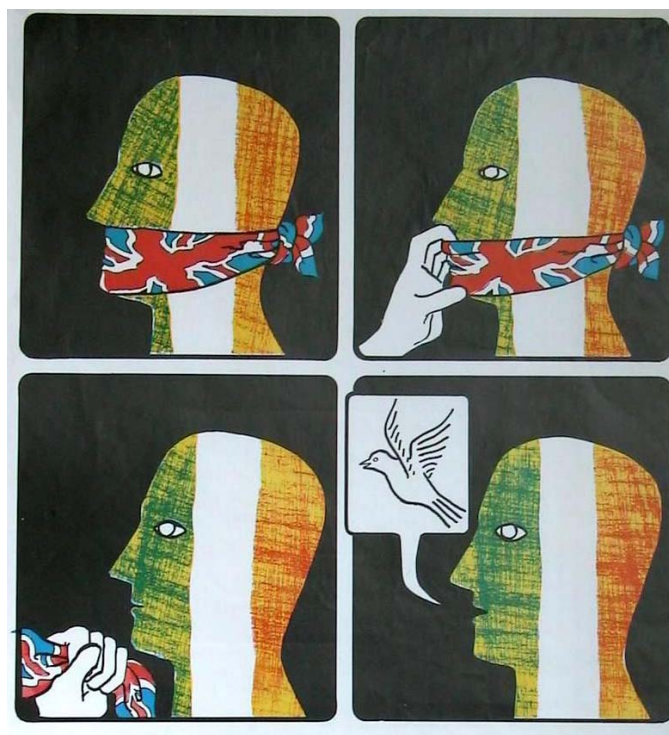


# The Media and Northern Ireland

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## Presentation

Hello everybody. First of all, we are very glad, Marielle and me, to present the work we have done on an issue related to Northern Ireland. In the case in point, the core of our presentation is an analysis of the role of the Media in the Northern Ireland Conflict. It is plain that it is a widespread issue but we will try to focus only on media coverage and censorship, particularly the British and Northern Ireland press.

## Plan

So, the plan of our account falls into six main parts. First, the introduction, in order to remind the background of the issue. In second place, the media coverage of the conflict. Then, censorship, with three main points, direct censorship, indirect censorship and self censorship. After that, of course, the reasons and the consequences of censorship and finally the conclusion our study.

## Introduction

As you may know, the Northern Ireland Conflict is commonly considered as “Troubles” in the media. In fact, “The Troubles” is an euphemism that is used to refer to the violent conflict (in fact the war) in Northern Ireland from 1968 to the present.

Inevitably, the conflict generated world-wide media attention. Certainly, the people of Northern Ireland could have no grounds for complaint about national and international media coverage. Daily newspapers, local papers, all of the English national papers have talked about the Northern Ireland Conflict. And similar patterns occur for television, radio and satellite channels. But it would be naive to imagine that the media simply acted as objective communicators of information. In fact, it is taken for granted that journalists and broadcasters have been themselves political actors rather than detached observers. So, we will try to highlight the censorship and the manipulation of the media during this war.

Now, before dealing with this censorship, let's talk about the media coverage of the conflict.

## Media coverage

To begin with, the role of the British Press must be underlined. British newspapers congratulate themselves on their high journalistic standards. They are supposed to be the “guardians of liberty”. But, in reality, there is no denying that the British Press has been manipulated and controlled by the successive British governments.

In other respects, the Press in Northern Ireland can be divided into two separated categories : the national dailies and the local papers available in the districts, towns and communities. The people of Northern Ireland had access to a wide range of media output. In a few words, the situation is as follow :

- The News Letter, founded in 1737, is the oldest newspaper. The editorial policy has consistently epoused the Unionist cause.
- The Irish News, first published in 1855, has always supported Nationalist aspirations.
- The Belfast Telegraph and the Sunday Life are read by both communities, Protestants and Catholics.

- There are about 50 local papers, for each communities. These papers serve neighbouring area and carry information which is relevant to each communities. As a consequence, people sharing the same geographical space are kept apart in terms of local newspapers preferences. As a result, a sense of group identity is strengthened by these local papers.

Generally speaking, we can say that half truths were presented as hard fact and that the propagandist activities of the British governments have been important factors in the persistence of political crisis. But, the real propaganda victories have been won by the perpetrators and supporters of violence (for instance the IRA), not by the elected governments.

Now, let talk about the IRA, because this is an relevant example of the attitude of the Press during the Conflict.

## The Press and the IRA

Many stories reported by journalists show that IRA is responsible for hard every accident, murder, incident which takes place in England or Northern Ireland. Is it grounded?

The first example given is about a bag that contained a bomb and exploded killing a man and injuring his wife in their car.

During two days this accident was related in front pages of lot of papers and described the IRA must have been responsible for this. They quote anonymous police spokesmen, or detectives investigations...

Consequences: "millions of people were led to believe that the IRA had planted the bomb."

"The image of IRA as bloodthirsty gangsters was emphasised and reinforced"

The problem is that no proof was made of IRA's guilt. No evidence was found to link the IRA to this accident. No arrest has been made. "The British press depicted the IRA in a way which was not based on any available facts."

The second example took place a few months after in Belfast. Fierce riots started after three men were shot. It last five days. And there were people killed and injured, material damage.

Again, the press laid these incidents to IRA's charge. They pretend that IRA stir Belfast riots. Some newspapers involved children writing "IRA guerrillas have organised children into stone-throwing gangs", and "men in black beret " who gave the orders..."

Again no proof was made of IRA' guilt. Journalists affirmed many details unbolt. There are contradictions in what is written between two papers. Nothing is précised. Everything is groundless. One journalist said "there is no other interpretation that can be put on the riots", it must have been the IRA...Where such precise details of how it occurred can come from? It's never said. No photo is given in spite of precision of the relating.

When real facts are known, the riots were caused by the army...who wounded two innocents men after a minor incident. They apologized but this was not said by journalists even if it was the origins of the riots.

Another example is about two men shot dead one month after the riots. Even if IRA denied responsibility, some journalists accused again this organisation and their atrocity.

British public has, by this way, the image of IRA as assassin.

Therefore, it is important to underline the censorship related to the Northern Ireland Conflict.

## Censorship

The censorship began in the 70's. Official pressures on the media became so intense that a declaration of intent was made in London by journalists who realised they were being repressed. In a word, they claimed "we deplore the intensification of TV, press and radio censorship on events in Northern Ireland and we want to oppose it".

But it was a waste of time and the whole argument of the censorship boils down to three main points.

- first of all, direct censorship : in 1972, a new law introduced a ban on broadcast on Irish Republic Radio interviews with representatives of Sinn Fein and of any organisations proscribed in Northern Ireland. The British government imposed a similar ban. As a result, over 100 TV programmes about Northern Ireland between 1969 and 1993 were banned by the British state's censorship.
- then, indirect censorship : the media have been restricted by the economic context of media production, through intimidation also. A minister said in 1971 : "Journalists must choose between the army and the terrorists". Moreover, most journalists rely heavily on official sources that is to say on the propaganda of the British government.
- finally, self censorship : editors were so worried about the pressures from above that they tried to approach a story not with the aim of discovering the truth, but in a manner that would ensure they did not get into troubles. The BBC is a relevant example of this attitude. The BBC's director declared : "between the British Army and the gunmen, the BBC is not and cannot be impartial. Programmes as a whole must show the BBC's detestation of terrorism". So a policy of censorship was imposed in the national interest. In addition, the British journalists were constantly reminded they were from a country whose soldiers were being killed by the IRA and programmes which ignored government's objectives were criticised in parliament, by policemen, ministers and so on. This is reflected in the editorial line of every paper. So no journalist writes what he knows will be cut. In fact, self censorship becomes natural.

## Reasons of censorship

Now, we can ask the question : what are the reasons of censorship ? Why is the press not objective ? This happens because the press in general serves a certain interest and the news published tend to support this interest.. For instance the British press is a constant state of adaptation to the needs of the British ruling class.

In fact, the press is not an independent institution. There is no free press. It is locked into the structure of society. The ultimate control over what is printed is drawn from the owners of big business.

In other words, the newspapers industry is an integral part of the capitalist system.

## Consequences of censorship

Now, let's talk about the consequences of censorship. The media have served the interest of the British state : it is claimed that pressure has been put on the media to ensure their support for government policy. Indeed, the British state has incorporated the manipulation of the media into its fight against terrorism. The consequences of this policy are :

- the loss of British broadcasting's reputation for independence.
- moreover, the British state has also been guilty of using the manipulation of the media to convince the outside world of the relative normality of life in Northern Ireland.

Actually, most British people have a distorted view of what is happening in Northern Ireland because they believe what they read. It is plain that London based national newspapers have never adequately covered events in Northern Ireland. They deal with the key marches, the big political meetings but incidents that occur day after day, week after week, go unreported in Britain. That is the blatant mistake. In fact, the news has been presented to serve the immediate political needs of the British government.

In a word, the media have become complicit in the maintenance of the crisis.

## Conclusion

What conclusion can we draw from that ? One should be aware that if the media had reported much more and better about events and had been less prone to accept the British's propaganda, then a political solution might have been reached sooner. And scores of innocents would have lived.

Moreover, it is plain that, nowadays, the role of the media in a conflict is very important. Namely, you have to win the war of the media before the conventional war. As a result, governments use propaganda and censorship in order to win the war of propaganda. And what happens at present time with the war in Afghanistan is a relevant example : CNN, NBC and all the American media rely heavily on official sources and refuse to show the interviews of Oussama Bin Laden. A policy of censorship is imposed in the national interest.

Finally, for the shake of both communities, the peace in Northern Ireland is not a dream. It is the same situation between Israelis and Palestinians : if only Catholics and Protestants shake hands and learn to live together then everything would be fine ...