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# **UTV, THE NETWORK RELATIONSHIP AND REPORTING THE ‘TROUBLES’.**

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## **ABSTRACT**

UTV, formerly known as Ulster Television, has been the franchised commercial broadcaster in Northern Ireland since Hallowe’ en night, 1959. While detailed research has been carried out on the history of the BBC in Northern Ireland (Cathcart, 1984, McLoone, 1996) there has been neglect in the study of the political, social and cultural role of UTV in this period. Johnson and Turnock (2005) attempted to address the lack of attention given to the regional structure of commercial broadcasting in the UK yet fail to even mention UTV in their index. There has however been some slight discussion of UTV within the wider context of broadcasting in Northern Ireland (Butler 1995, Curtis, 1998 and Millar 1994) and Bernard Sendall and Jeremy Potter’s (1983, 1990) volumes *Independent Television in Britain* provide an invaluable source of historical information. More recently a book released for the channel’s 50th anniversary gives some insight into the channel’s working processes but remains mainly anecdotal. These studies have not acknowledged the importance of regional broadcasters, particularly in relation to Northern Ireland and have failed to sustain their research. This paper aims to address this issue through three assertions. Studies on broadcasting in Northern Ireland have tended to focus on the lack of political debate or exploration of the situation in the region as well as productions which caused controversy when aired. This has led to a large neglect of aired programme material that can be analyzed and critiqued to add a different perspective to the already vast debate on the media and Northern Ireland. Secondly, the most important relationship for UTV as an independent broadcaster was its relationship with the Independent Television Authority and network. Finally, in coping with the ‘Troubles’, UTV adopted the approach of creating a dialogue with the community and ensuring that their focus remained on local people and their stories.

## **KEYWORDS**

Regional television; Northern Ireland; Politics; Conflict.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Radio and television journalists work at all times in corporate, institutional settings. To study broadcast journalism it is therefore necessary to situate it in the context of the broadcast institutions with the state, because, invariably, it is the conditions of this dominant relationship which sets the limits within which journalists can operate. There can be no clearer instance of this general rule of thumb than the reporting of the Northern Ireland conflict since 1968 (Butler, 1995, p. 60).

This quotation from David Butler in his 1995 publication *The Trouble With Reporting Northern Ireland* is an appropriate place to start in this study of UTV and its coverage of the 'Troubles' in order to understand the reporting styles, techniques and decisions which many of UTV's journalists (and its board of directors) have taken over the years in relation to sensitive material. This paper will explore two areas. Firstly it will investigate UTV's relationship to the Independent Television Authority (hereafter ITA) and network<sup>1</sup>. Secondly, it will consider how the channel dealt with living 'in terms of politics, religion and security -in a very different world from that of any other contractor in Independent Television' (Potter, 1990, Vol. 4, p. 199).

### **The Formation of UTV**

In 1958 one of the five areas in the UK yet to be served with an Independent Television service was Northern Ireland<sup>2</sup>. Sendall (1983) notes that it was a worthwhile choice for an independent programme company as the region clearly had its own individual character and there was little chance of signal overlap from Britain. Local regional companies such as Ulster Television were created to provide authentic and local programmes. These original productions not only prompted the adoption of programme ideas by other companies but also contributed to various network productions. UTV, for instance, regularly contributed troubles material for the national news bulletins (Anderson 2009). Several studies of Northern Ireland's relationship with the media

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<sup>1</sup> The Independent Television Authority was created in 1954 to engineer a new commercial television service which could compete with the BBC. It developed a 'network' television system which would consist of a few large 'network' companies and a number of smaller regional companies to ensure the provision of local programme services. For a more detailed background to the Independent Television Authority and network see Sendall (1982, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> During the creation of the new commercial broadcasting service the word 'commercial' was dropped and exchanged with 'independent' which illustrated more explicitly that this service would be 'independent' of the BBC (Anderson, 2009). Until this point the BBC had served as the only broadcaster within the UK.

(Butler, 1995, Curtis, 1998, Miller, 1994) have suggested that there is limited recognition of the role played by regional companies in providing output for local and networked audiences. Many regional contributions have gone unnoticed or unacknowledged. A pertinent example of UTV's documentary and educational programming is the series *Understanding Northern Ireland* (1992). The first instalment, *A Violent Birth*, explored the historical background to the 'Troubles' and the series concluded with *The Problem Unresolved* -an exploration of urban renewal in Belfast. These local productions have not been critiqued or analysed in any investigative manner with studies failing to merit them with any political, social or cultural value.

When invitations for the contract of an Independent Television franchise in Northern Ireland eventually went out in the autumn of 1958 two existing contractors - Associated Re-diffusion (the network's London contractor owned by Broadcast Relay Services Ltd and Associated Newspapers) and Granada (a wholly owned subsidiary of Granada Theatres Ltd who held the network contract for the north of England) - applied along with two new indigenous applicant groups.

Even in the early stages of the process which resulted in the creation of Ulster Television it was noted by the *Belfast Evening Telegraph* that due to the political significance of a new broadcaster the Stormont government would want to be included in the process (Sendall, 1983, Vol. 2). The ITA was 'deeply conscious' of the importance that the Independent Television Act held within the environment of Northern Ireland, in particular the provision of 'due impartiality'(Sendall, 1983, Vol.2, p. 23). The ITA decided that the contract would be best served by a group with a greater understanding of the region. This logically prioritised the two indigenous applicant groups. The first of these was lead by the Duke of Abercorn (a son of the first Governor of Northern Ireland). He was supported by Sir Laurence Olivier, Betty Box, representing Beaconsfield Films and William MacQuitty, a London film producer from a well-known Ulster family, who was to be UTV's first Managing Director. The newspaper interest in this group was represented by the owners of Belfast's *News-Letter*, Henderson family p. 23).

After interviews were conducted on 4 November 1958, the Antrim-Henderson group was awarded the contract. The ITA noted that 'its statement of intent seems fuller and its membership seemed more widely representative of Northern Ireland as a whole' (quoted in Sendall, 1983, Vol. 2, p.24). With the ITA aware that it would have to ensure there would be adequate Roman Catholic representation both in the boardroom and among the shareholders of the new company, it also remarked that it had been 'favourably impressed by Lord Antrim's good intentions in this respect'

(quoted in Sendall, 1983, Vol. 2, p. 24)<sup>3</sup>. It was at this point the new company adopted the name of Ulster Television.

As UTV was considered ‘pioneering’ in many respects, the ITA recognised the need for help from experienced professionals and the company eventually signed an affiliation agreement with ABC television. However, it became apparent that the organisation was going to have serious issues with its local programming. It was decided that for the time being the company’s total production effort should be concentrated on a single magazine type programme to be transmitted at the same time each day called *Roundabout* (Sendall, 1983, Vol.2). Brum Henderson, former Managing Director and Chairman of the company explains how this decision was reached:

The origin of the show lay in the idea that even if we could not have news we could still make a contribution in current affairs. So we planned a programme which brought Ulster life and its many forms into our one small studio each night. The brief was wide, embracing the arts, business, agriculture, sport and matters of small-scale local interest as well as politics and general events, and the tone would be as relaxed and accessible as current television conventions allowed (quoted in Anderson, 2009, p. 22).

The channel went to air on schedule on Hallowe’ en night 1959. Inaugural speeches were made by Sir Lawrence Olivier and the Governor, Lord Wakehurst. There was then a live show which featured children playing Hallowe’ en games and then a tour of Northern Ireland accompanied by words and music after which UTV switched to the network which showed *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, *ITN News*, *77 Sunset Strip*, a variety programme, wrestling and a movie. Don Anderson recounts an incident that may have served to be an indicator of future problems the channel would encounter. As mentioned above, part of the evening’s local programming from the channel featured a live show of children’s Hallowe’ en games around Havelock House. After the sketch was finished the Managing Director Bill MacQuitty took a call. The caller it seemed knew the children who had appeared in the sketch and made it known that the Managing Director would ‘rue this day’s work’ because the children were catholic (Anderson, 2009, p. 53). From this incident it was clear from the outset that UTV would be forced to confront sectarian sensibilities in its programming.

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<sup>3</sup> Over the years the Independent Television Authority came to discover that the local station were so aware of their need to remain impartial and willing to ensure a balanced outlook in their programming that they themselves strongly contended some network programmes should not be aired within Northern Ireland. This was to cause tension between the company and ITA throughout the years. A major figure in these debates was UTV’s Managing Director Brum Henderson.

Sendall notes that in November 1962, shortly after the success of their educational programme *Midnight Oil*, UTV's studio facilities were improved and this made possible the provision of a larger production output. A new and more comprehensive news service was now available and *Roundabout* was replaced by *Newsview*, a Monday to Friday programme intended to combine a news bulletin with topical magazine and comment. There would also be a regular local mid afternoon bulletin (p. 31). This advancement in the company's news service was in subsequent years to prove undeniably crucial in the 'uniquely important, if unenviable role that Ulster Television would be called upon to play.....' (Sendall, 1983, Vol 2, p. 32).

The staff at UTV clearly had to ensure that the trust and respect which it had built up and engendered in its audience over the previous decade would not be destroyed as it dealt with an increasingly sensitive political conflict. The station's news and current affairs departments played a pivotal role in reporting events and bore much the responsibility in coping with this situation.

## **News and Current Affairs**

The Glasgow University Media Group states in *Bad News* that news is 'a cultural artefact; it is a sequence of socially manufactured messages, which carry many of the culturally dominant assumptions of our society' (Beharrell et al., 1976, p.1). Four 'filtering processes' are outlined which determine what eventually makes 'the news'. What the Glasgow University Media Group highlight as the most important filter is 'the cultural air we breathe, the whole ideological atmosphere of our society, which tells us that some things can be said and others had best not be said' (p.x). This filter is particularly relevant in relation to broadcasting in Northern Ireland due an acute sensitization to those 'things that can be said' and others 'that had best not be said'.

Analysing the portrayal of terrorism in popular culture Philip Schlesinger notes how crucial the news is to the public's understanding of the term:

News coverage attracts the largest audiences, and therefore is likely to predominate in forming public views of political violence. Further, the occasions on which oppositional views (as opposed to alternative ones) are aired few indeed. But they are aired, and given more room for manoeuvre than any reductionist generalisations from news alone would lead us to expect. If we want to understand television we need to take this into account

(Schlesinger, 1983, p. 69).

In addition to this it is also important to note that as well as helping to construct the public's understanding of events in the region, it was also crucial to enable the public to carry out their day to day mundane tasks. News bulletins about the 'Troubles' were 'vitaly important' for the population in Northern Ireland at the time as having this information offered the potential to save lives (Anderson, 2009, p. 194). Here it is possible to see that the news has two broad functions. Firstly, as the main source of information which the public receives on events which are occurring both nationally and internationally it is the central infrastructure for the forming of public opinion. Secondly, it works on the practical level where the public requires it as a source of information in order to be able to function within the area in which they live.

### **Politics, Media and Northern Ireland**

In a paper presented at Cambridge in 1986 Tom Kelly questions if the media should be controlled in order to avoid accusations against broadcasters of being biased. He claims that even putting aside the question of whether or not government censorship would be viable in a democracy, there is still the argument that terrorists could escalate their action to the point where they were visibly noticeable, irrespective of whether they were reported on or not. Discussing the issue Kelly concedes that the pressure is once again passed on to the broadcasters and that it should be questioned whether adopting a standard for access to the forum it provides which is desired, if not necessarily imposed, by the government would present the answer. Looking at past evidence within Northern Ireland Kelly states that there are two results of this proposed solution, both of which he argues would not be deemed acceptable in a democracy. The first is the result that both the government and perhaps more importantly the general public would become misled as to the realities of the situation. Secondly, the media would lose its credibility and fail to be objective.

Both David Miller (1994) and Liz Curtis (1998) have scrutinized the British media, looking at its representations of the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland and have found that it has failed in its task to represent a 'balanced outlook' on the situation. Curtis cites the influence which the government seemed to hold over journalists, particularly in relation to interviews with groups who were deemed to be the 'opposition' (such as the IRA) and argues that this pressure was not just forced upon the BBC:

At the same time, the ITA which had barely figured as an object of the politicians' spleen panicked autonomously. Its reaction to the attacks on the BBC –which was to become habitual as the years progressed–was to censor potentially controversial material in order to stay out of the firing line (p.7).

Continuing with her discussion of the ITA Curtis takes the example of the Granada TV programme *South of the Border* which had looked at how the troubles in Northern Ireland were affecting the rest of the Republic of Ireland. The ITA banned the programme and interestingly Curtis states that the UTV Manager Brum Henderson was a significant figure in securing the ban. He had also already made sure that only two out of five *World in Action* programmes on Northern Ireland had been shown by UTV.

Curtis notes that there were two forms of censorship occurring within the media at the time of the 'Troubles': state operated censorship, and 'voluntary' censorship regulated by the broadcasting authorities themselves. However she argues that this was not admitted to by the broadcasters who claim that the public must have a conviction that the source from which they are receiving their news is credible. Discussing the arrival of Ulster Television to Northern Ireland in 1959 Curtis asserts that this forced the BBC to become more liberal with its coverage. The restraints on the news and current affairs journalists in the BBC were quite different to those imposed in UTV and the BBC recognised that UTV had more room for political analysis. She notes that while it did receive credit for the impartiality of its coverage, UTV was accused of failing to incite any sort of debate and had to be 'nagged and cajoled at times into venturing into public affairs coverage on any important scale' (quoted in Curtis, 1998, p.21). Just as she claims the BBC did Curtis argues that UTV 'quailed' when it came to the discussion of the political issues in Northern Ireland. Further to this she claims that the 'timidity' shown by the channel was still occurring in 1980 when the company's contract went up for renewal, citing one critic who claimed 'They've tried to be neutral and ended up being nothing' (quoted in Curtis, 1998, p.22). It was also noted by the critic that over the period of the 'Troubles' UTV had not actually attempted to make a programme which would shed light on the problems within the region. Concluding the findings of her study Curtis claims that the public have been presented with a distorted image of Northern Ireland. She argues that those within the government and the media responsible for providing the public with the 'full picture' of events in Northern Ireland, were unwilling to do so than from any other view than that which the British establishment held (p. 275).

While David Butler (1995) agrees to a certain extent with the conclusions which Curtis draws, he claims that her study is ‘marred by an unscholarly, one-dimensional attitude to its subject’ (p.6) stating that she does not account for any of broadcast journalists’ reliance on ‘regular sources’ in order to maintain its credibility (p. 7). Curtis does not consider that journalists within institutions are at all times forced to ensure that the stories which they produce not only bare the truth but have plausible and trustworthy sources to back them up. She also fails to acknowledge (as do the critics which she quotes) the programme *What’s it all about?* produced by UTV shortly after the start of the civil rights marches at the end of the 1960s in which religious leaders debated the background to events at the time.

In his publication *The Trouble With Reporting Northern Ireland* David Butler attempts to analyse the problem which reporters in Northern Ireland face. Again, as with earlier studies which I have discussed, he highlights the importance of the government and its control over broadcasting institutions. For UTV however, the main relationship which it had to negotiate was not in fact with the British government but with the ITA themselves. The ITA endured direct pressure from Westminster and this no doubt was also helped by UTV’s geographical location. It would also appear that UTV maintained a dignified relationship with Stormont. Anderson (2009) maintains that the biggest impact the station had on Government was when it indirectly contributed to the fall of the Republic of Ireland’s government under Albert Reynolds after airing the *Counterpoint* programme *Suffer Little Children*, exploring child abuse in the Catholic Church in October 1994.

Butler (1995) claims that throughout the 1960s UTV kept the lead which it had gained over BBC-NI with *The Orange and the Green* (1966) documentary which he declares was an ‘upbeat assessment of contemporary politics North and South on the occasion of the 50<sup>TH</sup> anniversary of the Easter Rising’. He also maintains that the *Flashpoint* current affairs series was ‘the hardest-hitting indigenously produced programme to date’ (Butler, 1995, p.47). While Butler does recognise these production efforts by UTV he provides no further analysis or critique of them.

In his second chapter *British Television and Northern Ireland* Butler suggests a widespread belief that until the outbreak of violence with the civil rights marches in 1968 local broadcasters conspired with the Stormont and Westminster governments to keep events in Northern Ireland out of the headlines. He argues however that the situation was much more complicated. He notes that prior to October 5<sup>th</sup> 1968 there was some British interest and coverage on the recurring trouble in Northern

Ireland citing the example of the *This Week* expose of 'Paisleyism' and the BBC's *24 Hours* report of Gerrymandering in the Derry Corporation 1967. What Butler claims was wrong with these reports, and various other news items, was that they did not: 'explain or investigate the connections between the various disquieting, but apparently discrete episodes occurring in Northern Ireland in the latter half of the 1960s' (p. 59). Basically a discussion into the historic background of events was omitted. Extending his argument Butler also claims that the bulk of the media saw the Unionists as 'bigoted and antediluvian...the civil rights campaigners were in contrast bathed by the media in the white light of righteousness....the goodies versus the prod baddies' (Ed Moloney quoted in Butler, 1998, p. 61). The argument which Butler states here is clearly one with credibility. However, he does not provide any sort of informed analysis into these reports or programmes, simply discussing them in the wider context of broadcast journalism itself. A clearer focus of these historical reports and programmes would provide a unique approach to the already vast debate on broadcasting in Northern Ireland.

After October 1968 Butler claims that the volume of coverage regarding Northern Ireland escalated and by the time April of 1969 had come around 'it was evident that Northern Ireland could not be reported like Vietnam' (p. 61). Many had acknowledged that the coverage of Vietnam was primarily accountable for the disillusionment created among the American people during the war effort. He again notes, as Curtis did, that UTV for a while reduced its news coverage and opted out of screening two *World in Action* films *No Surrender* which was a 'portrait of the protestant working class and *Crack of the Whip* 'a portrait of the catholic working class' (p.61). Brum Henderson (2003) gives an insight into the decision that the channel made when it refused to air these programmes:

The makers insisted that the two programmes balanced each other, which in a strict sense they did, but we pointed out that they were to be broadcast a week apart, and so for a week only one view would have been seen, which in Ulster was a long time. It is a measure of how little our qualms were understood in London that they then offered to switch the programmes around, putting the unionist view first, in the belief that we would be happier with that. Of course we were not. Our rule was that there should be balance *within each programme*, in the sense that the views of 'both' sides should be reflected, and we said that balance *within a series* was not enough since it left times for feelings to be inflamed. (p. 136).

Along with the increase in coverage of the crisis in Northern Ireland following military intervention

in August 1969, Butler (1995) argues that there was also a shift in the ‘goodies versus prod baddies’ paradigm discussed above. He claims that this was ‘recast as a dispute between equivalent warring tribes’ (p.61). Here Butler does briefly consider a Thames Television *This Week* film *The Army in Ulster: Men in the Middle* but again his discussion omits an in-depth focus particularly with relation to local broadcasters.

His discussion continues remaining primarily broad claiming that: ‘local broadcast agencies did not lose their grip on developments right away.....their gate-keeping authority diminished in step with changes in the relationship with central government’ (p. 62). He notes that between April 1971 and March 1972 a gradual change occurred in network coverage which began to shift to the view from a ‘diehard Ulster Unionist perspective’ (p. 63). Summarising this ‘shift’ Butler claims ‘To all intents and purposes analysis of the deeper causes of the violence was barred. In journalistic terminology, the ‘who, what, where and when’ could still be reported, but the context, the ‘why’, could not’ (p.63). Both the BBC and UTV it can be argued adopted this approach. Simply reporting the facts meant that the viewers were still getting the vital information which they required but any political discussion around these facts was dealt with sensitively due to the nature of the situation within the region. UTV in particular adopted the approach of building an association with community. It focused on the people of the region instead of providing an in-depth analysis of the events occurring within it. Perhaps the best example of this is seen in the channel's use of familiar faces and focus on entertainment programming.

In 1971 UTV lost its automatic right to veto over transmission. A number of events followed in the region which included The Provisional IRA’s Bloody Friday Blitz (21.7.72) when a total of nine people were killed after twenty two bombs exploded which had been planted at various areas throughout Belfast and, Operation Motorman- an infiltration of the reinforced catholic neighbourhoods of Belfast and Derry (31.7.72). These events resulted in a White Paper proposing a devolved system of power sharing with a Council of Ireland which led to the signing of the Sunningdale Agreement in December 1973. Butler highlights these events because he claims they help him stress ‘the ignorance and inability of the British broadcast media to understand these and other developments’ (p. 65). He further asserts that ‘due to the institutional bias against analysis, since 1971 broadcast journalism has been steadily diluted to a descriptive function’ (p.65). Butler here seems to ignore the fact that UTV conducted a special Sunningdale report in which areas within the agreement such as common law enforcement and future Council of Ireland were discussed. While it may seem minute in comparison to the magnitude of the events which had

occurred, it is important to acknowledge these contributions by broadcasters as they aided the public's understanding of these events and due to the fact that they did not occur frequently probably had more of an impact than critics would care to concede. It seems that discussion around the reporting in Northern Ireland question has tended to focus on what has been censored and criticised rather than successful attempts by broadcasters to analyse and report the situation.

At the end of 1974 the Government introduced the Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act (PTA) which made membership of the IRA, the INLA and a number of loyalist groups illegal. In the period that followed all discussion which dealt with the Northern Irish question was halted. Known as 'Ulsterisation' this policy constituted the British government's attempt to limit the impact of negative images of NI (Butler, 1995). This again, proved to be a difficult task for broadcasters in the region and put strains on the practices of broadcast journalism. Not only this but they also came under attack and were accused of 'chequebook journalism' and 'irresponsibility' (Butler, 1995, p. 69). Butler quotes Christopher Dunkley who claims that reporting had been reduced to cataloguing 'bomb blasts, casualty figures and laundry lists of sectarian murders' (p.69) Summarising the understanding of local broadcasters at the end of the 1970s Butler asserts: 'In NI, by the end of 1979 there was, a willingness on the part of the broadcasters to report developments and opinions according to their political significance....and after Carrickmore and the attorney-general's ruling, an instruction that persons who may be associated with proscribed airtime. These were irreconcilable objects' (p.74). Entering into a new decade it can be argued that the 1980s was perhaps the most difficult throughout the period of the 'Troubles' beginning with the IRA hunger strikes which proved a most 'undesirable dilemma' for local broadcasters. Clearly a significant event, coverage could not be avoided. Once again however, the government continued to assert a large amount of control and broadcasters were repeatedly forced to give way to government pressure. Butler even goes as far as to say that broadcast journalism was 'reduced by degrees to a state of culpable silence' and that throughout the 1980s they were going to perform an 'increasingly meditative role' (P. 86). He does however admit that local broadcasters, including UTV 'continued to strive for fuller description of the basis of the conflict than was permissible at the national level...there was an ongoing patrician commitment to reflect the range of views, even if the parties themselves were prohibited from taking a full part' (p.87). As well as being denied access to speak with any of the Hunger Strikers or even entry into the 'H Blocks' broadcasters had to find a way still reporting the event with limited resources and scope as well as the ever present tension in the region which they were consistently dealing with (Miller 1994). As well as this in 1988 the government also brought in the broadcasting ban.

The Broadcasting Ban suppressed broadcasting of material from eleven Irish organisations, and, significantly, words spoken in support of those organisations. While loyalist parties such as the Ulster Defence Association were subsequently outlawed, Curtis and Anderson state that the main target of the ban was Sinn Féin, known to be the political wing of the IRA. Michael Beattie, a former producer and editor of *Counterpoint*, recalled issues with the broadcasting ban while making a special on the tenth anniversary of the Maze escape. As part of the programme Beattie had also interviewed Sir James Hennessy – the Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales who had carried out the inquiry into the escape. Within his report Sir James had concluded that only ‘inhuman and unacceptable methods’ could guarantee complete security and had also stated that the escape was an achievement for the republican movement. Beattie had concluded that in scrutinising the broadcasting ban, Sir James could be interpreted as speaking in support of a listed organisation. He then subsequently informed the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) that if he was going to have to get an actor, or subtitle the escapees’ words in the programme, he would do the same with Sir James. The programme was aired without any alterations (Anderson, 2009). The broadcasting ban was eventually lifted in 1994.

In his final chapter Butler looks at news and current affairs coverage and states that there is more of an obligation on current affairs to reflect a balanced sentiment. In particular when dealing with political discussion. Butler notes (as does Liz Curtis) that there were a number of documentaries shown on the network in Britain but not in Northern Ireland. Looking at UTV documentaries he again recounts how UTV management refused to air the documentary *No Surrender* (15.9.69) as it was unflattering to the loyalist working class of west Belfast ‘bluntly depicting their bile and bitterness’ and set to be aired at a controversial time with the arrival of troops from Britain (p. 144). Commenting on this censorship Butler maintains that erasing the forum that documentaries provided contributed to the lack of background understanding to the causes of the conflict. While admittedly in this chapter Butler does discuss various current affairs series such as Granada Television’s *World in Action* when it comes to discussing local production efforts he again concentrates on what has been censored and fails to investigate local programme output relating to the ‘Troubles’.

Concluding his study Butler sums up what he believes is ‘the trouble with reporting Northern Ireland’ stating that the broadcast media have failed to investigate the rationale behind ‘terrorist’ violence. However he argues that if we were to simply contend that the problem is purely related to

political violence we would hinder a sufficient understanding of the background to the conflict (p. 165). Broadcasters admittedly have failed to scrutinise the antecedents to the violence in Northern Ireland and have focused more upon positive occurrences within the region. However, they have attempted to incite debate around issues embedded in the violence and have always kept local people foremost in their discussion. Critique of these discussions are necessary to ensure that an overall picture of broadcasting is developed and does not remain focused on censorship and controversy in the reporting of these events.

### **The Troubles in Northern Ireland**

In noting the problems which local broadcasters have faced Potter reasserts the argument presented by Butler and Curtis that as part of the Independent Television network extra responsibility was imposed on UTV:

Broadcasters in Northern Ireland have always found their every utterance scrutinised for the most minute evidence or nuance of political or religious partiality. Now the local station was also held responsible for any shortcomings, real or imaginary, in ITV's network programmes (Potter, 1990, Vol. 4 p. 199).

Sendall argues that UTV brought a great deal to the ITV network particularly when it came to providing an understanding of the situation in the region. In comparison to the BBC, which was often run by an Englishman, and thought of as an 'outpost' of its London base, UTV were able to use familiar faces and strike up a trust among the local community (Anderson, 2009).

Potter notes that the difficulties which faced the channel did not go unrecognised by the ITA and an assessment of the station's programme performance in 1974 gives praise to the company claiming that their prevailing expertise was in news and current affairs. It notes that the UTV's news programme at the time *UTV Reports* was predominating viewership over its BBC equivalent and the *Gordon Burns Hour* was commended for its 'excellent in-depth studies of political and controversial issues' (quoted in Potter, 1990, Vol. 4, p. 201). The links that UTV had built with Radio Telefis Eireann in the Republic of Ireland were also acknowledged and applauded.

Despite this Potter also argues that because of the pressure put on the channel in providing their news and current affairs coverage of events in the region, other programmes' strands were

inexorably neglected. This argument is refuted by Don Anderson who claims that UTV had many successes in entertainment, children's and environmental programming. Additionally he argues that these programmes provided the public with a form of escapism.

Potter argues that that it was easier for UTV to self-censor their own material than it was to ensure this objectivity also occurred in material aired from Britain. They clearly did not want to be scrutinised in the same way as the BBC had been previously. The channel's management was fully aware that the station's reporting could incite violence and wanted to insure against any potential accusations of irresponsibility. There was a further understanding of the sensitive nature of material aired and a consciousness of upsetting minors viewing programmes with families or friends. Despite worries over the 'ethics of suppression' editorial judgements were made for what was believed the greater good (Potter, 1990, Vol.4). Brum Henderson argues that the decision of taking this approach was easy and justifiable: 'anything carried on the network would be seen in Northern Ireland and we would be the ones to bear responsibility locally for any consequences. And we had to pay for them!' (Henderson, 2003, p.133). UTV's resolution to the problem which they faced was to focus on different areas within their productions. Potter notes that the company accomplished much in its positive contribution to life in the local community, particularly through the reporting of positive stories. Despite this a number of critics did note that it had not contributed very much programming to the network (Potter, 1990). Anderson (2009) maintains that this disappointing contribution to the network was due to the fact that the coverage of the 'Troubles' was used so frequently on the network that it became difficult to convince them to take any other local material.

In 1980 UTV's programming contract was renewed after a tough battle from a competing consortium Northern Ireland Independent Television (NIITV). Potter notes that their record in a difficult area, and their ability to form an effective rapport with local viewers, were considerable factors in this decision. However, he also points out that the authority looked for improvement in children's, religious and drama programmes. They also requested an increase in local material, and asked to be consulted in advance regarding developments in the management structure.

### **UTV and the Network relationship**

Potter discusses the importance of the role that UTV had to play throughout the 1970s stating that it was a 'frontline station, operating in a war zone where the slightest misjudgement on its part could

lead to loss of life...to its viewers the threat to family, friends and property was a daily reality' (p. 206 ). However in relation to the rest of the network within the UK he again argues (as do Kelly, Butler and Curtis) that Northern Ireland was seen as an individual island and there was no clear understanding of events in the region both among the broadcasters and their viewers. As mentioned before ITV's network coverage was provided by ITN news bulletins and documentaries from various sources and by the current affairs programmes of three networked companies: *World In Action* (Granada), *This Week* (Thames) and *Weekend World* (LWT) and on a number of occasions UTV took legal advice and chose not to screen a number of their programmes.

Under an authority ruling there had to be consultation with the ITA's resident Officer for Northern Ireland and the Managing Director of UTV (Brum Henderson) over every network programme relating to Northern Ireland. Programme makers were also under a number of legal and other constraints. Both The Television Act 1964 and the Independent Broadcasting Authority Act 1973 required 'due impartiality' on matters of political controversy or relating to current public policy, and forbade the inclusion in programmes of 'anything likely to incite to crime or lead to disorder or to be offensive to public feeling' (quoted in Potter, 1990, Vol. 4, p. 207). While Potter argues that these acts 'laid no special duty on broadcasters' it did make 'any action which might aid and abet terrorists activities an offence' and he argues from this that broadcasters, as citizens, were not exempt.

Guidelines published by the ITA in 1977 stated that any proposals for a programme which was to feature any investigation or exploration of parties within Britain who advocated violence or criminal measures for the achievement of political ends must be submitted to the authority before being made. Taking into consideration the fact that in the case of news and current affairs reporting this may not always have been possible, the guidelines also stated that the authority must still be consulted to discuss whether the item could be transmitted.

Broadcasters were required to inform the public of the 'cause and course of terrorist activity' and were also obligated not to provide terrorists with a platform. These guidelines were construed by individual programme-makers, the two broadcasting authorities and the government in ways which, at times, were contrary (Potter, 1990, Vol.4, p. 208).

## **Reporting the 'Troubles' at UTV**

Rob Morrison who worked as head of news and launched *UTV Live at Six* discusses the strategy implemented when putting together the news at the channel and admits that the channel had a preoccupation with the 'Troubles':

Bread and butter issues had never really much of a look in, but looking back, I don't know if we could have done it differently. We knew that in the background waiting lists were too long, that there were high levels dental decay, that we had the highest rates of heart disease, of strokes, of diabetes, of spina bifida-too many highest rates of. We covered them, but on the periphery of our agenda and if they got into the running order at all they were doing well. We were obsessed with the 'Troubles' and finding a way out. Ordinary politics were suspended for all those years and we were reflecting that (quoted in Anderson, 2009, p. 187).

It has frequently been argued that local broadcasters have consistently failed to provide effective contextual discussion on the 'Troubles' and have been instead preoccupied with issues related to censorship and partiality. Studying historical archive reports and programmes will not only generate original debate on the already vast area of the media and Northern Ireland but will also show that there was an effort on behalf of local broadcasters to provide analyses of events while ensuring that they kept central to their discussion the local community and people.

Anderson (2009) argues that in coping with the 'Troubles' UTV ensured that as well as providing the audience with its essential news coverage it also produced softer material that the audience could use as their Friday night escape from reality. Perhaps the best example of this he claims is the *Kelly* show which 'appeared when the population was ready for what it was offering' and gave the local audience 'a taste of what every comparable city and its surroundings in Great Britain and Ireland had been enjoying for decades.....In a small but important way the *Kelly* programme belongs to the tradition that the show must go on, no matter what. The *Kelly* show subliminally kept alive for its viewers the prospect of spotlights at the end of the long dark tunnel' (p. 196-197).

Specifically pinpointing one show in particular Anderson discusses an episode of the *Kelly* show which aired on the night of Friday the 9<sup>th</sup> of February 1996. This night marked the end of the first modern IRA ceasefire of 17 months after a huge bomb exploded in the Canary Wharf area of London. Over the evening at the channel ad-hoc programmes were aired as the start of the *Kelly* show was delayed. Some felt airing the show would be inappropriate however it eventually went

ahead later than scheduled. At the time the show included ‘the coin game’ and the caller who participated in the game that night won the top prize of £25,000. Anderson claims ‘It was an extraordinary moment in the 17 year history of the *Kelly* show, encapsulating in a brief, special instant the exceptional significance of the show for a beleaguered Northern Ireland’ (p. 202). The *Kelly* show for many people in Northern Ireland offered escapism from the realities that the rest of the week brought.

Anderson also notes how UTV made several other local productions which have proved very successful including the *Hidden Heritage*, *Lesser Spotted Ulster* and the children’s programme *Romper Room*. However, it seemed that even a programme like this could not escape the political tensions in the region. He notes that towards the end of the programme’s run those involved in the production were shocked and horrified to discover that loyalist killer gangs in Belfast had adopted ‘Romper Room’ as a cover name for the practice of beating up, torturing and often murdering victims in front of an audience of associates. They used the verb ‘rompering’ to describe the process and the usage spread into everyday language during the Troubles (p. 205). Here it can be seen that even ‘lighter’ programming began to become associated with the ‘Troubles’, an issue that would suggest that all of UTV’s material can be linked, whether directly or indirectly, with the political context of this period.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion the overall aim of this paper was to address the dearth of attention given to commercial broadcasting in Northern Ireland. Three arguments have been proposed identified. The first of these denotes that studies which have looked at the media and Northern Ireland have mainly reflected on censorship and programme balance failing to take into account many reports and programmes produced by local broadcasters which could add a novel debate to the already vast discussion available in the area. Secondly, I have argued that as an independent broadcaster in Northern Ireland UTV’s most important relationship was not with either the Westminster or Stormont governments, but rather with the ITA: a relationship tinged with confrontation. Finally this paper has asserted that in coping with the ‘Troubles’ UTV adopted a strategy which ensured that as well as providing discussion and analysis around events occurring in the region they focused on the local community and people living with these events in their everyday lives. An emerging pattern in the history of UTV is the emphasis placed on the station’s relationship with the

community it served. This paper sought to begin a discussion of UTV's coverage of events associated with the 'Troubles' and investigate the station's focus on tangible effects on communities under conflict. It is clear that UTV's rich and varied history, under further analysis, will shed light not only on significant 'Troubles' related issues but also the challenges associated with news coverage of conflict more generally. This area has been under-explored and further investigation is needed if an overall picture of broadcasting and the media in Northern Ireland is to be drawn up.

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Newsview (1954-1969)

Flashpoint (1960s)

Midnight Oil (1960s)

Romper Room (1960s/70s)

UTV Reports (1969-1978)

The Gordon Burns Hour (1974)

Good Evening Ulster (1979-1987)

Counterpoint (1978-1996)

The 'Kelly' Show (1989-2005)

UTV Live at Six (1993-date)

#### **Programmes**

*The Orange and the Green* 1966

*What's it all about* 1969

*Understanding Northern Ireland* 1992

#### **Granada**

*World in Action*, "No Surrender" and "Crack of the Whip" September 1969, *South of the Border*

November 1971

#### **Thames TV**

This Week programme on *Paisleyism* 1967

This Week *The Army in Ulster: Men in the Middle* September 1969 This Week *Death on a Rock*

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#### **BBC**

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