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PREPARED FOR WAR, READY FOR PEACE?: Paramilitaries, Politics, and the Press in Northern Ireland

by

Tim Cooke

Discussion Paper D-31
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The Joan Shorenstein Center
PRESS ▪ POLITICS
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INTRODUCTION

Ever since the early 1970s the problems of Northern Ireland have become all too familiar on our television screens. Events became cliches: another young soldier shot, another explosion or petrol bomb which has gone off in Belfast, another violent clash between the two communities, another discovery of arms caches by the security forces. The relentless familiarity of the incidents, year after year, produced a predictable scenario for covering the province.

The developments in the peace process leading up to, and beyond, the Good Friday agreement challenged all of us to look afresh at events there. The agreement, which seemed to hang precariously in the balance until the last minute, dramatically split the unionist community and produced a realignment in the conventional religious cleavages, as Trimble and Hume found themselves campaigning in the referendum on the same platform. The subsequent elections seemed a triumph of the moderate forces which mobilized public support behind the new Assembly. Yet just a few weeks later, before all the campaign posters could come down, events at Portadown brought back painful memories of burning cars, bomb threats in London, and violence across the province.

For journalists the complexities of these developments created new challenges about how to portray the politics of the province, and particularly the depiction of paramilitary groups as they gradually became absorbed into mainstream electoral politics. As in the Middle East or South Africa, rapid political turmoil led to serious questions for journalism about conventional distinctions between "terrorists" and "political leaders."

This paper by Tim Cooke, an experienced broadcaster and senior editor who has worked for BBC Northern Ireland throughout the troubles, provides important insights which help us to understand how the news media covers periods of sustained conflict and the transition to peace. The lessons of this paper are critical if journalists are to help, rather than hinder, the peace process. This issue is always important, but even more so given the apparent fragility of any settlement in Northern Ireland, the Middle East, and many other troubled areas of the world beset by ethnic and religious conflict.

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PREPARED FOR WAR, READY FOR PEACE?:
Paramilitaries, Politics and the Press in Northern Ireland

by Tim Cooke

Overview

The reporting of sustained conflict poses particular challenges for news organizations and journalists in the search for truth, objectivity, accuracy, balance, independence and responsibility. For news media most closely linked to the arena of conflict the challenges are unique. While international or foreign media often go largely unaccountable to the society about which they report, indigenous news organizations must wrestle daily with both the short and longer-term consequences of their judgments and actions. The very proximity of news organizations rooted in and broadcasting or publishing to a society affected by conflict, and in particular by political violence, makes them important players in the battle for hearts and minds in a war of weapons and words, of politics and pictures.

The Middle East, South Africa and Northern Ireland have all offered examples of how the news practices of indigenous journalism can be heavily conditioned by political violence. They also offer case studies of how news organizations used to reporting conflict have responded to the fresh challenge of reporting a society attempting the transition to peace. What role does the news media play in such a transition and how do news programs, newspapers and the journalists who frame our daily window on the world assess what we should see when we look through it? This examination of the role of news organizations in Northern Ireland in reporting the paramilitary groups responsible for 30 years of headlines at home and abroad as they have moved into the political arena attempts to offer insight into this interactive process in one divided society.

Context

After decades of conflict Northern Ireland is riding the roller-coaster of constitutional change. The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 places the province firmly in the center of a political vortex which proffers the most fundamental transformation in governance since the foundation of the State in 1921—more far-reaching than the abolition of the unionist-dominated Stormont Parliament and the imposition by the British Government of Direct Rule from Westminster in 1972.

One of the key reasons the conditions for such change now exist is that many of the people who have sustained and directed the political violence of the last quarter century and more have agreed, for the moment at least, to silence their guns and emphasize politics rather than paramilitarism.

Encouraged in latter years by changes in the policies of both the British and Irish Governments, most of the key paramilitary groups involved in three decades of violence now have a political party which represents their thinking. On the republican side the Provisional IRA (Irish Republican Army) is represented by Sinn Fein. On the loyalist side the UDA/UFF (Ulster Defense Association/Ulster Freedom Fighters) is represented by the UDP (Ulster Democratic Party) and the Ulster Volunteer Force is represented by the PUP (Progressive Unionist Party). These three paramilitary groups, the IRA, UDA/UFF and UVF have been responsible for most of the 3,500 deaths in Northern Ireland since 1969—the IRA for some 1,600 deaths and the two loyalist groups for almost 1,000. One of the key elements of government policy aimed at encouraging a transition to politics was the devising of an election in May 1996 which helped even the smallest of these political parties (the UDP) achieve representation at the multi-party Talks sponsored by the British and Irish governments which ended on April 10, 1998 with a new cross-community agreement on future governance.

All this has had a profound effect in and on the media in Northern Ireland. After years of reporting a catalogue of horror, grief and destruction within a paradigm which condemns acts of terrorism as illegitimate and irrational, new questions have emerged as to who government and the media view as legitimate actors in the political sphere. The transmutation of violent protagonists into politicians and brokers of peace is a process which the media has both facilitated and wrestled with. A news media proficient in reporting the paramilitaries in conflict appears

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less prepared for the consequences of the paramilitary role in peace-making. Journalists are still adjusting to a changing situation which is giving the paramilitaries a new role in the press, public, and political arenas. This question was thrown into relief by an event in January 1998 which exposed the quandary—the decision by the British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Dr. Mo Mowlam, to visit convicted paramilitary leaders inside the high-security Maze prison to persuade them to renew their support for the peace process at a time when it seemed on the verge of collapse. As we shall see, the event raised uncomfortable questions for the media—evident in the text and pictures which form news narrative and in the editorials of certain newspapers.

The purpose of this paper is to examine how journalists and news organizations in Northern Ireland have been dealing with the questions of legitimacy and voice in a period of transition and to discuss the past and present influences affecting their framing and treatment of paramilitary groups inside and outside the peace process.

The role of the news media in the process of political communication has been and continues to be of particular importance in Northern Ireland. In a society with many traditional religious divisions in education, housing, employment, sport and culture and where previous attempts to build political institutions with cross-community consensus have failed, the media has been a primary arena for communication between and within the Catholic and Protestant communities. A notable factor here is that Northern Ireland does not fall victim to one of the difficulties apparent in some other divided societies—that of a media divided by language and speaking to only one side in the conflict. The mainstream news organizations in Northern Ireland are English language and most of the population experiences exposure to more than one news source. Thus while the two morning newspapers published in Belfast cater to particular constituencies, the *Irish News* to Catholics and the *News Letter* to Protestants, the newspaper with the largest circulation, the *Belfast Telegraph* (29 percent market share) sells to Catholics and Protestants. The news services provided by BBC Northern Ireland and Ulster Television are also aimed at the whole community. This paper draws mainly on material from the five news organizations mentioned above. Between them, the *Belfast Telegraph*, *Irish News* and *News Letter* account for some 47 percent of market share. The daily television news programs discussed here, Ulster Television's *UTV Live* at 6pm and BBC *Northern Ireland's Newsline 6.30* half-an-hour later account for a combined share of around 70 percent.

Of course not all the paramilitary groups active in Northern Ireland are involved in the transition into the political process—and even those on ceasefire have been judged in varying degrees to have infringed the principles on nonviolence to which they were required to subscribe as a precondition for participation in the Talks process. Both the UDP and Sinn Fein were suspended temporarily from the Talks for varying periods during the first three months of 1998. Furthermore the IRA ceasefire, which allowed Sinn Fein to take part in the talks, is viewed by some Irish republicans as at best ill-advised and at worst a treacherous betrayal. Hence we have seen the emergence of the Continuity IRA which has bombed a number of town centers in Northern Ireland in the first months of 1998. On the loyalist side the emergence of the LVF (Loyalist Volunteer Force) is a challenge to the analysis of the established pro-British paramilitary groups the UDA and the UVF. At the beginning of 1998 the LVF carried out a series of killings of Catholics after another small republican group not on ceasefire, the INLA (Irish National Liberation Army), killed the LVF leader Billy Wright inside the Maze Prison.

Against this complex web of violence and ceasefire, infringement and observation, the emergence of groups more extreme than the established extremists, and the background of the multi-party Talks, the media has been confronted with irregular patterns and conflicting messages, reporting both paramilitaries in pursuit of peace and others in pursuit of violence. Here I examine the media's dilemma.

Firstly, concentrating on the methods of communication between the paramilitaries and the media, I discuss the extent to which news organizations try to differentiate between propaganda and news. Key issues here are the way in which the rules about what makes news gives stories about paramilitaries and their actions a journalistic appeal while at the same time news organizations also see themselves as representatives of the wider society's anti-terrorist stance.

Secondly, I discuss the characteristics of a transition of actors who have been viewed from within an anti-terrorist paradigm onto the public stage and into the political sphere. In the case of Northern Ireland this has meant the same people who have been involved in specific

acts of violence in what the media generally viewed as a "terrorist" campaign being accorded a public role as politicians and negotiators. The changing portrayal of individuals and movements in transition would seem to be a necessary condition for wider social and political change.

Thirdly, focusing on one of the defining moments of the peace process (Mowlam's visit to the Maze), I examine attitudes and quandaries as violence continued to affect the framing of the paramilitary groups and their place in the peace process. With journalists, it would seem, old habits die hard and the ambivalence of paramilitary groups (including threats to return to violence and actual bombings and killings) has continued to foster suspicion and cynicism towards paramilitaries.

That does not mean however that change does not take place within the media. In fact there has been significant change over time in both the public role and the portrayal of paramilitary-related politicians. But as the pace of political change accelerates, news organizations can find themselves caught in a dichotomy—in the vanguard of reflecting the dynamics, consequences and potential of change while at the same time allowing the inheritance of past experience to weigh more heavily on their decisions and outlook than is apparent with some other actors. It does not follow that such a cautious approach is harmful towards positive transition. Rather, the converse may be true. It would seem the rewards offered by the news media to those embracing peace seem ultimately to be more highly prized by the paramilitaries than the publicity benefits of violence.

1. Propaganda and News

The actions of paramilitary groups have had a dominant place in the news agenda in Northern Ireland and have frequently made headlines around the world. A town center devastated by a car bomb explosion, an indiscriminate sectarian gun attack on a public house, the killing of a prominent politician, an assault on a British Army barracks . . . events which register firmly with reporters, producers, editors, audiences, readers and government. The publicity which inevitably follows violent action is part of the paramilitary calculation, sending a message of political determination, technical ability and military will. It is a message directed towards enemies *and* supporters.

While the paramilitaries have, through violence, the ability to generate publicity, the character of that publicity is not in their control. Reportage of their actions routinely brings with it the condemnation of politicians and community leaders, the stories and grief of the victims, the reaction of government and of paramilitary groups on the opposing side. Within the output of the Northern Ireland media (newspapers and broadcast news programs) the negative response to paramilitary violence has been ritual and overt, reflecting the disapproval of the community (a large majority of Protestants and Catholics view the violence of the paramilitaries as politically, legally and morally wrong) and of government. That disapproval is reflected in news narrative and in the practices of newsrooms. Reportage has generally although not exclusively[1] characterized the activities of paramilitary groups as "terrorist," offering a negative representation of the groups and their methods.

News organizations have also been aware that they are targets of paramilitary propaganda. Against the background of societal and governmental disapproval of paramilitary activity, they have tried to avoid overt manipulation of the content of reports and of their news agendas. Apart from the broadcasting ban imposed by the British Government between October 1988 and September 1994, this effort has been self-regulated. It has also been variable, depending on the decisions of individual journalists, photographers, producers and editors although the BBC has published its own guidelines to staff.

The paramilitaries, discontent with a pattern of coverage and condemnation which has portrayed them as evil, pyschopathic and often irrational, have taken their battle to another front, attempting to explain, justify and legitimize themselves through media under their own control and through a public relations strategy which seeks to achieve greater portrayal of their chosen image of themselves. Understanding the way in which the paramilitary organizations view themselves is crucial to understanding the image they seek to portray through the wider media. Insight into their self-perception is available through the media they have under their direct control. Here I briefly discuss five key idioms—*statements, briefings, staged events, publications* and *murals*. The first four play a pivotal role in the patterns of communication from paramilitaries to journalists while the fifth provides paramilitaries with direct communication to local communities. The way in which these idioms filter into and through the editorial and production chain and

the extent to which the self-styled symbolism, imagery and terminology translate into the narrative of news is instructive as to how journalists in Northern Ireland seek to balance propaganda and news.

Statements

Statements from paramilitary groups are a well-established news source in Northern Ireland and are frequently telephoned to newsrooms in Belfast and Dublin. They are usually accompanied by a codeword which certain journalists will recognize and which will authenticate the source. These statements are used by the paramilitaries for a variety of purposes, for example to warn of explosive devices which they have left in a particular place where they are not seeking to achieve casualties, to admit responsibility for killings or other attacks in order to achieve association in the public mind with the event, or to set out their current political analysis at a time they assess to be useful in sending a message to the government or supporters. The terminology indicates that the groups see themselves as legitimate armies with military structures and ranks. The IRA has an "Army Council," the various loyalist groups had until recently a "Combined Loyalist Military Command." The Ulster Defense Association has an "Inner Council." The statements speak of "brigades," "battalions," "companies" and "active service units." Members hold ranks and identifiable positions such as "commander," "brigadier," "quartermaster" or "volunteer." They describe members who are serving sentences in prison for violent acts as "POWs" or as "political prisoners."

Statements have been and still are a common source of information about the paramilitaries and their activities and often have an immediate news value. In the aftermath of its attacks on police or army personnel, or following a bomb attack on a town centre, it was common practice for the IRA to contact a journalist and claim responsibility. Such claims, when believed to be genuine, were regularly reported by news organizations. Information, warnings or claims judged authentic usually find their way quickly onto air or into print. While the statements often have an undeniable news value and aid understanding or interpretation of events, the terminology used in them is often rephrased or ignored by journalists, although there is no universal set of rules or guidelines adopted by news organizations.

Briefings

One-on-one briefings, sometimes at the request of journalists and other times offered by the paramilitaries, are another source of information about the groups and the historical and political context in which they see themselves.

Depending on timing and content, these briefings can result in lead story treatment by one news organization with the subject matter then being picked up by others. From the paramilitary perspective it can be an effective way of influencing news agendas or getting a message across at a chosen time, particularly when it is a message which news organizations deem to be politically significant. For example, following bomb attacks in Moira on February 20, 1998 and Portadown, February 23, 1998 the IRA briefed the BBC in Belfast with the message that it was not responsible, that its cessation of violence was intact and that there was no split in the organization. That briefing was of value to Sinn Fein in its efforts to stay involved in the Talks and turned suspicion more directly towards the Continuity IRA. The briefing resulted in a lead story on *BBC Newsline 6.30* (February 24) and was picked up and reported by all the other news organizations in Northern Ireland.

In addition, information and views gleaned in briefings—either directly from paramilitary figures or from someone considered close to their thinking—often finds its way into background analysis, explanation or context given by reporters as to the current thinking within paramilitary groups.

Staged events

On occasion paramilitary groups stage events in order to send a message to government, to the "other side" or to a faction on their own side. They may organize their own publicity, distributing photographs or video footage to the media. At other times they may specifically invite journalists and cameras to meet them at the corner of a certain street at a certain time of night. On arrival masked men with guns will emerge and parade around as if on patrol. There have also been cases of journalists being blindfolded and taken by car to a secret rendezvous where a photo-opportunity has been arranged. In 1993 when the IRA was having particular success with a so-called "barrack buster" mortar device used mostly against RUC bases in rural towns, a video appeared in televisions newsrooms showing masked men in combat gear training with the device. The instructor featured in the video can be heard explaining that the device was similar to what had been used by the IRA in an attack on 10 Downing Street, an attack the IRA regarded as a major military and propaganda coup. Parts of the video have been

used occasionally by television news programs in Northern Ireland in the context of analyzing the IRA's activity or political position.

The reporting of staged events is problematic. Journalists are not excluded from the provisions of the Prevention of Terrorism Act under which it is a criminal offense to withhold information about terrorist activities. Beyond that however there are editorial considerations with some organizations taking the view that they will not respond to invitations from illegal groups involved in violence to meet and film or record them. Others do find themselves, at times knowingly and at other times without design, at staged events and they broadcast or publish the material they gather. It is a question of judgment and practice—and both vary among journalists and news organizations.

When Billy Wright, leader of the Loyalist Volunteer Force, was shot dead by INLA inmates inside the Maze Prison in December 1997 and his body returned to his home in Portadown, a photograph was issued to the media showing him lying in an open coffin, flanked by four hooded men in uniform, three of them with handguns. What is a journalist or editor to make of this? Is it macabre bad taste to publish the photograph, is it offensive, does it glorify a dead terrorist, does it glamorize a group which murders innocent Catholics, what is the intended message of the LVF in staging the photograph? The media could choose to publish or not. Both decisions were made. The *News Letter* (December 29, 1997) published the photograph alongside a story headlined "FEAR AND FURY" with a caption "Shot dead: loyalist gunmen guard the body of LVF leader Billy Wright." The *Belfast Telegraph* on the same date also published the photograph but neither the *Irish News* nor the BBC used it.

Publications

The most sophisticated and regular publication offering insight into the affairs and analysis of the largest paramilitary group, the IRA, is *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, published as a weekly newspaper in Dublin and on the web. It carries statements from and interviews with the IRA and embraces the organization's imagery and terminology. It is designed to advance the Irish republican agenda and to communicate within the movement. It promotes Sinn Fein, giving prominence to party policy and representatives. Emphasis is given to the republican analysis, the welfare of republican prisoners, a negative portrayal of what are termed "crown forces" (*i.e.*, the British Army and RUC).

At times *An Phoblacht/Republican News* is a news source for journalists, particularly when it quotes directly from the IRA in relation to policy position. However, the terminology and rhetoric inherent in the editorial narrative has not normally carried over into mainstream or dominant news narrative.

Publications associated with loyalist groups—the UDA's *Defender* and the UVF's *Combat*—have limited circulation and only rarely feature as a news source.

Murals

The urban ghettoes of Northern Ireland are often awash with color—from the bunting strung between the street lights to the red, white and blue or green, white and gold painted sidewalks which mark out territory as Protestant or Catholic. Beyond this lies another more arresting landscape—the paramilitary murals which adorn the gable walls. These five or six meter high brick canvases depict masked men with automatic weapons as heroes devoted to a cause which is politically, religiously and morally legitimate. They frequently invoke history, God and the use of rocket launchers or automatic rifles. Flags, emblems, armed and hooded figures acting as guardians or defenders, rolls of honor commemorating members who have been killed, celebrations of local sub-divisions within the group's structure are common. In his study of Northern Irish murals, Bill Rolston says that for both loyalists and republicans, murals are an important form of political mobilization, sending a message to the "converted" and acting as a potential source of "conversion" of others.

> ". . . although also fought out at the society and international levels, it is at the local level that the battle for state legitimacy is waged daily. In the midst of that battle, murals are not just folk artifacts but a crucial factor in the politicization of the community. Politically articulate murals simultaneously become expressions of and creators of community solidarity. Although it would be too far-fetched to argue that the propaganda war is won or lost at the local level, there can be no denying the role the murals play as crucial weapons in that war."[2]

Television, of course, demands pictures and many of the reports dealing with paramilitary groups are limited in the range of pictures available. Television journalists have embraced the paramilitary mural as an additional picture source. In the race against the clock where a

television journalist is balancing concern over video of a mural which proclaims the heroism of the UVF or IRA with a demand for pictures over which to explain a development affecting a paramilitary organization, production demands can influence the result. The murals are colorful, graphic and clear and will not defame anyone. They are also part of the urban landscape and can be seen in reality by anyone daily. While judgments are made in television newsrooms about frequency of use and context, murals painted by the paramilitaries and designed to glorify their cause do find their way onto television screens in Northern Ireland regularly. Thus the murals can achieve a prominence or send a message more widely than originally intended although the growing professionalism and technical ability displayed in more recent examples suggests those who conceive them are alive to this possibility.

News Production, Judgment and Legitimacy

It is clear that while the paramilitaries are a vital news source, their access to newsprint and airwaves is not unfettered. There is at present no legislation in force which directly prevents journalists reporting what paramilitaries say or even publishing or broadcasting interviews with them. Nevertheless news organizations in Northern Ireland rarely seek on-the-record interviews with paramilitaries for publication or broadcast, evidence of reluctance to give airtime and column space to the analysis of groups which have been killing people on a weekly and sometimes daily basis.

Yet most individual journalistic decisions are heavily influenced by judgments over news value and by production demands. The need to illustrate or visualize a story deemed important while the clock ticks towards broadcast time can be more powerful than any notion of a model for reporting on paramilitaries. This can result in different judgments at different times in balancing the overlap between news and what could be argued to be propaganda advantage for paramilitaries. Such judgments may also be affected by other factors including a current level of violence or the state of public opinion.

In an effort to achieve consistency of approach the BBC has published its own guidelines for staff on coverage of Northern Ireland. The guidelines caution against according "spurious respectability" to paramilitaries.[3] They counsel staff to "avoid anything which would glamorize the terrorist, or give an impression of legitimacy" and say statements can be "paraphrased to avoid the military titles and pomp."[4]

While news organizations see the paramilitaries as an important news source and accord their activities a major role in the news agenda, there are varying attempts to remove or dilute the most obvious propaganda and report activities in a context of disapproval. News organizations therefore, while acknowledging the paramilitaries as a central player on the political and media stages, do not accord them the overt recognition and legitimacy they believe they deserve from the public, the politicians and the press. It is to the process of how that axis of legitimacy in terms of political involvement and news coverage can change that we now turn.

2. Paramilitaries and Politics

It is evident in reading or watching reports by news organizations in Northern Ireland that political parties such as Sinn Fein, the PUP and the UDP are now woven into the tapestry of daily news. Representatives are given voice routinely, commenting with their latest analysis or calling for movement in line with their policy. In contemporary affairs, the news report in which they appear could well be about a meeting with the British Prime Minister, contact with the White House or their participation in discussing or implementing political change in Northern Ireland alongside what have been traditionally described as the "constitutional parties," i.e., against the use of violence. It is remarkable how far events and the place of Sinn Fein, the PUP and UDP in the media have moved. Five years ago the Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams was refused meetings with even the most junior British Government Minister, the United States refused to grant him an entry visa and his voice was largely banned from being heard on British and Irish airwaves. The change has come about through a complex political process in which the news media has played an important role.

Many factors have contributed to this evolutionary process, among them the emergence of Sinn Fein into the electorally successful political wing of the IRA. The Provisional IRA is an illegal organization and membership is a criminal offense in the United Kingdom and in the Republic of Ireland. For legal reasons alone it has not been possible for an identifiable individual to appear publicly as someone speaking directly for the IRA. But the "Republican Movement" is made up of both a military wing, the IRA, and a political wing, Sinn Fein. Sinn Fein is a legal political party which, since the

early 1980s, has been developing an electoral strategy. In the most recent election in Northern Ireland (Local Government Election May 1997) the party gained 16.9 percent of the vote, the third highest percentage of all the parties, giving it 74 of the 582 seats across the 26 local councils.

The electoral impact of political parties representing the loyalist paramilitary groups is a more recent development. The UDP was formed at the end of 1989 although it evolved from the earlier electorally unsuccessful Ulster Loyalist Democratic Party. The PUP had been active on a small scale since 1979. But both parties only emerged more recently with a cohesive public profile which has translated into electoral support in the elections of 1996 and 1997. In the election to the Northern Ireland Forum in May 1996, a qualifying election for participation in the Talks on the future of Northern Ireland, the UDP and PUP between them won 5.6 percent of the vote—they had previously never managed to exceed a 1 percent share. In the Local Government Election of May 1997 they won 3.2 percent between them, yielding a total of 10 seats compared to 2 in the 1987 election. This small but significant breakthrough for the loyalist parties reflected a peace dividend and a higher media profile following the announcement of a ceasefire by the Combined Loyalist Military Command (CLMC) in October 1994, a group which represented all the loyalist paramilitary organizations. In the run-up to that announcement and in its aftermath, new articulate media-friendly voices emerged onto the public stage.

The republican and loyalist ceasefires announced in 1994 were a crucial factor in creating conditions which allowed for the beginning of a process of "normalization of relations" between parties such as Sinn Fein and the British and Irish Governments. Both Governments had previously refused to meet Sinn Fein representatives at a Ministerial level. Initially the Irish Government under Albert Reynolds moved with greater speed and enthusiasm to embrace Sinn Fein as a legitimate player on the political stage. Under John Major's premiership, the British Government was much more cautious in its response, so cautious that republicans became disillusioned and the IRA ended its ceasefire in February 1996. The election of the Labor Party under Tony Blair as the new British Government in May 1997 generated new impetus, so much so that the IRA ceasefire was restored in July 1997. Before the year was out Sinn Fein was participating in the Talks at Stormont and in discussions with Prime Minister Blair at 10 Downing Street.

Crucially though, under the Major premiership, an election was organized in Northern Ireland to determine who would take part in the Talks process. The system of election all but guaranteed that the political representatives of the paramilitaries would qualify as participants. The formula was specifically designed to include the loyalist parties (the PUP and UDP) which had limited electoral support.

All this has been a lengthy and tortuous process affected by many variables, among them the level of violence, the impact of particular bomb explosions and shootings, and the broadcasting ban imposed by the Thatcher Government. It has also been a process characterized by a media challenge, in interviews and opinion columns, to the ultimate commitment of parties with paramilitary connections to democratic ideals. Ed Moloney has discussed many of these variables in his essay on the broadcasting ban where he highlights some of the features of the axis between journalists and Sinn Fein in the late 1980s.

> "Over time though legitimate journalistic interest in the conflicts between Sinn Fein politics and the IRA's violence developed into something of a preoccupation, not to say obsession for some. Sinn Fein interviews and press conferences became almost exclusively contests between defensive Sinn Feiners and reporters trying to get a revealing and damaging response to the latest IRA disaster . . . Some reporters began to see this essentially confrontational approach as the only way in which the IRA could or should be covered and when the media ban was announced voices were raised complaining it would no longer be possible."[5]

The media's difficulty with accepting the democratic credentials of elected Sinn Fein representatives while IRA violence ran hot was a reproduction of both governmental and societal disapproval. In terms of Irish history, 1990 is not long ago but as recently as then journalist and commentator David McKittrick was writing:

> "From the republican point of view, Sinn Fein, the political wing of the IRA, provides a useful political and propaganda adjunct to the terrorist campaign. Its presence in political life is a standing embarrassment to the authorities and a continuing affront to Unionists who continue to lobby for the banning of the party. . . . The government is uncomfortable with Sinn Fein. On one level it is a legal political party, standing for elections and representing its voters. But on another it is clearly attached to the

> IRA and is, to most intents and purposes, subordinate to it. The government has not sought to ban Sinn Fein (which was legalized in 1974), and civil service departments routinely deal with its members. At the same time, however, ministers will not meet Sinn Fein personnel, and its representatives are, in general, banned from appearing on television and radio."[6]

The broadcasting ban, which was in effect for almost six years, was an attempt by the Thatcher Government to penalize Sinn Fein particularly for its association with the IRA. The electoral success of the party and the emergence to prominence of capable media performers caused offense to the unionist population and to the British Government. In an effort to deny access to airwaves, the British Home Office introduced restrictions controlling the circumstances in which representatives of a series of organizations including the IRA, Sinn Fein, the UDA and UFF could be heard speaking on television and radio. Thatcher took the view that BBC and Independent programs were too lax, allowing groups running a dual military and political campaign to have the best of both worlds—the publicity impact and political leverage of bomb attacks and shootings and access to television and radio to promote their political analysis in the wake of such events. Announcing the ban in the House of Commons the then Home Secretary Douglas Hurd said:

> "For some time broadcast coverage of events in Northern Ireland has included the occasional appearance of representatives of paramilitary organizations and their political wings, who have used these opportunities as an attempt to justify their criminal activities. Such appearances have caused widespread offense to viewers and listeners throughout the United Kingdom, particularly in the aftermath of a terrorist outrage. The terrorists themselves draw support and sustenance from having access to radio and television and from addressing their views more directly to the population at large than is possible through the press. The Government has decided that the time has now come to deny this easy platform to those who use it to propagate terrorism."[7]

So, for example, when Gerry Adams was Member of Parliament for West Belfast while the ban was in force, he could appear on television in his capacity as MP and have his voice heard speaking about housing, roads or schools but when it came to speaking on political matters on behalf of Sinn Fein, he could be seen and his views reported but his voice could not be broadcast.

Nevertheless the fact that the broadcasting ban was introduced at all clearly suggests that news organizations were ascribing more legitimacy to Sinn Fein in particular than the British Government of the time. Sinn Fein had already demonstrated significant and sustained electoral support before the ban was introduced—a fact which news organizations could scarcely ignore even if they did continue to challenge Sinn Fein on its support of "armed struggle" and its association with the IRA. Despite the British Government's stated unwillingness to meet with or talk to Gerry Adams at the time, news organizations continued to give him voice as President of Sinn Fein and as MP for West Belfast between 1983 and 1992 (he lost the seat to the SDLP in 1992, regaining it in 1997).

The political landscape against which the broadcasting ban was first imposed has changed markedly (it was lifted by John Major shortly after the IRA ceasefire announcement of August 1994), as has the media landscape in which Sinn Fein, the PUP and UDP are now prominent features. Observation of this transitional process over two decades enables identification of key components which impact on a changing media relationship with the paramilitaries embarked on progressive involvement in the political process.

The key components which have influenced a changing media relationship in Northern Ireland include *politicization, electoral participation, electoral success,* the subsequent *holding of official positions,* the *emergence of celebrities* onto the media stage, the *halting of violence,* an *inclusive political initiative* and the *emergence of new extremists.*

The election of IRA prisoner Bobby Sands as an MP as he lay dying on hunger strike inside the Maze Prison in 1981 was a powerful demonstration of the republican movement's potential to harness electoral support. At Sinn Fein's ardfheis (annual conference) in the same year one of the party's leaders, Danny Morrison, spoke of republicans taking power "with an Armalite in one hand and a ballot paper in the other." This was the public evidence of an increasing emphasis on *politicization* and the efforts of Sinn Fein to mobilize urban and rural support behind its objectives and its strategy. Although there was nothing new in the political nature of republican objectives it did signify a broadening of the means of achieving them beyond the military arena. That politicization

created dynamics of policy debate within the movement and at least offered the media potential to broaden its coverage beyond events with which republicans were connected—acts of violence, public rallies—into examination and discussion of ideology, analysis, methods and goals. It also contributed markedly to the emergence of the peace strategy within Sinn Fein.

Electoral participation in itself confers legitimacy and adds credibility to actors who receive media attention and, in the case of Northern Ireland, a legal entitlement to due and fair coverage under the Representation of the People Act, the legislation regulating election publicity. This means, for example, that parties of any background are legally entitled to make party election broadcasts as a right on the BBC and Independent television. This provides a guarantee of coverage in a formal setting in which the parties themselves have control of what they say and how they present themselves within a given time frame.

Electoral success brings further rewards through public demonstration of the strength of support and the subsequent *holding of official positions,* the acquisition of titles (in local government, say, councillor, chairperson of committee, appointment to a health or education board, or chair of one of Northern Ireland's district councils). This results in views being quoted more widely, additional credibility via status, and at times automatic involvement in news by virtue of position.

The emergence of celebrities into the public sphere—figures who become prominent in representing a particular cause—is another feature accelerated by electoral validation. Election to public office reinforces the role of individuals as well as of parties. Another issue in the emergence of media personalities is the role of journalistic resonance, an unscientific process whereby the media repeatedly seek out and give voice to actors who bring one or more particular qualities to the news arena. These may include novelty, power of articulation, rationality, drama, charisma, availability. This may or may not be associated with electoral success but it can certainly be intensified by voter support. Organizations can influence this process themselves by giving people titles or positions with names which translate more widely and carry overtones of authority, i.e., president, leader, chairman.

The halting of violence has been pivotal, allowing governments which had previously vowed not to talk to those engaged in violence to devise an *inclusive political initiative* in which the paramilitary groups are fully represented. Within the paramilitary organizations and the parties associated with them the inclusive nature of the process justifies the halting of their campaigns and the emphasis on politics. It also provides them with the public recognition and legitimacy they have long desired. The end of the campaigns of violence has also allowed the media more freedom to reflect and explore the analysis of the parties associated with paramilitary groups. Their involvement in a formal political dialogue sponsored by the London and Dublin administrations also makes them valid media players, right on a par with other participants. It is significant also here that the political initiative is official in nature. When the leader of the main largest nationalist party in Northern Ireland, John Hume of the SDLP (Social Democratic and Labour Party), embarked on a series of talks with Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams in 1993 in what became known as the Hume-Adams initiative, he faced widespread criticism for engaging in such dialogue in the absence of an IRA ceasefire. There can be little doubt, however, that this dialogue was a decisive factor in creating the circumstances which led to the IRA ceasefire of August 1994.

The *emergence of new extremists* is a further factor now beginning to affect the media role of Sinn Fein, the PUP and the UDP. Since the IRA, UDA and UVF announced their ceasefires, new paramilitary groups have emerged—the Continuity IRA on the republican side which has been responsible for a series of bomb attacks, and the LVF on the loyalist side which has killed ordinary members of the Catholic population in random sectarian attacks. There have also been tensions within the paramilitary groups on ceasefire and violent events involving some of their members. The result has been occasions upon which Sinn Fein, the UDP and the PUP position themselves as the moderates, expressing commitment to peaceful methods, to dialogue and to agreement. For example, in response to an attempt by the Continuity IRA to bomb a bank in Londonderry, Gerry Adams issued a statement calling for an end to all paramilitary violence. "We think this very unique opportunity for peace should be consolidated and I would call on anyone engaged in armed actions, from right across the spectrum, to cease," said Adams (*Belfast Telegraph*, March 20, 1998). Loyalists formerly involved in violence have also portrayed themselves as moderates.

Following the murder of a Catholic man by the LVF in Belfast, the PUP leader David Ervine said his death had been caused by "some obscure group of head cases" (*News Letter*, January 12, 1998). As the UDP returned to the Talks after an expulsion because the paramilitary group associated with them (the UFF) had killed people, the *Irish News* (February 24, 1998) under the headline "UDP rejoins peace talks" reported: "The Ulster Democratic Party has said efforts must be redoubled inside the political talks and loyalists should not be provoked into reacting to the Portadown and Moira bombings."

Many of the elements discussed are interrelated and some are more important at particular times. They are the pivots around which media interaction has evolved with political change involving the paramilitaries in Northern Ireland over 20 years. That evolution continues.

3. Mowlam at the Maze: Media and Message

A CASE STUDY

Background Briefing

Towards the end of 1997, loyalist prisoners inside the Maze were expressing discontent with the conduct of the peace process, concern over what they saw as one-sided concessions to the IRA via the transfer of republican prisoners from England to the Republic of Ireland and the early release in the Republic of a number of IRA prisoners, and the lack of movement on resolving their own situation after a period of more than three years on ceasefire. This resulted in a vote by members of the UDA/UFF to withdraw their support for the continued presence at the Talks of the UDP, the small political party which represents their organization. In the judgment of many observers this would have been a significant and probably fatal blow to the Talks process. The sense of crisis was compounded with the killing of Billy Wright inside the prison. In retaliation the LVF, the paramilitary group which Wright led, killed a number of Catholics in gun attacks in what looked to be the beginning of a series of fatal reprisals, adding to concerns that the loyalist ceasefire as a whole could be jeopardized.

On January 6, 1998 *BBC Northern Ireland* reported:

> ". . . further fears for the loyalist ceasefire tonight after top level meetings at the Maze Prison with UFF and UDA inmates failed to convince them to support the peace process. The UDP leader Gary McMichael said the situation was worsening and talked of the process crumbling under his feet. An Ulster Unionist delegation led by David Trimble also visited the jail in an effort to persuade loyalists to give the process another chance . . . As the week has progressed the loyalist political leadership has looked more isolated and there's a growing concern that the paramilitaries are again taking control." (*BBC Newsline 6.30*, January 6, 1998)

It was after a meeting with the UDP leadership in London on January 7, 1998 that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Dr. Mo Mowlam announced her decision to enter the Maze Prison to try to persuade the UDA /UFF prisoners to renew their support for the Talks and allow the UDP to attend the next session on January 12.

An apparently coincidental yet important factor affecting media coverage in the following few days was the fact that the main news organizations in Northern Ireland had been invited to visit inside the Maze on January 8. The invitation to the media had been issued by Prison Service and the Northern Ireland Office. This visit was designed as a public relations exercise to offer reassurance that the prison was secure despite the escape of an IRA inmate and the killing of Wright in December 1997. So in between the announcement of Mowlam's decision to visit and her actual visit there was a unique situation in which the media were given wide access inside the jail to the very men the Secretary of State was to meet the next day, January 9. News organizations were therefore provided with dramatic and unusual visual and audio material directly related to the story which was unfolding. BBC Northern Ireland and Ulster Television, for instance, were able to take their cameras into the H-blocks and film and interview the five loyalist inmates due to meet Mowlam the next day. By the time of the media visit it had further emerged that Mowlam would also meet briefly with IRA prisoners. While this was reported and interviews with the IRA leader inside the prison were broadcast and published subsequently, the media focus stayed firmly on the loyalists.

Reportage and Reaction

The announcement of Mowlam's visit came as a surprise to the media in Northern Ireland. In their initial reports, all the mainstream news organizations described the decision as "unprecedented." Other adjectives commonplace in news narrative included "controversial" (BBC, *Belfast Telegraph*) and "dramatic" (*Irish News*). Her

planned visit was characterized as "last ditch" (BBC, *Irish News*), "huge risk" (*News Letter*) and as a "gamble" (BBC, *News Letter*, *Irish News*, *Belfast Telegraph*). The unusual nature of the decision and its impact on the media was noted beyond Northern Ireland. One British daily newspaper, struck by some of the wider media reaction, drew attention to the language used by the BBC's Ireland Correspondent Denis Murray in his television reports broadcast from London:

> "Mo Mowlam's decision to visit the Maze Prison to talk to convicted murderers so astonished the BBC's Ireland Editor that he described it as "staggering" in a news report. This sudden intrusion of tabloid adjectival excess into the corporation's sober and careful reporting was one way, at least, of marking a historic moment. What he meant was that this was something so far outside the tramlines of Northern Ireland's assumptions that he had run out of words with which to describe it. In a region well used to the demands of extreme language to name various forms of killing and other brutality, he was rendered inarticulate by Ms. Mowlam's political quickstep." (Independent, January 9, 1998)

There was certainly a sense of incredulity among journalists. Mowlam's move was, as the Independent put it, "far outside the tramlines" of what had been the modus operandi of previous incumbents at Stormont Castle. Mowlam herself argued that she had visited the prisoners while in Opposition and that it was necessary to take risks for peace.

In their reporting of the decision, the news narrative of all the media under discussion reflected an acknowledgment that this was an effort to save a peace process which was in trouble: "It's a last ditch effort to try to save the Talks process" (*BBC Newsline 6.30*, January 7, 1998), "The move is being seen as a last ditch effort to keep the loyalist parties in the Talks" (*Irish News*, January 8, 1998), "a last ditch bid to rescue the peace process" (*News Letter*, January 8, 1998), "make or break meeting" (*UTV Live*, January 9, 1998),[8] "a desperate bid to rescue the talks process" (*Belfast Telegraph*, January 9, 1998).

The *News Letter* (January 8, 1998) under a front page headline "GAMBLER MO" emphasized the drama and the risk. The *Belfast Telegraph* (January 9, 1998) ran a larger than usual front page headline "MY BIGGEST GAMBLE," reporting:

> "Secretary of State Mo Mowlam admitted she was taking a major political risk today as she came face-to-face with some of the province's most notorious convicted terrorists." The front page headline in the *Irish News* (January 9, 1998) said: "Mowlam puts job on line for peace."

In a number of broadcast interviews Mowlam was asked to justify her decision and answer the charge that it looked like an act of desperation. On *BBC Newsline 6.30* (January 6, 1998) she said:

> "I don't consider it desperation, I don't consider it odd. I talked to the prisoners in Opposition and what I am determined to do is make sure I take every step possible to make sure the Talks work. I'm not negotiating . . . I will say that whatever they (the prisoners) are after, and I am sure they are probably after releases, that releases will have to be addressed in an overall settlement . . . we can only get a settlement by Talks and we can only get Talks by parties like the UDP talking and I want them to understand that."

There was contrast between Mowlam's position as a high-ranking government minister and the status of the prisoners, with a particular emphasis on the notoriety of the five loyalist inmates she planned to meet. The *Belfast Telegraph* (January 8, 1998) referred to the "unprecedented step by a serving cabinet member to meet terrorists in prison." The BBC (*Newsline 6.30*, January 7, 1998) said "the unprecedented step by Dr. Mowlam will bring her face-to-face with convicted terrorists including UFF killer Michael Stone" and (*Newsline 6.30*, January 8, 1998) highlighted the fact that "the UFF men she'll be talking to are between them serving more than 100 years for serious terrorist offenses." The *Irish News* (January 9, 1998) wrote of Mowlam placing "her political credibility in the hands of some of Northern Ireland's most feared paramilitaries . . . among those she will meet are the notorious loyalist killer Michael Stone and Johnny Adair, one of the most feared leaders of the UFF." In the same edition the newspaper wrote of Mowlam's "plan to sit down this morning with some of Northern Ireland's most notorious killers." *UTV Live* (January 9, 1998) reported: "Mo Mowlam arrived early this morning at the Maze to meet some of Northern Ireland's most notorious terrorists—among those she talked to, triple killer Michael Stone and Johnny 'Mad Dog' Adair."

While news narrative displayed initial surprise, with focus on the dramatic and unusual

nature of Mowlam's move, the opinion columns of the *Belfast Telegraph* and the *News Letter* raised ethical concerns and worries over the long-term impact on democratic ideals.

The *News Letter* described the move as "a step too far," a "breath-taking step" and a "mighty risk," using its opinion column to argue:

> ". . . by giving political legitimacy to a totally unrepresentative group who have been guilty of the most heinous criminal acts, she may stand accused of dangerously by-passing the accepted standards of British democracy and justice." (*News Letter*, January 8, 1998)

The next day's opinion column, with an undertone of criticism of how the Maze is run, said:

> " The visit will most certainly massage the already inflated egos of the gunmen and bombers now enjoying the freedom of the Maze but there must be no question of the Secretary of State offering more concessions to prisoners who, although they are not legally entitled to vote, have been effectively calling the shots in a process that is aimed to bring permanent peace and stability to this Province." (*News Letter*, January 9, 1998)

Similar concerns were aired in a *Belfast Telegraph* leading article:

> "Behind all the honeyed words of their political representatives it is clear that the extremists in both sections of the community pose a threat which cannot be ignored. At present, the shots in the peace process are being called by people with little or no electoral mandate and both governments are having to pay heed to those who have flouted the law for years. If this society is to have any future, it must be based on the principle of democracy. A lasting solution will only be achieved if those participating in the negotiations adhere to a strictly political course in order to further their objectives. Dr. Mowlam may secure a short-term gain today, but the worry must be that she has demoted the cause of democracy in Northern Ireland." (*Belfast Telegraph*, January 9, 1998)

The *Belfast Telegraph* argued that the way in which the peace process had already been conducted meant that "terrorism has been sanitized to some extent." The opinion column continued:

"The most dangerous flaw in the peace process—and one which was identified at an early stage—is that some of those who are participating still appear to reserve the right to return to murder and bombing. The IRA has made no promise that its campaign of terrorism will not be renewed and indeed there is speculation that it will review its ceasefire this spring. On the loyalist side the maxim has long been 'Prepared for peace . . . ready for war . . .'"

In a separate column a *Belfast Telegraph* commentator wrote:

> "Sorry Mo, the basis for agreement is not there and the more you run to and fro, imagining that your presence can bring about miracles of reconciliation, the more you are encouraging the belief that guns speak louder than words." (*Barry White's View, Belfast Telegraph*, January 9, 1998)

In contrast, the *Irish News* opinion column (January 9, 1998) came out in support of Mowlam, praising her "exceptional courage and determination" in working towards an agreed settlement. "In pursuit of that goal," said the *Irish News*, "she is entitled to take the kind of calculated risk she is engaging in today." The same editorial attacked criticism of the decision from the DUP and sections of the Ulster Unionist Party, arguing the wider political case that the Ulster Unionist leader David Trimble was inconsistent in being willing to talk to loyalist paramilitary leaders in jail himself while refusing to engage with Sinn Fein elected representatives at Stormont.

It is noteworthy that jail visits by leaders and other representatives of political parties in Northern Ireland, including Members of Parliament such as Trimble, did not attract the kind of criticism leveled at Mowlam in and by the news media—her status as a Government Minister and Secretary of State seems to have been viewed in a different category from other politicians including other MPs.

The attitudes displayed by the three newspapers reflect divergent views in the wider population, the *Irish News* close to majority Catholic opinion while the *News Letter* and *Belfast Telegraph* are closer to Protestant opinion. A recent survey indicates that the Catholic community is more willing than the Protestant community to accept the direct involvement of paramilitaries in the process. Asked about Mowlam's decision to meet paramilitary groups in the Maze, 78 percent of Catholics said it was the right thing to do compared to 55 percent of Protestants. Asked what should happen to paramilitary prisoners if the ceasefires hold, 28 percent of Catholics said they should be made to serve their full sentences compared to 64 percent

of Protestants who held that view. Forty percent of Catholics thought paramilitary prisoners should be released early as part of a political settlement compared to 16 percent of Protestants.[9]

These indicators are consistent with the observations of one commentator in the Dublin newspaper the *Irish Times* who wrote:

> "There's also a large and fairly moderate unionist constituency which will be horrified that a Northern Secretary is prepared to deal directly with people who have committed terrible acts. Psychologically, most reasonable nationalists would accept and understand Dr. Mowlam's rationale, but reasonable unionists have a different psyche and would be chary of such acts." (Gerry Moriarty, *Irish Times,* January 8, 1998)

An *Irish Times* opinion column (January 10, 1998) was also supportive of Mowlam while acknowledging the significance of her move:

> "The Secretary of State's initiative represented a reversal of long-standing British policy on paramilitary prisoners. In recent years that position has gradually altered as the two governments embarked on an inclusive political process designed to involve paramilitary groups and their political supporters. The visit to the Maze represented public recognition by the British Government that paramilitary prisoners constitute an important element in the Northern Ireland equation that must be addressed in any overall political settlement." (*Irish Times,* January 10, 1998)

The material available to journalists covering the story was markedly affected by the media visit on January 8 and significantly affected coverage on radio, television and in newspapers on January 8 and 9. It offered fresh pictures and interviews with the paramilitary leaders in the dramatic prison setting, giving the story a visual power it would not otherwise have had. Pictures of paramilitary leaders inside jail have always had a sense of drama. On this occasion, with Mowlam preparing for a crucial visit and the public preparing for the possibility of the collapse of the Stormont Talks, the pictures were compelling.

Both the BBC and Ulster Television nightly news programs on January 8 were dominated by the pictures inside the Maze, focusing on the loyalist leaders due to meet Mowlam the next day. Viewers were able to watch the men at the center of events walking around the prison blocks in free association,[10] watching television, giving interviews to the media, and posing for photographs in front of murals celebrating their acts of violence. *UTV Live*, for instance, ran three reports, highlighting the "unprecedented access to the prison and to prisoners." Michael Stone was the prisoner given most airtime, welcoming the meeting with Mowlam, accusing some critics of hypocrisy, dismissing reports of drink, drugs and sex in the prison as "embarrassing," and praising the bravery of the daughter of one of his victims who had spoken in support of Mowlam's decision. Among the images used in the reports were a large mural depicting four masked and armed UFF members from the "2nd Battalion C Company" with the slogan "SIMPLY THE BEST" in large letters, a photographer taking pictures of four prisoners in front of the mural, a prisoner working out in a gym. At one stage we see a reporter talking to camera inside a cell saying: "This is the very cell which is occupied by Johnny Adair, the UFF leader in west Belfast. Adair's cell is decorated with the chilling celebrations of loyalist terror."

The *Belfast Telegraph* (January 9, 1998) ran a picture of Mowlam beside a separate picture of loyalist paramilitary Johnny Adair, serving 16 years for directing terrorism, posing in front of a flag showing a skull, beret and bloody knife with the slogan "Kill 'Em All . . . Let God Sort Em Out," a reference to republicans at least and possibly to the Catholic population at large.

The *News Letter* (January 9, 1998) under a sub-headline "Face-to-face with terror chiefs" published mugshot photographs of the five leaders due to meet Mowlam, with text detailing their sentences, offenses and reputations. Under a mugshot of Johnny Adair, for example, the text ran: "Adair was jailed in 1995 for 16 years for directing terrorism. Nicknamed "Mad Dog," Adair directed a four-year bloody campaign during which 40 Catholics were murdered. He has survived 10 IRA and INLA assassination bids. The *Irish News* (January 9, 1998) under a headline "The men of violence who will square up to Mowlam" also detailed the biographies of the loyalists, along with similar accounts of the background of IRA prisoners also due to meet Mowlam. The *Irish News* focused on "Milltown Cemetery grenade bomber Michael Stone . . . jailed for 30 years in 1988 for a total of six murders." In its first report on Mowlam's decision, the *Irish News* (January 8, 1998) also drew attention to Stone writing: "In a dramatic and unprecedented move, Secretary of State Mo Mowlam is to visit loyalist prisoners, including mass-murderer Michael Stone, at the Maze."

The BBC (*Newsline 6.30*, January 8, 1998) also gave biographies of the loyalists, detailing their convictions and sentences and showing footage of Stone's attack at Milltown in 1988 in which three people died. The same program showed archival footage of an attack by Stone in 1984 in which a Catholic milkman who was also a Sinn Fein member was killed. This report included an interview with the victim's daughter saying that while she felt contempt for Stone, Mowlam was right to talk to the prisoners in her effort to achieve peace. Both *BBC Newsline 6.30* and *UTV Live* featured politicians and members of the public speaking for and against Mowlam's visit. *UTV Live* (January 8 and 9, 1998) also included victims of violence speaking for and against.

Michael Stone's attack on republican mourners at Milltown cemetery had a huge impact in Northern Ireland at the time for three primary reasons: firstly because television cameras were there to capture the drama, the danger, the violence, the screams as the attack unfolded; secondly because his attack sat in a continuum of dramatic violence—it was preceded by the SAS shooting dead three unarmed IRA suspects in Gibraltar as they planned a bomb attack on a British Army band and succeeded by the killing of two British Army corporals at the funeral of one of Stone's victims, an event also captured by television cameras; thirdly because three people were killed in an attack on a funeral. The combination of these factors gave him unusual notoriety among individuals who had engaged in violence in Northern Ireland, elevating him to the status of hero among loyalists and a figure of particular revulsion to republicans. It also seemed to emphasize his illegitimacy in comparison with a Secretary of State. All the news organizations drew attention to Stone in text and in pictures. *UTV Live* broadcast a television interview with him. The BBC did not. The *Irish News*, *News Letter* and *Belfast Telegraph* published quotes from Stone.

The result of Mowlam's visit was that the prisoners changed their position. Within an hour of her leaving the jail, they voted to withdraw their objection to UDP participation in the Talks. The prisoners' statement said:

> "We have decided, despite our reservations, not to oppose the continued participation of the UDP within negotiations. This does not represent a change in our assessment of the Talks process but is, however, a recognition of our faith in the ability of the political leadership of the UDP to represent the best interests of the loyalist community despite the current flaws."[11]

The BBC (*Newsline 6.30*, January 9, 1998) reported that "Mo Mowlam's political gamble in sitting down face-to-face with UFF terrorists has paid off . . ." and, over pictures of the UDP leaders emerging from the jail with details of the prisoners' vote, "this was the moment when it was revealed the peace process had been saved. . . ." The *News Letter* (January 10, 1998) ran a front page headline "SHE DID IT!" along with a large photograph of a smiling Mowlam. But congratulations were quickly mixed with criticism as the body of the report began: "Ministers in London and Dublin were jubilant last night claiming 'Mighty Mo' had come up trumps in the biggest gamble of her political career. They were confident she had not only saved the peace talks but prevented a bloody reaction from paramilitaries by winning support from UDA/UFF prisoners for their political leaders to stay in the process. But deep cracks immediately fractured support from elected representatives both inside and outside the talks." The report went on to voice the criticisms of the Alliance Party and the DUP.

The *Belfast Telegraph* (January 10, 1998) gave prominence to praise from the British Prime Minister Tony Blair. "Mo Mowlam has achieved an enormous amount in these last few days and I think her courage and her willingness to take risks in the interests of peace have got to be warmly congratulated," said Blair. The *Irish News* (January 10, 1998) under the headline "New hope as Maze gamble pays off" included this paragraph: "The UFF inmates were said to have been impressed with Dr. Mowlam's decision to meet them and it is believed this, more than her hint at dealing with prisons issues if there was progress at Stormont, was the main factor in them reversing their decision."

Mowlam did in fact enter the prison with more than just faith in her ability to change the prisoners' minds by virtue of her willingness to meet them. She presented the prisoners with a 14-point plan which included a section on prisoners. It said one of the sub-committees of the Talks process, the "confidence building committee" was "prepared to work on an account of what would happen in respect of prisoner releases in the context of a settlement." Mowlam told reporters: "Let me make it clear there will be no significant changes to release arrangements in any other context, or for prisoners associated with a paramilitary organization actively engaged in terrorist activity." (*Belfast Telegraph*, January 10, 1998). Mowlam

further indicated that she would personally attend the next meeting of the confidence building committee, to take place on Tuesday January 13, at which prisoner issues would be discussed. Asked about the issue on *UTV Live* (January 9, 1998) Mowlam described the development as "a change of emphasis rather than a change of policy."

In their opinion columns the *News Letter* and *Belfast Telegraph* remained skeptical. The *News Letter* (January 10, 1998) said:

> "The degree of posturing by the prisoners and their political representatives on the outside before and during and after the great visitation was breathtaking in the extreme and few democrats will have gleaned reassurance from the shenanigans . . . The Stormont talks are now on course for a Monday reconvene, but now that violence is seen to work it may be difficult to keep the moderate centre constitutional parties on board after the alarming lurch to the fringes by those supposedly in charge. A political process which is only allowed to operate at the whim of those convicted of the most heinous crimes will never succeed in bringing permanent peace and stability to this province."

The *Belfast Telegraph* (January 10, 1998) voiced similar concerns:

> "With the future of the peace process hanging in the balance this weekend it is ironic that the paramilitaries should be playing such a central role. Men who have cast a dark shadow over this province are now sitting in judgment on the political negotiations and democrats anxiously await the verdict of those who have so brazenly flouted the law. The world seems to have been turned upside down . . . The paramilitaries are centre stage at present but it is vital that democrats regain the initiative."

The *Irish News* (January 10, 1998), which had supported Mowlam's initiative from the outset, offered praise and a more optimistic analysis under the heading "Full credit to Mo Mowlam":

> "She placed her credibility on the line by meeting directly with both republican and loyalist inmates, and initial indications are that her decision was fully justified . . . Dr. Mowlam would undoubtedly have taken most of the blame if the talks process had suffered further defections, so she is fully entitled to be handed the credit for yesterday's positive developments. . . . Yesterday's events did not amount to any kind of historic breakthrough but we are now at least a little closer to the goal of permanent peace. For that we should all be grateful."

While the *Irish News* was being read that morning in Belfast, Prime Minister Blair was on the telephone from Tokyo with the Irish premier Bertie Ahern, trying to regain the initiative and boost the momentum of the Talks process. The result was a "Heads of Agreement" published by the two Governments the following week, an action which appeared to give the process fresh focus.

Rules, Roles and Relationships

The picture which emerges across the board in this examination of reportage and reaction is of a media seeking to convey a sense of moment, a shifting of fault lines in the rules which govern roles and relationships in Northern Ireland.

The rules, for example, of how a Government behaves, who a Secretary of State meets and in what circumstances. In this single action, Mowlam overturned the public precepts of her predecessors as Secretary of State who had pronounced for years that they would not talk to terrorists. Here she moved beyond the policy of drawing elected representatives with paramilitary connections such as Sinn Fein or the UDP into negotiations, dealing directly with the men who had fired guns and retained the power to order others outside the jail to use their weapons. Her action appeared to convey legitimacy on those who previous governments had invested much effort in portraying as illegitimate.

In doing so, Mowlam also freed the media from some of its self-imposed restraints about interviewing convicted paramilitaries, the reasoning being that if a Cabinet Minister was prepared to talk with the prison inmates and acknowledge their role in the political process, and even arrange a media visit to see the prisoners, the latitude of the media in dealing with the paramilitary leaders expands.

Yet while taking advantage of the facility of interviewing and photographing the paramilitary leaders, there were varying degrees of discomfort within the media. For the editorial writers of the *Belfast Telegraph* and *News Letter*, as we have seen, the discomfort was significant, expressed as clear concern that democracy had been devalued. Yet only one of the 8 political parties involved in the Talks process (the Alliance Party) objected, although divisions were aired within the Ulster Unionist Party.

The other main objections came from the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and the smaller UK Unionists, both already refusing to participate in the Talks.

Through the use of mugshots, repetition of their crimes, references to their notoriety, and footage and photographs of flags and banners displaying macabre celebration of violent attacks which had resulted in random sectarian killings, the media portrayal was consistent with the negative view of paramilitarism discussed earlier, an example of the media applying their old rules, while taking advantage of new ones being created by Mowlam to gather and disseminate the views of the prisoners.

Yet while Mowlam herself was playing by new rules, the loyalists were still playing by old ones. Against the background of distrust and violence current at the time, the withdrawal of support for UDP participation in the Talks carried with it the implication that the ceasefire was in jeopardy. This assessment is reinforced by a comment from UDP spokesman David Adams following the vote which reversed the prisoners' original decision:

> "If the vote had gone the other way and the prisoners had remained firmly opposed to the process and our participation in it, that would have necessitated a re-think by the leadership of the organization (the UFF) to the process and, I suppose, ultimately the ceasefire." (*Irish News*, January 10, 1998)

In fact, the UFF was already killing Catholics in breach of its ceasefire as part of a coordinated response with the LVF to the killing of Billy Wright. This suspicion, voiced to journalists by "security sources," was already in the public domain when Mowlam went inside the jail and was, within weeks, to become a focus of political and media attention leading to the temporary expulsion of the UDP from the Talks.

Discussion

Two weeks after Mowlam's visit to the Maze the UFF admitted involvement in the series of killings of Catholics which followed the shooting of Billy Wright. While Wright's own organization, the LVF, was responsible for most of the killings, the UFF was responsible for at least three deaths. With the RUC Chief Constable blaming the UFF and journalists and politicians asking questions about whether the UDP could remain in the Talks, the UFF issued a statement:

> "The current phase of Republican aggression initiated by the INLA made a measured response unavoidable. That response has concluded . . . The UFF wishes to make it clear that it remains committed to the search for a peaceful resolution of the conflict and supports the efforts of the UDP to secure a democratically acceptable political agreement."[12]

As a result of the UFF admission the UDP withdrew from the Talks on January 26 before being formally suspended by the British and Irish Governments for a period which amounted to under a month. The UDP was back in the process on February 23.

By then the focus had turned to the IRA and Sinn Fein. The RUC Chief Constable reported that the IRA was responsible for two murders. Although the IRA denied that its ceasefire was over and Sinn Fein continued to protest that it was a separate political party, Sinn Fein was suspended from the Talks on February 20 as a penalty for the IRA killings. Sinn Fein's suspension lasted officially until March 9 but in practice the party refused to return until after a meeting with Prime Minister Blair at Downing Street later in the month. After that meeting, which brought positive comments from both sides, Adams flew to America for a White House appointment with President Clinton. UDP representatives, in common with other parties participating in the Talks, were also present at White House functions to mark St Patrick's Day.

Imposing a political penalty for paramilitary action was a difficult balancing exercise for the British and Irish Governments. Their judgment that the rules of non-violence for participation in the Talks had been broken and that there was a subsequent need to censure the UDP and Sinn Fein (the Ulster Unionists would have withdrawn if Sinn Fein had not been suspended) was weighed against the need to keep those same parties involved in the process. Hence the temporary exclusions.

In this balancing exercise and in Mowlam's visit to the Maze we witness a latitude being extended to paramilitary groups and their political associates which was only likely to be sustainable while the goal of political agreement appeared realistically achievable. The case study suggests that the transition between the arena of violence and the arena of democracy could not continue indefinitely without the disillusionment of the majority of news media in terms of narrative, framing and opinion columns coming to play a dominant role in the public sphere. While the findings of one recent survey[13] suggest the public at large takes a more utilitarian view than say the lead writers of the *Belfast*

Telegraph and *News Letter* to the direct involvement of paramilitary groups, another survey[14] points up the priority Protestants and Catholics place on the disbandment of all paramilitary groups. Seventy percent of Protestants and 67 percent of Catholics say it is essential to disband all paramilitary groups to achieve a lasting settlement while a further 11 percent and 15 percent respectively agree disbandment is *desirable*. Already low tolerance levels of paramilitary activity, I suggest, are likely to decrease in the light of the recent Agreement.

From this examination we are able to discern future implications as to how the news media will deal with the issues of *violence*, the *political process* and *prisoners* now that agreement has been reached.

Violence: With groups such as the Continuity IRA, INLA and LVF sitting outside the peace process, there is a real possibility of further violence. There is also the possibility that some of those involved in the process will view its outcome as unsatisfactory. Northern Ireland's news organizations are unlikely to be forgiving of anyone who, having turned from violence to espouse politics, returns to violence. To those who choose to pursue violence, whether or not they have participated in the Talks, the evidence indicates that the news media will readily revert to its well-practiced anti-terrorist paradigm. While violence will achieve publicity and propaganda, news organizations will attempt to deny overt legitimacy to the groups responsible.

Political process: As and when the new political institutions—the 108-seat Assembly, the North-South Ministerial Council, the British-Irish Council and the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference—come into operation, the news media will accord them full legitimacy, reinforcing their role and authority through coverage. This will serve to add a further layer of legitimacy to politicians who have made the transition from paramilitarism and who are participating in the new bodies as a result of the June 1998 election. Such legitimacy may be further reinforced by the violence of the new extremists attempting to destabilize the new structures.

Prisoners: Under the Agreement, paramilitary prisoners associated with organizations maintaining ceasefires will be released within two years. In practice, according to one official source, 70 percent of serving prisoners will be released within 14 months.[15] This issue has already generated substantial public and political debate. That debate is certain to continue and will be a subject of future media focus which will display the tension between the emotive and moral issues and the *realpolitik* approach which, against the context of an Agreement which is working, will view the early releases as a necessary evil, the price of complicity in peace.

The question of the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons is also certain to be a focus of media interest. The Agreement sets a goal of decommissioning paramilitary arms within two years under the aegis of the already established Independent International Commission on Decommissioning. The IRA has consistently stated that it will not hand in weapons. The British Government has given the Ulster Unionists a written assurance that parties associated with paramilitary groups which have not engaged in decommissioning will be prevented from participating in government.

Aside from these practical issues arising from the Agreement, Northern Ireland will continue to offer a field of study of the way in which a news media rooted in the community and itself conditioned by conflict interacts with wider political change. No one elects journalists to their public role and yet they make decisions on behalf of society as to who gets to speak, when they get to speak and how the messenger or message is framed. Apart from legal constraints, many of those decisions are independently made against a prevailing and variable notion of a correct balance between freedom and responsibility. The notion of that responsibility clearly weighs heavily in a divided and violent society. News organizations in Northern Ireland are now faced with the question of how that responsibility is to be defined in a society which may be tentatively edging towards peace.

Notes

1. The *Irish News* decided in the early 1990s to specifically drop the use of the word "terrorist," taking the view that there were differences in the types of incidents happening and that overtly labeling violent acts as "terrorist" was stereotypical. In its editorials, in common with other newspapers, the *Irish News* has been overt in its denunciation of paramilitary violence.

2. Bill Rolston, *Politics and Painting: Murals and Conflict in Northern Ireland,* London, Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1991.

3. BBC Style Guide 1993 Section 15.

4. BBC Guidelines For Factual Programs 1989 Section 80.

5. Ed Moloney "Closing Down the Airwaves: The Story of the Broadcasting Ban" in Bill Rolston, *ed.*, *The Media and Northern Ireland* (London: Macmillan, 1991).

6. David McKittrick, *Endgame*, Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1994.

7. Statement by the British Home Secretary Douglas Hurd, October 19, 1988.

8. UTV Live Afternoon Summary, January 8, 1998.

9. *Towards Referendum Day,* Coopers and Lybrand for *BBC Hearts and Minds,* February 1998.

10. The H-blocks of the Maze prison are largely run by the paramilitary organizations under their own command structure and prisoners have free association within the blocks. They are not locked inside cells, they wear their own clothes and have access to gymnasium, snooker and library facilities.

11. UDA/UFF Prisoners' Statement, January 9, 1998.

12. UFF Statement, January 23, 1998.

13. *Towards Referendum Day.*

14. *The Search for a Settlement,* Queen's University/ Rowntree Survey Report, January 1998.

15. The *Belfast Telegraph* on April 16, 1998 reported details of a letter from Prime Minister Blair's Chief of Staff Jonathan Powell to Ulster Unionist MP Ken Maginnis which gave statistics relating to an early release timetable. Examples cited were 70 percent of serving prisoners released within 14 months and 80 percent by the following year, leaving 71 prisoners who may be entitled for general release after June 2000.