

Case Study: News values

From Miller, (1993) *Official sources and primary definition in Media, Culture and Society Vol. 15 July 1993*

Note: the NIO is the Northern Ireland Office which produces official press releases and stories.

There is an important sense in which the priorities of journalists and those of the state are different. The professional imperatives of news journalism tend to make violence the main rationale for reporting Northern Ireland (Elliott, 1977; Schlesinger, 1987). Most news accounts are conflict related. A study of television news content in 1988 and 1989, for example, concluded that coverage of the Provisional Republican movement was largely about questions of violence (Henderson et al., 1990). It seems that in the early 1970s some news desks were so convinced (presumably, partly, by their own prior reporting) that Northern Ireland was synonymous with violence, that they were reluctant to print stories which gave a different view. Simon Hoggart has related his experiences on the *Guardian*:

Years ago I wrote an article about holidaying in Northern Ireland. I praised the gorgeous countryside, the friendly people, the opportunities for diving, fishing and boating and mentioned how — not surprisingly — it was wonderfully uncrowded. Sadly the Guardian, for which I then worked, refused to print it on the grounds that some things were so improbable that nobody would believe them even if they were endorsed by a team of notaries public headed by George Washington with his little axe.

(Observer Magazine, 25 February 1990)

It has often been assumed by critics of the media that the concentration on violence indicated that there was a simple 'fit' between dominant definitions of the conflict and news reports. But it is clear from some official statements that the coverage of violence is disliked and, somewhat disingenuously, blamed on the media. For example, a Northern Ireland Office publicity booklet issued for the twentieth anniversary of the redeployment of British troops in Northern Ireland, emphasizes the distortion of media images of the conflict:

Spirited resolve is the real story of Northern Ireland and its people; a community that is carving out international respect for its resilience, work ethic, enterprise and hospitality. More and more there is worldwide acceptance that this, not the media image of the masked terrorist, is the true face of Northern Ireland.

(NIO 1989: 1)

However, official sources in Northern Ireland operate a dual strategy with regard to media coverage. It is not uncommon, then, for the Northern Ireland Office, the RUC or even for officials promoting the government view on employment discrimination to emphasize the dire deeds of the IRA, thereby painting a picture of Northern Ireland

as a battle zone, where violence is endemic. Indeed, publicity material from the NIO prominently features such images in combination with an emphasis on the positive qualities of life in 'Ulster' (see Miller, 1993b). The Republican movement has similar problems. In order, at least partly, to counter 'normalization' and the 'containment' (Rolston, 1991a) of the troubles the IRA continue to plan attacks which 'expose' the inability of the state to contain their struggle. At the same time Sinn Féin spokespersons routinely complain about the fixation of journalists on the activities of the IRA. Most Sinn Féin statements, they say, are not about the actions of the IRA, yet such statements are not used by journalists (Morrison, 1989: 8—9).

Some journalists do write committed articles consciously pointing out the positive side of Northern Ireland. This is especially the case with midrange tabloid newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* and was a feature of the coverage of *Today* under the editorship of Northern Ireland-born David Montgomery (see Odling-Smee, 1989). Nevertheless, the violence remains the main rationale of covering routine events in Northern Ireland. Indeed, it is the very predominance of news values of this type which allows the implicit and explicit contrast to be drawn between routine images of Northern Ireland and the 'other side of life', or acts as a starting point for an argument about the 'true face' of Northern Ireland. Given this approach we can find a Senior Director of the Northern Ireland Industrial Development Board writing to an American business audience under the title: '*Despite Its Bad Media Image, Northern Ireland Proves To Be A Good Place To Do Business*' (Walters, 1984: 12).

But the NIO continues to promote this dual view in spite of its contradictions and the disadvantages that it brings them when journalists used to a diet of atrocity stories are less than keen on good news. One such story was the rolling out of the first of eighteen Sherpa C-23A freighter aircraft ordered by the United States Air Force from Shorts aircraft factory in Belfast on 8 August 1984. The story was announced in a press release and in co-operation with the Northern Ireland Information Service, some enthusiasm was drummed up among journalists. The BBC sent a camera crew along and filmed the impressive array of dignitaries who were present, including a Northern Ireland Minister, the US Ambassador, a clutch of US generals and the USAF band.

According to Shorts, the 'largest single contract ever received by Shorts, was won in the face of extremely stiff competition' and the order 'has resulted in a substantial intake of new employees' (Press Release, 8 August 1984). This happy little item seemed destined for the evening news that night until the IRA intervened. In County Derry a busload of Irish Northern Aid supporters were on a tour when the bus was boarded by two armed and masked members of the IRA. Cameras were present and the incident made the television news that night (BBC 1, 21.00, 8 August 1984). The story from Shorts, however, was dropped, much to the annoyance of both Shorts and the Information Service, who complained to the BBC. The point of this is not that the IRA gained favourable publicity from the appearance of the news they didn't. The BBC reporter dismissed the incident as a publicity stunt. The issue is not the way in which the 'stunt' was covered, but simply that it was covered in preference to the 'good' news

story.' It is clear that incidents like the appearance of two armed and masked IRA members contained a 'news value' that the Shorts story simply did not. It is difficult to argue from this that journalists simply recycle or transmit the 'bureaucratic propaganda' of official sources. While it is possible to show that much of British mainstream coverage (as opposed to current affairs or features) is dominated by news about 'terrorism' and the evils of the IRA, which is oriented towards the views of the powerful, at the same time, we find that those same sources are still not able to secure the prominence they would like for stories about the 'other side' of life in Northern Ireland. The 'good news' part of British strategy meets with *relatively* little success in the news media, foundering on a contradiction within the strategy of official sources and on the rock of news values. We can only explain the apparent dominance or subordination of particular views by reference to the processes involved in forming media strategies and negotiating with media organizations. This requires that we investigate the production process by examining the perspectives of sources and media personnel.

So far I have considered some difficulties for official sources in dominating the media. But such difficulties may be regarded as more or less trivial if they never have a major effect on the ability of the powerful to dominate the media. The most sociologically interesting cases are surely those where official sources lose, at least temporarily, definitional advantage and where alternative and less powerful sources are able to make serious interventions in the public sphere.

1. What is a news value?
2. List some news values which are appropriate to TV and newspapers.
3. Which perspective would suggest a fit between government opinion and news reports?
4. Go through the passage and list the main writers and their associated research findings.
5. In what way are the priorities of journalism and those of the state different according to Miller?
6. What sort of stories did news desks prefer about Northern Ireland in the 1970s?
7. What types of story did the Northern Ireland Office prefer throughout the same period?
8. What was IRA news management strategy in the same period?
9. Which newspapers will present a positive image of Northern Ireland?
10. Suggest reasons why the news media preferred the IRA bus hijack stunt to the Shorts Aircraft success story.
11. To what extent is the government successful in promoting anti-IRA material?
12. To what extent is the government successful in promoting a positive view of Northern Ireland?
13. Is there a link between the needs of the government and the needs of journalists?
14. To what extent can it be argued that the media are simply a mouth piece for the government? List arguments both for and against this view.