

AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

A woman clutches a dove of peace at a 1996 Belfast vigil.  
In Northern Ireland, hopes for peace and the realities of conflict shape daily journalism.

# DIVIDED PEOPLE, DIVIDED PRESS

Interpreting the poisonous silences in a fractured society

JOHN O'FARRELL

**I**N NORTHERN IRELAND, to use the internationally accepted name for the place of which I write, it is generally assumed that journalists take sides. The place name you use spells out your allegiance: "The North of Ireland," or just

"Ireland," is commonly used by Irish nationalists or republicans who want to see the entire island consolidated into the Irish republic. "Ulster" is used by unionists or loyalists who favor the link with Britain. "Northern Ireland" itself is favored by

## John O'Farrell: Divided People, Divided Press

British commentators and politicians, while "The North" is the most commonly used term in the Republic of Ireland. More hard-line republicans call it "Occupied North-East Ireland," while loyalists reciprocate by referring to the Republic of Ireland ("The South" to northern nationalists) as "Eire," a name officially dropped in 1949. Which province do you want to live in?

We in Northern Ireland are a divided people. If the press reflects the society it reports, how do these divisions—cultural, social, religious, political, even ethnic—manifest themselves in reporting? Does a sectarian society necessarily have to have a sectarian press? If everyone is biased, is there an ideological center that can act as a fulcrum for a definition of fairness? Alternately, how far can bias go? Is it limited by the realization that the discrediting and destruction of an enemy may rebound? Is reporting of the peace process subject to self-censorship in order to maintain the process itself?

THE MEDIA THAT REPORT ON Northern Ireland can be divided into two groups: print and broadcast media within Northern Ireland, and print and broadcast media that serve news organizations based outside Northern Ireland. These two groups operate, it can be argued, by different standards of "fairness," based on their audience and governmental restrictions. For example, in the city of Belfast, there are three daily newspapers: the *News Letter*, the *Irish News* and the *Belfast Telegraph*. The *News Letter*, the oldest continuously printed English-language newspaper on Earth, takes a unionist viewpoint,

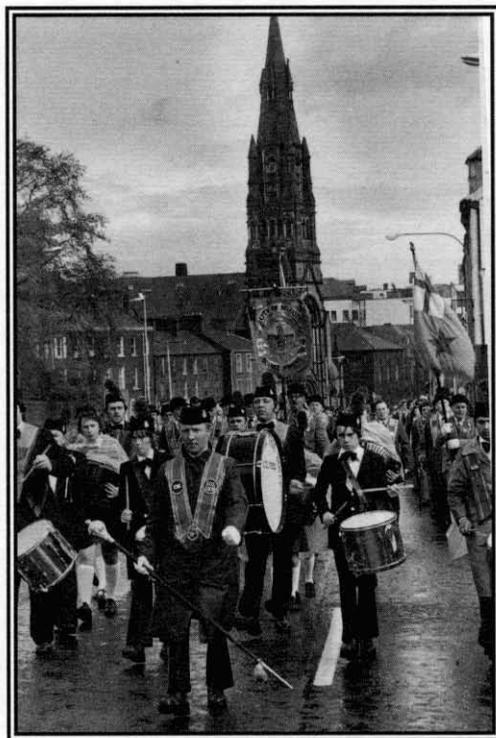
between the right wing of the Ulster Unionist Party and Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionists. It is contemptuous of loyalist paramilitaries, but its real spleen is directed at Irish nationalism in general and what it calls "Sinn Féin/IRA" in particular. It uses a house style that insists in calling the Republic "Eire," and its *taoiseach* the "Irish prime minister," emphasizing the foreignness of its island neighbor. The *Irish News* takes a nonviolent nationalist viewpoint; it is critical of IRA violence but tends to blame the unionists and the British for the woes of "The North." The *Telegraph* is an

evening paper that takes a liberal unionist viewpoint but allows regular opinion pieces from all political viewpoints, from loyalist to republican.

Northern Ireland is unusually well served by a number of local weekly newspapers supported by a loyal readership of between 10,000 to 25,000. Most decent-sized towns have at least two newspapers, whose views reflect their readership. Dungannon, a market town in County Tyrone with a roughly 50-50 unionist/nationalist population, has both a unionist and a nationalist newspaper. Larne, a staunchly unionist town, has two newspapers reflecting the two main strands of unionism—the Ulster Unionists and Democratic Unionists. These newspapers do not attempt to educate or alter the perceptions of their readers, rather they reflect their views (or prejudices).

Marshall McLuhan's aphorism about people not reading their paper but sinking into it like a warm bath is appropriate here. Broadcast media is shackled by the legal requirements to achieve "balance"—as

John O'Farrell  
is managing editor of  
*Fortnight* magazine in  
Belfast.



UPI/CORBIS-BETTMANN

The seasonal marches of the Protestant Unionists of the Orange Order, who want to keep Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom, attract divided media attention.

defined by the codes of practice of the British Broadcasting Corporation and the Independent Broadcasting Authority—and therefore outrages political operators of all hues. Nationalists accuse the BBC in particular of being run by a Masonic cabal that tends towards an Anglocentric viewpoint, while unionists point accusingly at journalists with “Irish” names (such as *Séamus* or *Mairéad*). Political parties with paramilitary connections point to a culture of self-censorship, replacing the statutory censorship that banned Sinn Féin, the Progressive Unionists and Ulster Democrats from the airways from 1988 until 1994. The recent inclusion of these three parties into accept-

able political debate on radio and television has been important for those parties obviously, but also for the wider audience, who tended to demonize them as terrorist apologists. It has also been important for journalists, who could not easily dismiss the views of these parties, particularly as recent elections have shown more than 20 percent combined support for SF, the PUP and UDP, larger than the center vote, which averages 15 percent of the electorate.

WHEN WE TURN to journalists who report for media organizations based outside Northern Ireland, different rules and agendas come into play. One of the

reasons that "the Troubles" has had a wide international audience, and therefore the consequent reason that people here have an inflated impression of the importance of our angst, is that we are white and speak English. There are 1.5 million people involved. There have been just over 3,000 fatalities. Over 29 years. That's peanuts. There are 100 violent conflicts on the boil in the New World Order. Algeria, Kosovo, Rwanda, Chiapas, East Timor or Kurdistan make us look like amateurs, with casualty lists that drown our real tragedies with the tears of millions. Northern Ireland is an important story. Its resolution will be a sign, and not just to the people living here, that the demons of ethnic nationalism can be overcome, that the reason of the Enlightenment will prevail over the superstitious sectarianism of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation. We can worry about postmodernism later.

Reporters for news organizations based outside Northern Ireland see themselves as uniquely impartial; as "outsiders" they are somehow above the fray. While their reporting is generally balanced, the editorial lines of their newspapers are anything but. With the exception of the *Daily Mirror*, whose "Troops Out" line has been blunted over recent years, every London paper has always adopted a prounion stance. The Republic's papers, with the exception of the *Sunday Independent*, take a "soft" nationalist line—somewhere between John Hume's Social Democratic and Labor Party and the Irish government—which holds that Irish unity can only happen with unionist consent.

It could be argued that the editorial lines of papers in London and Dublin are at least subconsciously affected by the political moods around them. Policies of bipartisan-

ship have operated in both capitals for the past 30 years, producing a self-conscious consensus that has deepened over the past five years as Irish "soft" nationalism and British "soft" unionism have politically merged.

The consequence is a severe disincentive to rock the boat. Questioning the peace process or its players invites accusations that one prefers a state of war. Questioning the pervasive and intrusive security state that still exists in Northern Ireland invites accusations that one is "soft" on terrorism. Indeed, distancing oneself from "terrorism" is a popular field sport. It means the bizarre spectacle of "democratic" politicians queuing up to "condemn" the latest atrocity while challenging other politicians to do likewise in a unique ritual of the virility of their constitutionality. Those who do not condemn, meaning those whose paramilitary friends have done the dirty deed, are themselves condemned for not condemning, and so it goes.

AT THIS STAGE, I should bring myself into the frame, just so my apparent bias is clear. I was born in Dublin, where I lived until four years ago. A planned stay in Belfast has become permanent, for personal as much as professional reasons. Three years ago, I became managing editor of *Fortnight*, a small independent current affairs and arts magazine founded in 1970. *Fortnight* was specifically started as a response to the Troubles and a reaction to the sectarian basis of print media in Northern Ireland.

*Fortnight* has a policy of encouraging debate by publishing the views of all political persuasions, which naturally causes reactions. It is a point of perverse pride that the magazine has been accused of being pawns

of the IRA, Ulster Volunteer Force, the Alliance Party, SDLP and British Intelligence. On the big constitutional issues, it strives toward neutrality, but on social, economic and cultural issues, it is unashamedly liberal. This means arguing for unpopular measures, such as gay rights and the extension of the abortion laws that prevail in the rest of the United Kingdom but are vetoed here by the fundamentalist Catholic and Protestant supporters of the SDLP and unionist parties.

The fact is, however, that *Fortnight* faces justified charges that it is as ghettoized as the nationalist *Irish News* or the unionist *News Letter*; its readers and contributors tend to be from a small left/liberal clique. Another unfortunate, but valid, perception is that *Fortnight* is geographically limited: People in Britain think it is Irish; Irish people in the Republic think it is northern; Northern Ireland people from rural areas or Derry think it is too Belfast; most of Belfast associate it with the square mile around Queen's University, a psychological ghetto of self-conscious liberalism.

Nevertheless, this low-circulation (4,000) journal of the native "cultural elite" has some clout among the local political class. Editing *Fortnight* has afforded me unique access to both the workings of power and the politics of the paramilitaries. The reactions I get from people are interesting: As a southerner, am I therefore a nationalist? As editor of *Fortnight*, am I a liberal? As a middle-class (nonpracticing) Roman Catholic, is my natural political home the SDLP or the Alliance Party? As a socialist, do I favor Sinn Féin or the Progres-

sive Unionists or the British Labor government? For what it's worth, I choose not to exercise my franchise here. I believe that I have a duty to my readers to strive for as little partiality as possible; therefore I cop out of making the necessary subjective choices one has to make when one contemplates voting. Furthermore, the more I learn about the people and parties that offer themselves for election, the less I want to vote for any of them.

**The people most disappointed by my journalism are those who presume that I owe them some allegiance.**

THE SDLP EPITOMIZES the middle-class Catholic chauvinism I grew up hating in the Republic. The Ulster Unionists combine a smug "born to rule" attitude with frightening sectarianism, institutionalized through their constitutional link with the Orange Order. The

Democratic Unionists are a crypto-fascist mélange of flat-earthers and cynical sectarian manipulators. Sinn Féin spout dreams of an Irish socialist utopia but exert control of their ghetto strongholds through blackballing opponents and punishment beatings. The two loyalist parties are wannabe Sinn Féins for poor Protestants. Alliance think the world owes them a living for not being as hate-ridden as the other parties. A plaque on all their houses. There are individuals within these parties who are heroically trying to alter the sclerosis that has afflicted the North's political parties, but those few good men and women tend to hide behind party lines when the going gets tough.

It follows that the people most disappointed by my journalism are those who presume that I owe them some allegiance.

(Not that John Hume or I lose sleep about that.) The fact is that whenever a politician opens his mouth into a passing microphone, no matter if it's in South Africa or South Armagh, the primary audience for his remarks are his (and it is almost always *his*) immediate supporters. Such is the parochial (not to say patriarchal) nature of politics in Northern Ireland that it is very difficult to get politicians to go on the record with any original thoughts.

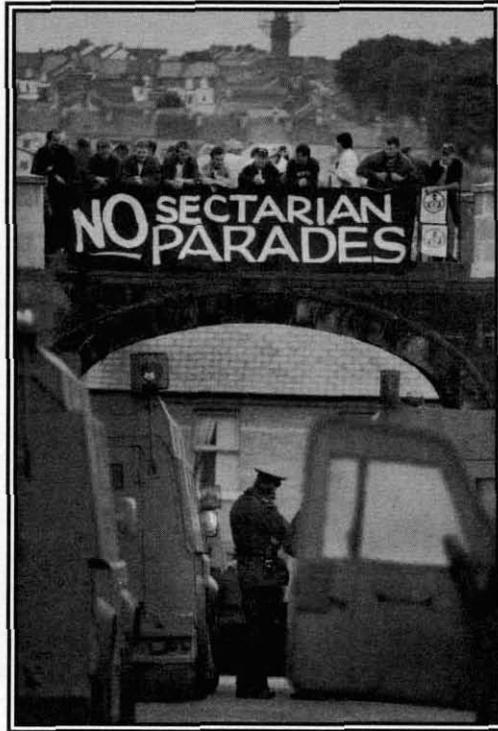
The field is left to barren sectarian clichés, where "our" side is always the innocent victim of "their" crimes. Therefore unionist spokesmen can overlook half a century of abusive rule under the effective one-party state that was the Stormont government, scrapped by the British in 1972, and point at the crimes of the IRA over three decades as the beginning and end of all of our problems. The IRA justify their crimes as a reaction to Stormont, the Royal Ulster Constabulary or 800 years of British involvement in Ireland. Loyalist paramilitaries claim their sectarian murders of Catholics are provoked by the IRA. Both the British and Irish governments wash their hands of any responsibilities, propagating the fiction that they are honest brokers in a religious-based tribal conflict, a polite fiction whereby they depoliticize the situation, absolve themselves of blame for the political vacuum that encourages demagogues and situate themselves above the squabbling tribes.

**A** PROBLEM WITH the "two tribes" analysis is that it ignores the real debate that happens continually within, as much as between, the six or seven unionist parties and the five or six nationalist political groupings. A real brain drain has

occurred, with the middle classes, business, trade unions and agricultural interests evacuating the field. The character of those attracted to politics tends towards the maverick. While "maverick" is usually a complimentary description in our individualist Western culture, the Northern Irish maverick tends towards the power hungry and ruthless end of the definition. We get the sort of man who is bursting with frustration until some level of power is reached within his party, permanently watching his back as he sharpens his knife, eyes fixed on the space between the shoulder blades of the party colleague ahead of him.

Journalists in Northern Ireland have to bear this in mind every time they get an interview or briefing from a politician here. The chances of one risking his career by sounding too magnanimous to the other side, and therefore selling out his own party or people are minimal. Everyone remembers the lesson of Bill Craig, the fastest rising star of the hard unionist right in the early 1970s until he thought twice about the violent consequences of his rhetoric and actions. When he proposed a voluntary coalition between the unionists and the constitutional nationalism of the SDLP, he fell victim to the same unionist backlash that supported him: his Westminster seat was taken by his former deputy, and he sank into obscurity and alcoholism. Among current unionist leadership, David Trimble is savagely criticized from both within his Ulster Unionists party and the second largest unionist party, the Democratic Unionists, for his participation in peace talks.

Similarly, Sinn Féin's Gerry Adams faces accusations within the republican movement, publicly from the sister of Bobby



MACBRIDE, OISIN/CORBIS-BETTMANN

Residents of the Catholic Bogside neighborhood in Derry City, Northern Ireland, oppose Orange Order marches. Protests and parades vie for media attention.

Sands, whose death on hunger strike in 1981 elevated him to the status of the movement's most potent martyr, and privately from dissident IRA men exploding bombs and shooting people.

In the final hours of the Easter 1998 negotiations in Stormont, as the British and Irish prime ministers worked for three days to reach an agreement acceptable to both sides, the spin operation from the parties and governments was extraordinary. The story shifted every two hours in a political tennis match. Reporters conveyed news to the newsmakers: For the parties in the talks, hourly bulletins and regular phone calls from journalists were the main

way of learning what "the other side" was saying.

It was a concentrated version of an old pattern in Northern Ireland that is likely to persist into the future. Politicians feed stories to journalists with an eye to how the news will play to both their own side and their adversaries. The "other side" interprets the news according to the veracity of the story, the source, the journalist and their news organization. The result is a process of communication that is intense yet wary and indirect.

This has to be borne in mind while interviewing politicians. On the record, one gets platitudes and clichés. Off the

record, one can either hear unprintable sectarian bile, or well-thought-out ideas on the future. Politicians take into account the track record of the reporter and her/his media organization. Previous bad press is long remembered. To give a personal example, UUP leader David Trimble will have nothing to do with *Fortnight* due to a disagreement with a previous editor.

My Dublin accent precludes me from safely entering loyalist areas in Belfast, where I may be seen as a hostile interloper. The telephone is much safer.

Resistance and mistrust that confront *Fortnight* have been overcome by invitations to write op-ed pieces, which we run unaltered, bearing only libel in mind. News judgments have consequences too. We thought long and hard before publishing evidence that the IRA were breaking their 1994-96 cease-fire by shooting alleged drug dealers, using the cover name Direct Action Against Drugs. A local tabloid newspaper had evidence that a prominent party leader had engaged in a string of adulterous affairs, but it succumbed to pressure from the two governments as well as the individual concerned and killed the story on the basis that it would undermine the peace talks.

People are wary whether a settlement can be reached, let alone work. That doesn't stop people from hoping that it will work. In Northern Ireland pessimism of the intellect battles optimism of the spirit; journal-

ists do not stand apart from this fight. Indeed, with all its problems and frustrations, many better journalists than I think Northern Ireland is the most interesting story around. I daily pay private tribute to the inspiring brilliance of people like David McKitterick of *The Independent* of London, Mary Holland of *The Observer*, Peter Taylor of the BBC, Kevin Cullen of *The Boston Globe*, David Sharrock of *The Guardian*, David Dunseath of BBC Radio Ulster, Deaglán De Bradún of *The Irish Times* and Eamonn McCann, Susan McKay and Ed Maloney of Dublin's *Sunday Tribune*.

Yet in covering Northern Ireland, journalists face painful dilemmas. Imagine yourself a reporter who possesses facts that, if published, could undermine politicians who might make a historic compromise with sworn enemies. Do you publish and damn the consequences? What if the consequence is the toppling of a leader who might risk leading his people to a peace settlement? What if it raises up yet another reactionary bigot who is happy to lead his faction to nowhere but the confirmation of their own worst fears and prejudices?

Those are the most pressing questions relating to "fairness" while reporting on Northern Ireland. And this is the important one: Is getting one's byline on a front page one Sunday worth bodies on the streets? It is a gray area that evades easy answers.