate independently of the priorities of the state.

In recent months there has been an intensification of official and legal pressure on broadcasters to further constrain their coverage of Northern Ireland. The broadcasters, specifically the BBC, have also moved quite separately to introduce more restrictive guidelines for reporting Northern Ireland. In different ways both these developments are important pointers to the condition of the relationship between broadcasting and the state and landmarks in the process of pushing debate about the conflict in Ireland to the margins of society.

The first of these moves was the prosecution of Channel Four for contempt under the Prevention of Terrorism Act, after they refused to name the key sources used in an edition of *Dispatches*. The programme alleged widespread collusion between the protestant business community, the RUC and loyalist paramilitaries in a secret organisation dedicated to a campaign of sectarian assassination.

When the Prevention of Terrorism Act was introduced it was acknowledged by the Home Secretary to be a "draconian" piece of legislation, but even then it was not intended to be used to force journalists to divulge their sources. However, the threat of prosecution under the Act has increasingly been used to intimidate journalists in recent years. The PTA was amended and made permanent in 1989 and police were given extra powers to seize information on 'terrorist crimes'.

These new powers were used in bringing the contempt case against Channel 4 earlier this year. This was the first case under the PTA in which journalists have been prosecuted for refusing to reveal their sources. The RUC asked the court to use its potentially unlimited powers to impose a fine or series of fines which would shut Channel 4 down. In the event, this was too much even for the judge, who imposed a fine of £75,000.

It has been reported that the RUC know the identity of the source used in the *Dispatches* programme. If this is true, it makes a mockery of the entire court case, which can be seen simply as an attempt by the RUC to intimidate broadcasters

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Photo: Sarah Booker

from covering stories harmful to the image of the 'security forces'. Either way the RUC is determined to pursue the case to the bitter end, as the recent arrest for perjury of Ben Hamilton, the researcher for the programme, makes plain.

**The second development** is the change in BBC guidelines for covering Northern Ireland which resulted from the controversy around the decision to subtitle the remarks of Bernadette McAliskey on an edition of the programme *Nation*.

**The McAliskey case** is important because it falls under a section of the Home Office directive which has rarely been used in the past four years. The main debates and struggles over the ban have been over interviews with representatives of the listed organisations - almost exclusively Sinn Féin. In this area, policy has been worked out on a case by case basis and the broadcasters have now settled into routine ways of dealing with Sinn Féin. The most important of these is that Sinn Féin views are simply left out of news bulletins, but when they are interviewed broadcasters have used a variety of tactics to obscure the fact that their coverage has been censored. On the BBC, for example, the use of subtitles has been banned on news programmes in case they draw attention to the operation of censorship.

**The subtitling of Bernadette McAliskey** was done under the clause of the Ban which prohibits words which 'support or solicit or invite support' for a listed organisation. One reason why this part of the Ban has been so little used may be because of a reluctance of journalists to attempt to interview individuals who are known to be critical of government policy on Ireland. It is a mark of the inadequacy of much British coverage that it has taken four years for such an issue to arise.

**There is a tendency** in official circles to see criticism of the official position on Northern Ireland as being akin to 'fellow-travelling' with the IRA. Such a view has, in the past, also occasionally been taken by broadcasting managements as a means of inhibiting journalists from reporting on the perceptions of the nationalist community. In the McAliskey case, the BBC's

legal advice was that the notice prohibited interviewees saying that they 'understand' the causes of the conflict. This view coincides neatly with the official view that the IRA are 'terrorists' and any attempt to suggest that they have a political rationale is to give support to the IRA. The adoption of this view by the broadcasters greatly narrows the range of legitimate comment on British television.

**There are signs**, however, that there is some division within the BBC about the validity of the legal opinion in this case. The problem is that the BBC will now find it difficult to extricate itself from what has become a de facto policy. Indeed this issue has led to the creation of a further procedural step for journalists making programmes on Ireland. Items which might be affected by this part of the Ban will in future have to be referred to the Controller of Editorial Policy. Part experience suggests that increased referral procedures lead to decreased critical programming. For the BBC to demonstrate its credibility, it should quickly arrange for the airing of views such as Bernadette McAliskey's and transmit them without subtitles. Recent attacks on the BBC and the low morale of many within the institution make this an unlikely course.

**Recent developments illustrate** the increasing pressure being put on broadcasting to move away from a public service role, especially in the coverage of Northern Ireland. It is often said that the subtitling or the use of an actors voice under the Broadcasting Ban shows how ridiculous or ineffective a piece of censorship it is. However, the Ban is neither ridiculous nor ineffective. It has severely restricted the representation of critical voices on Ireland and, because of its limited nature, will probably get past the European Court of Human Rights. The result of this is similar to the pressure brought to bear on broadcasters by the Prevention of Terrorism Act - the disappearance of the conflict in Ireland from our television screens and its marginalisation in British political culture.