

TO

# News becoming measured by interests, not accuracy

ON LUNCHTIME news bulletins on October 19th last year, Gerry Adams could be heard at a press conference called to pre-empt the British Government's broadcasting ban on Sinn Fein, the UDA and other organisations supporting paramilitary violence. By early evening bulletins the sound had been removed. How have broadcasters coped with the first year of these unprecedented peace-time restrictions?

The ban requires broadcasters to refrain from broadcasting any words where the person speaking "represents or purports to represent" or their words "support, solicit or invite support" for a listed organisation. What this means in practice has been left to the broadcasters to decide, in effect giving television and radio executives a new role; that of policing a government directive.

The resulting confusion over the precise meaning of the ban was illustrated by an interview on Channel Four's "Media Show" with Derry Sinn Fein Councillor Dodie McGuinness two weeks after it came into effect. Ms McGuinness was asked about the effect of the ban on her work as a councillor. However, instead of the interview, the following words appeared on the screen: "Following legal advice, the senior management at Channel Four thought this interview to be borderline but acceptable under the new notice. However, following its own legal advice the Independent Broadcasting Authority thought it unacceptable."

The sound of the interview was removed and a narrator spoke Ms McGuinness's words. In the current atmosphere broadcasters have tended to err on the side of caution.

There is now a long list of people who are not members of listed organisations, whose views have fallen victim to this caution. They include Brighton Labour Councillor Richard Stanton, American author Margie Bernard, Bernadette McAliskey and Errol Smalley, uncle of one of the Guildford Four.

However, this is not to say that Sinn Fein cannot be heard at all on British screens. The crucial issue if we want to hear Gerry Adams is in which capacity he appears. Thus Adams has been heard speaking about local issues, such as jobs for West Belfast in his capacity as an MP, but he cannot be heard in his capacity as Sinn Fein MP for West Belfast. Thus, because he cannot be heard in any capacity speaking about

## David Miller, a researcher with the Glasgow University Media Group, examines the effects of the British broadcasting ban on Sinn Fein, which came into operation a year ago tomorrow

Wolfe Tone and the 1798 rising, he was subtitled on a Channel Four documentary "Ireland's Opportunity" in July.

The NUJ strike over the ban was called off after BBC and ITV executives gave assurances that "health warnings" would be used to indicate the effects of the ban on broadcast output although the type of health warnings was not agreed. News bulletins from South Africa have regularly been prefaced by blanket warnings that, for example, "this report . . . has been prepared under reporting restrictions imposed by the South African government".

But health warnings on Ireland have only been used when Sinn Fein has been interviewed and

detail of health warnings, or perhaps because of it, journalists have not always referred to the restrictions when Sinn Fein has appeared. One example occurred after the killing of David Brannagh by loyalists in Ardoyne, Belfast, last March. Both BBC and UTV interviewed Councillors Brian Feeney of the SDLP and Gerard McGuigan of Sinn Fein. The BBC included a warning, UTV did not.

Instead of missing out health warnings, the temptation for journalists, on tight deadlines, has been the time and referral-saving device of simply leaving Sinn Fein out. Figures compiled by Sinn Fein, and not disputed by the BBC, show a drop in the

### *The temptation for journalists on tight deadlines, has been the time and referral-saving device of simply leaving Sinn Fein out.*

they have been woven into the text of reports at the point that an interview occurs. Indeed, the confidential minutes of the BBC's fortnightly Editorial Policy Meeting (EPM), which we have seen, show that senior BBC executives have explicitly eschewed a blanket warning because "it could sound propagandist."

The same concern surfaced after BBC Northern Ireland subtitled an "Inside Ulster" interview with Danny Morrison in January this year. The BBC decided that subtitles would no longer be used on the local news because, in the words of one senior executive, "it looked so dramatic — it looked like we were seeking to make a point." This decision was endorsed at the Editorial Policy Meeting and the Controller of Editorial Policy, John Wilson, indicated his preference for it to be extended to British network news. The minutes of the meeting show that another senior executive "strongly favoured a moving, rather than a still picture . . . with a voiceover in the style of an interpreter."

Even with this attention to the

in Northern Ireland continue to vote for Sinn Fein.

The banning of the Pogues song, "Streets of Sorrow / Birmingham 6," by the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) is often quoted in order to ridicule the ban, but there is a serious issue at stake. The song proclaims the innocence of the Birmingham Six and Guildford Four and is deemed by the IBA to breach the ban because it contains "a general disagreement with the way in which the British Government responds to and the courts deal with, the terrorist threat in the UK."

When Norman Tebbit attacked the BBC's coverage of the US bombing of Libya he argued that showing footage of crying Libyan children would operate "in Libya's interests". This view, that news should be measured in terms of interests rather than accuracy, seems to have been accepted by the IBA. So for the IBA it apparently doesn't matter whether the Birmingham Six are actually innocent or guilty, what matters is whose interests are served.

There are indications that this perspective is taking hold in broadcasting. In the aftermath of the Deal bombing the BBC dispensed with their signature tune and closed their main evening news bulletin with the Marines band playing over slow motion footage of a young boy in uniform laying a wreath to the dead.

When a contributor to "Right to Reply" complained that this was not news but "pure emotionalism", the BBC responded: "The day before this item was broadcast 10 Marine bandmen had been murdered and around 20 injured. We are satisfied that the item properly reflected the feeling of many people in the aftermath of such an event." That the BBC is in the business of reflecting the perceived feelings of the nation, rather than that of reporting events is simply assumed.

Censorship is not just an imposition from above. It advances by nods and winks. The shifts and conflicts in broadcasting policy and practice over the past year should make that clear. But if the broadcasters are to keep the respect of the people then they need to declare, as the BBC did in reply to Norman Tebbit, that it is not their "function to decide whether some facts are too 'damaging' or too 'callous' to be broadcast; and if we were to take that decision we would indeed be open to the accusation of manipulating the news for political purposes."