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## #AGREEMENT20

# Towards a 'Journalism of Opposition': BBC Northern Ireland, *Hearts and Minds* and the Good Friday Agreement

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The signing of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA) is regarded as the gateway to Northern Ireland's path to a re-integrated society. However, it also presented a sizable challenge to the region's journalists. Newspaper journalism was still divided along sectarian lines, while covering the conflict had led to re-active rather than pro-active reporting. The promise of devolution meant there would eventually be constitutional politics to cover at Stormont. BBC Northern Ireland had recognised this in 1996 with the launch of *Hearts and Minds*, the first television programme devoted to politics produced for a local audience. However, by the end of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the consociational system of government at Stormont meant the Assembly was beginning to stagnate. I argue that *BBC Hearts and Minds* paved the way for a change in reporting on politics, which led to some sections of the Northern Ireland media developing a 'journalism of opposition'. This research offers a departure from much of the previous literature examining the coverage of Northern Ireland focussing as it does on the local media after the GFA. In addition, it offers a unique perspective: I was the assistant producer of *Hearts and Minds* between 2006 and 2012 when the programme ended. My involvement in the production process means I am uniquely placed to explore its significance. This research draws together my experience with a more analytical framing to draw on the work of, in particular, David Butler (1995) and situates the analysis within this context.

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The signing of the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland in 1998 was characterised by the news media as the 'happy ending' to the long-running story of the region's conflict, which they had long tired of covering. Once it was signed, for the most part the UK national and international news organisations turned away from covering Northern Ireland, while for the local media a new job had just begun. If we accept that building democracy in a post-conflict society is an on-going process that continues long after the 'peace agreement' has been signed, then analysing the media's role in this is vital. In this area, there is very little existing study, as has been pointed out by Wolfsfeld (2001), and Miller and McLaughlin (1996). Although specific academics have examined particular moments or programmes in Northern Ireland after 1998 (Fawcett, 2002; Rolston, 2007), as Rolston summarises, 'accustomed to reporting war, the broadcasters found it difficult to find imaginative ways to report peace' (Rolston, 2007: 348). This is despite the fact that Northern Ireland, unlike many post-conflict societies, has 'a professional and sophisticated broadcasting environment' (Rolston, 2007: 345). This article examines the broadcast media's role in representing the continued *operation* of the peace process in Northern Ireland, and the devolution of powers from Westminster in the decades after the Good Friday Agreement. It gives insight into how the 'peace' in Northern Ireland was represented and interrogated by the media.

In particular, this work focusses on the *local* media in Northern Ireland, as, again, this is an area that is under-represented in the existing research. Specifically, it examines the BBC Northern Ireland television programme *Hearts and Minds* (1996–2012, BBC Northern Ireland). As this was a BBC programme, this research draws on much of the excellent work done on the formation and development of BBC Northern Ireland, and its relationship with the BBC nationally and with RTÉ in the Republic of Ireland (Cathcart, 1984; Briggs, 1979; Scannell & Cardiff, 1991). However, this article offers a unique perspective as, for the second half of its 16-year run, I was the Assistant Producer of *Hearts and Minds*. Not only do I bring my own experience to bear, but I have interviewed other key members of the production team, to incorporate an understanding of practice-based decision-making. I argue

that elements of the programme, particularly the films I made for *Hearts and Minds*, alongside the work of other journalists across Northern Ireland, were examples of a newly evolving method of reporting on Northern Ireland. As Graham Spencer has noted, television journalists are 'full and active participants in contestations and dialogues about peace' (Spencer, 2004: 604). And he adds:

It is the scope of this involvement that makes their views about the pressures created by television coverage, how reporting operates as a negotiating tool, the theatrical power which television brings to politics, the communicative abilities of the respective parties, and the news media as political informants and interpreters, especially relevant. (Spencer, 2004: 604)

I argue that, in the years after the Good Friday Agreement several local programmes and journalists started to develop a specific democratic role. This role had evolved far beyond the reactive reporting on the conflict. With Stormont frozen into consociational mandatory coalition, where everyone is in power but no one is responsible, and in the absence of any effective oversight by the British or Irish governments, in large part it fell to journalists to interrogate the operation of devolution. I argue that this led to sections of the media in Northern Ireland being forced to adopt the role normally filled by a democratic opposition, developing what I am terming a 'journalism of opposition'. Taken as a whole, this represented a new way of reporting on Northern Ireland.

### **Studying the Reporting of Northern Ireland**

In 1998, David Miller wrote in the introduction to *Rethinking Northern Ireland* that 'the standard of academic, media and popular commentary on the Northern Ireland conflict remains abysmal' (Miller, 1998: xix). While this is harsh, it is true that among the academics who have studied the media's coverage over time there is little consensus. Research carried out in the thick of the troubles has understandably focussed on censorship; and how the British government and the military used the broadcast media for propaganda purposes (Curtis, 1984; Miller, 1994; Rolston & Miller, 1996).

However, much of this work conflates the reporting by local, national and international media. It ascribes no agency to the news media studied, and characterises journalists as adopting without question the British government's interpretation of the 'story' of Northern Ireland as the 'struggle against terrorism' or an 'anti-terrorist paradigm' (McLaughlin & Miller, 1996: 117). There is plenty of evidence to support this analysis of the national and international coverage, but it demonstrates a failure to make any distinction between reports constructed for a UK national audience, inevitably requiring summarisation of the situation, and those produced by local journalists for a local audience. It also tends to conflate newspaper reporting with that by the broadcast media, failing to highlight the additional freedom the press in the UK has always had to use political opinion to frame reporting.

With hindsight, and extensive access to BBC papers, Robert Savage (2015) has contextualised these works and given due prominence to the broadcast journalists, particularly those in Belfast, who were often at the forefront of the battle of wills with the government; and sometimes the London-based leadership of the BBC, over the coverage of Northern Ireland. This was particularly evident in 1988, when the security forces shot dead three unarmed IRA personnel on Gibraltar and brought the broadcasters into direct conflict with the UK Conservative government. Although the Thames Television documentary *Death On The Rock* is often cited, as Savage notes, the BBC Northern Ireland programme *Spotlight* had also investigated the incident, 'and produced a programme that challenged the version of events presented by the government' (Savage, 2015: 260). The then Foreign Secretary Sir Geoffrey Howe intervened to try to prevent *Spotlight* from being broadcast and eventually it was agreed that it would be shown only in Northern Ireland, despite the protests of the reporter Alex Thomson.

The Conservative government, led by Margaret Thatcher, then introduced the broadcasting ban on interviewing members of Sinn Féin. Again, it was a former staff member at BBC Northern Ireland who found a way around this decree, which was in direct opposition to the BBC's own impartiality guidelines. Richard Ayre had reported in Belfast and moved to work in BBC editorial policy in London in 1993. He recalls 'I read and reread the Government's regulations to look for a way out – and found

one. It was the actual voices that were banned – not what they said or how they said it' (Ayre, n. dat.). Consequently, the ingenious system of using actors to voice up the words of Sinn Féin interviewees was devised, essentially allowing the entirety of the BBC to 'push back against the Thatcher government's ham-fisted efforts to control the narrative of "the Troubles" by silencing elected, if unpalatable, voices' (Savage, 2015: 264).

Northern Ireland's infamously divided society has always posed an almost intractable problem for the BBC (Butler, 1995; McLoone, 1996, 1991). David Butler has explored the paradox that faced the BBC in Northern Ireland. If the model laid down for the BBC by its founder John Reith, and particularly the broadcaster's role in post-WWII Britain, was about projecting an 'integrative, centralising vision of "national unity"' or "consensus broadcasting" where did that leave broadcasting in Northern Ireland, where "twoness", rather than "oneness" defined political and cultural life' (Butler, 1996: 133)? If broadcasting was only permitted to reflect a balance of agreed views, that meant excluding 'subversive' voices, voices like those of the paramilitaries or Sinn Féin.

By 1977, this challenge was recognised to the point that a policy shift was needed. Richard Francis, the Controller of BBC Northern Ireland from 1972–80, spoke to Chatham House on the challenges of broadcasting in a divided society (Butler, 1991: 100), stating that '[t]he BBC's ... responsibility lies as much in reflecting the significant voices of the people, including subversives, as in sustaining institutions of democracy not wholly accepted' (Francis, 1977). The development of this policy led to what Butler has described as a state of 'balanced sectarianism' in broadcasting in Northern Ireland, leading to 'dissensus broadcasting' (1995: 73). He argues that by the 1970s, 'the local broadcast media were in the process of evolving an alternative, more adequate, means of representing the atypical conditions of political and civil life in Northern Ireland' (Butler, 1995: 74). In this respect, he also recognises the role that broadcast journalists in Northern Ireland had in developing a method of covering the conflict that went far beyond merely reporting the British government line. But Butler has also highlighted the unavoidable challenge that 'balanced sectarianism' presents to reporting peace. If 'dissensus broadcasting' means 'there was no

centre ground (and that the production of consent was not feasible)' (Butler, 1995: 73), we see how trying to represent society *after* the peace agreement needed new methods of reporting and broadcasting. Research has shown that in the run up to the Good Friday Agreement, when the UK and Irish governments were fully behind the peace process, the 'anti-terrorism' narrative was transformed into the 'propaganda of peace' and fed to the media to help integrate Northern Ireland into global capitalism (McLaughlin & Baker, 2010: 12). This was accepted at face value by some, but by the time of the official launch of the Assembly in 2007, I argue that journalism in Northern Ireland was evolving. Not only was BBC *Hearts and Minds* a vehicle for this evolution, but the films I made for the programme between 2007 and 2012 developed this further.

### **BBC *Hearts and Minds***

*Hearts and Minds*, 'the liveliest and most appealing political series ever to have been made in Northern Ireland' (Bardon, 2000: 51), was launched in 1996. From its inception, it began to challenge traditional ways of reporting in Northern Ireland. This was due in part to innovations in its production, holding the 'attention of the viewer by an ingenious mix of items and styles' (Bardon, 2000: 51) and its irreverent tone. The name *Hearts and Minds* reflects a concept associated with both the British Empire and the idea of relating to 'occupied' peoples in ways other than militarily, what is now known as 'soft power' (Miller, 2012). It was chosen by Anna Carragher, then Head of Broadcasting for BBC Northern Ireland. In terms of the programme, the name posed the suggestion that engaging with politics is not just about the intellect, but also about the emotions. The 28-minute programme was composed of segments, was predominantly studio-based, and was generally pre-recorded on the day of transmission. Although the format developed over time, broadly speaking there were two long-form in-studio eight to 12-minute interviews or discussions, hosted by the journalist and presenter Noel Thompson; the 'If You Ask Me' segment, which invited local commentators, reflecting a range of political views, to write and deliver to camera a three-minute piece, illustrated by the cartoonist Ian Knox; a six minute film; and the end sequence, a film of a taxi driver taking Noel Thompson home, with

an audio commentary, recorded each week by the comedian Tim McGarry. The programme was broadcast weekly on a Thursday evening on BBC Northern Ireland: first on BBC 2, with a later rerun on BBC 1. It also went out on the BBC's Parliament Channel. Official BBC data on audience reception only exists from 2002 onwards (BBC NI, n.d.) and shows that at that time the combined weekly reach of the programme's two broadcasts on BBC NI 1 and 2 ranged from 40,000 to 67,000. There is no mention of the BBC Parliament broadcast viewing figures. However, peak figures were recorded for specific programmes, for example on October 10, 2002, at the time of the fourth suspension of the Stormont Assembly, the programme reached 118,000 viewers (BBC NI, n.d.). This demonstrates the role *Hearts and Minds* played in the public sphere, and I will elaborate on this point further.

When it was launched in the spring of 1996, *Hearts and Minds* was the first and only television programme made in Northern Ireland covering politics. Neither BBC Northern Ireland nor the commercial broadcaster Ulster Television (now UTV) had produced a politics programme on television, although the Radio Ulster programme, *Inside Politics*, produced weekly by BBC journalist Deirdre Devlin, had become an established forum for discussions around politics. It was a febrile time in Northern Ireland. The IRA and some loyalist paramilitary groups had agreed to ceasefires in 1994. According to Brian Rowan, then the BBC NI Security Correspondent, 'the two ceasefires have already outstretched most people's expectations ... things that were totally unthinkable a year ago are now taken for granted' (Rowan, 1995: 162). The media landscape was also starting to reflect these changes. At BBC Northern Ireland, the longstanding television news programme *Inside Ulster* was re-launched as *BBC Newsline* (Bardon, 2000: 49), and a post was advertised to produce a new politics programme on television. That programme was to be *Hearts and Minds*. Deirdre Devlin got the job:

We knew that programmes were used as tick-tack between people who wouldn't speak to each other... that was the time that you knew your programme counted. So that's the way I went into *Hearts and Minds*, to make the programme count and punch above its weight. [I thought] this is a



programme, that's ... the only thing that's around for TV. Let's make it the most important vehicle on the airwaves, for political debate. I never received a piece of paper or was never told "this must be a programme for a new dawn", but everyone knew that things had changed completely, and that we were in a different phase of the political, of the evolving political process. So the programme became that. (Deirdre Devlin qtd Paul, 2015a)

In academic terms, that meant making the programme a centrally important part of Northern Ireland's 'public sphere' (Outhwaite, 1994). The political scientist Brian McNair defines the public sphere as 'the communicative institutions of a society, through which facts and opinions circulate, and by means of which a common stock of knowledge is built up as the basis for collective political action' (McNair, 1995: 20). Mick Fealty, the media commentator and founder of the political blogging site *Sluggie O'Toole*, suggests that the additional innovation of *Hearts and Minds* was that it offered the 'imaginative space' to examine politics effectively:

It wasn't the voting system alone (that made Greek democracy viable), it was Greek theatre, it was the invention of tragedy and comedy and the ability to laugh and probe at the tragedy of the decisions that had to be made by the representatives of the people. And if you don't have that imaginative space away from the machinery of politics, then democracy is in danger of slipping out, out underneath the door and out of our lives. And so, I think *Hearts and Minds* did that very effectively and it is a real shame that it's not around anymore. (Mick Fealty qtd Paul, 2016)

This space was both literal and metaphorical, in that the additional time given to the interviews and, in particular, the film segment allowed for a more in-depth analysis of the subject matter. However, it was also evident in the thought processes that went into the production of the whole programme, and particularly the film segment.

In Northern Ireland in 1996, seeing politicians from opposing sides of the political divide sitting in a studio together was innovative, and on February 9 that year,

*Hearts and Minds* did just that. The programme recorded the first studio interview on British television with both a unionist and a republican politician, when Noel Thompson interviewed Ken Maginnis of the Ulster Unionist Party and Mitchel McLaughlin of Sinn Féin. It was front page news in Northern Ireland: 'All the newspaper sellers had the headline saying, "historic meeting on TV airwaves"' (Deirdre Devlin qtd Paul, 2015a). But that was also the day of the bombing of Canary Wharf in London, which ended the IRA ceasefire, changing not just that night's programme on BBC NI, but the whole political landscape:

It was such a profound shock that this had happened, and I was thinking "my programme!" The ground-breaking *Hearts and Minds* that didn't go out. It did go out the next week, in a shortened form, but actually, the world had changed between that Friday and the next Friday. (Deirdre Devlin qtd Paul, 2015a)

This demonstrated the continuing tensions between violence and democratic politics that characterised society in Northern Ireland, but, also showed how, from its inception, *Hearts and Minds* was an integral part of that society.

Two years later, as the negotiations led up to the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, again, *Hearts and Minds* was at the centre of the coverage, actually breaking the news of the agreement. On Thursday April 9, 1998, the programme went on air at 7pm, planning to be extended to an hour. But the negotiations were at such a pitch that in the end, *Hearts and Minds* did not come off air until 2am. Staff returned to work at 7.30am on Good Friday and the programme was back on air at 11am:

The political correspondent Stephen Grimason... got the copy of the agreement, and that was a BBC Northern Ireland major scoop, we got that first. He was able to read from (it) ... waving it in the air and saying, "I have it in my hand", and we stayed on air then. That was a day that no one will ever forget, because we had a feeling that we were part of history. (Deirdre Devlin qtd Paul, 2015a)

The coverage, which won BBC Northern Ireland a Royal Television Society award, also impacted on *Hearts and Minds*, as the programme 'became hugely popular, both externally and within the BBC, it was held up as a model, throughout the BBC, as a programme that could be copied, or could be taken as a serious contender' (Deirdre Devlin qtd Paul, 2015a). *Hearts and Minds* was moved to a permanent broadcast slot on Thursday and given a rerun so that it featured on both BBC's 1 and 2. This scheduling reflected the growing recognition that Thursday night was the time to reach audiences interested in politics, and reinforced that *Hearts and Minds* was a central part of the political debate in Northern Ireland.

The studio-based interviews, carried out by journalist and presenter Noel Thompson, were a renowned section of the programme. This was partly because the programme format allowed for longer, more in-depth interviews, but also due to Noel Thompson's robust interviewing style. These parts of the programme allowed him to challenge the party representatives who appeared. However, while this appealed to many viewers, it has also been identified as one of the facets of political reporting that is off-putting for the audience. James Fallows has accused political journalism of engaging in 'hyperadversarialism', where political debate is reduced to a game of survival of the fittest between politicians (Fallows, 1997: 31). In addition, this also highlights the gender imbalance often found in political programmes. Producer Mary Kelly told me:

I used to think if you could get a package of a programme that allowed bits of everything, so if you switched on, and you saw two, invariably males, arguing, but you knew there was something else coming up that you were interested in, that you would stay with it. (Mary Kelly qtd Paul, 2015b)

The film segment was a key part of that 'package'. It enabled the programme to go outside the studio and away from the gladiatorial interviews between one or more (invariably male) politicians and a (male) presenter. McNair proposes that the public manifestation of the political process in a democracy reaches people as a media product. These products are the result of a set of journalistic codes and practices, but are also shaped by politicians and their professional communication advisors, meaning

the 'accounts of political reality provided by the media are complex constructions embodying the communicative work of both groups' (McNair, 1999: 1). Within *Hearts and Minds*, the film segment also had a role in *rejecting* the 'communicative work' of politicians and professional advisors. The films were rarely inspired by party press releases, more often taking their subject matter from society and demonstrating the ways in which people were living their lives, not the ways in which the political parties told us they were living. They allowed the audience to hear from new and 'other' voices. The films were often based around the work of the civic society, academics, NGO staff, campaigners for pressure groups, groups which had evidence and research material to back up their observations. In the language of peace journalism, this 'cut across familiar narratives by raising unexpected questions' (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005: xix). Occasionally films were used to 'set-up' a studio debate, allowing the programme to present their findings to the political parties, and then question them on policy. The films challenged the perception that things were the way they were in Northern Ireland because that was the way they had always been.

Although I did not join the programme until 2006, even then there were still barriers to break. At that time, broadcasting was transitioning from the old media model of presenting the audience with a product, but offering little opportunity for them to speedily participate or respond. According to Beckett, '[o]ld Media was responsive only in terms of sales, viewing figures, and advertising' (Becket, 2011: 48). Prior to the introduction of BBC's online watch again platform iPlayer there was no way of viewing *Hearts and Minds* if the original broadcast (or its repeat) was missed. There was also no forum for the audience to communicate with the production team other than by contacting the BBC complaints phone line, or by writing a letter, meaning 'secondary contact was highly limited' (Becket, 2011: 48). But at the same time, the internet was allowing an alternative media landscape to develop in Northern Ireland; Although now no longer available, satirical news websites like *The Portadown News* had been entertaining journalists. In addition, arenas like the political blogging site *Sluggie O'Toole* were offering a platform in Northern Ireland; not just for different political views and arguments, but also for those who wanted to comment on what 'old media' programmes, like *Hearts and Minds*, were doing.

The 'e-revolution' was a way of challenging not just traditional politics, but also traditional broadcasting.

In May 2009, I made a film about two initiatives to try to engage young people with local politics using new media: *R8 Your Politician*, a website set up by two students, which allowed people to monitor how active their politician was (now only available on Facebook);<sup>1</sup> and Political Innovation Camp at Queen's University, a *Sluggie O'Toole* day of political debate bringing bloggers and 'traditional' journalists together (BBC Northern Ireland, 2009a). There was a developing symbiosis going on here: a film about how 'new media' was growing audiences for political content that was only available to view at defined times and on specific channels on an 'old media' programme, broadcast in a specific programme slot. However, this collaboration actually led to *Hearts and Minds* challenging that situation. The programme continued to develop a working relationship with *Sluggie O'Toole* to the point where the site would rip and upload the programme after it had been broadcast, allowing people to view it when they chose to, and to comment. This opened a whole new audience: those who were online, and often younger than the traditional viewers. However, Mick Fealty says this collaboration was about more than just broadening the audience, it was also about recognising that television coverage of politics was part of the historical record:

I think this thing about moving something from the ephemeral to the tangible means that actually it's accessible over time, and for me, that was part of the value that we were adding .... for me, some of the videos that Pete Baker (from *Sluggie O'Toole*) was able to put on YouTube say in 2006–7, really become part of a valuable historical record, so that when Martin McGuinness says something today, we can go back and look at it and say "Well, what did he say in 2007?" (Mick Fealty qtd Paul, 2016)

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://www.facebook.com/R8-Your-Politician-NIreland-119436871400424/timeline/> (Last accessed 5 April 2016).

Eventually, the BBC, which does not allow its content to be featured on third party sites, stopped this collaboration after receiving complaints. This was a complicated situation: copyright law often applied to some of the material in the films. The BBC's editorial policy on the reuse of material states that it must be used 'for purposes that maintain the integrity of the material and the BBC' (BBC, 2017); and this *was* the case in terms of how it was used on *Slugger O'Toole*. This is evidence of how the traditional broadcasters were still working out how to adjust to the new media landscape: *Hearts and Minds* was ahead of the curve.

In 2009, I was the first member of a BBC Northern Ireland programme team to establish the use of social media as part of the output. I set up and ran the Twitter account @BBCHeartsnMinds again under the radar of BBC policy at the time, which had not yet ratified its use. In March 2009 I made a film about how Barack Obama had used Twitter to great advantage in that year's presidential elections (BBC Northern Ireland, 2009b). The film is unintentionally hilarious when viewed now, for the way in which I demonstrate and explain this 'new' way of communicating, now an essential part of life for many people. At the time, however, Twitter *was* revolutionary. We now know that powerful elites have developed their own use and manipulation of Twitter, with forty per cent of tweets generated by robots and ten per cent of Twitter users driving ninety per cent of the content (Fenton, 2015). However, in 2009, as I was making a film explaining how the platform was being used so effectively in political campaigning, it was also clear to me how well it could be used to further enhance our programme's role as part of the public sphere. Here was a spontaneous and unedited public platform allowing viewers to interact with the programme producers and each other. It allowed them to connect and create a community around the programme, but this was achievable without joining a fan club. As people with Twitter accounts at that time were predominantly younger, the conversations could reflect different and new views; meanwhile the international nature of Twitter meant viewers in the Republic, and from the Irish diaspora in the UK and the USA could also contribute. The Twitter account was discontinued when the programme finished, but, due to the nature of the online platform, remains accessible. It now stands as a

memorial to the programme and the responses to the decision to de-commission it; and allows another way of understanding the audience's reaction to and interaction with the programme.

### **A Still Divided Society**

By the time I joined *Hearts and Minds* in 2006, Northern Ireland was regarded as a 'post-conflict society', but it appeared to be no less divided than prior to the Good Friday Agreement. This impacted on how society was represented in the media, a particular issue for those working for the public service broadcaster. As Butler states, 'defining the terms of reference is a fundamental feature of the Northern Ireland problem. The absence of agreed (or enforceable) definitions (verbal, political, ontological) is at the core of the conflict' (Butler, 1995: 2). Was it the job of BBC *Hearts and Minds* to challenge that lack of agreement? Certainly, I felt it was my job in the film segment not to take at face value what the political parties told us about the willingness of people to live or work together. I felt it was important to communicate that these were political parties whose very existence depended on there *being* divisions in society.

The films I made had several roles, but I argue that most significant were those that stepped back and took the overview, often returning over years, to key issues for society in Northern Ireland: how Northern Ireland was dealing with its past; the effectiveness of politics and democracy in Northern Ireland and their relationship to devolution; and whether the problems associated with a divided society were being addressed. Although 'decisions about what to report, and how to report it, are commonly disguised as natural and obvious ... usually the public pronouncements, comings and goings of political leaders in particular, and "officialdom" in general' (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005: xvii), these films often featured the voices of 'other' members of society, people with disabilities, members of the LGBT community, or the ethnic or immigrant communities in Northern Ireland. They were a way of holding the Assembly to account, examining alternatives to the official line, and as such, with hindsight, reflect many of the values of peace journalism. As Lynch and McGoldrick identify, 'subjects officialdom does not care to discuss, facts and perspectives omitted

or suppressed from official discourses and representations, tend to go missing from the news, even when they are vital to understanding what is going on and why' (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005: xvii).

The lack of progress in removing Belfast's walls and interface barriers was one such issue. In 2007, I made a film following the news that a new 'peacewall' was to be put up following sectarian violence near an integrated school in North Belfast (BBC Northern Ireland, 2007a). It featured Belfast's most depressing barrier, the wall that divides Alexandra Park in North Belfast. In 2010, I made a film about a North Belfast community group that had moved to open a low-level security gate across a side-road in their area (BBC Northern Ireland, 2010). The film followed their attempts to negotiate with two different Stormont ministries and revealed a Kafkaesque picture of a government proclaiming its commitment to removing the symbols of division yet failing to even effectively communicate with itself on its own policy. In 2011, I followed this with 'Walls', a film that showed the celebrations as the wall across Alexandra Park had a gate (open during daylight hours) fitted. Simultaneously, however, some thirteen years after the Good Friday Agreement, a new housing project in North Belfast was being constructed with a substantial brick wall encircling it, demonstrating that new housing was being built with division already in mind. The film also featured a North Belfast man who had been among the builders contracted to erect the walls in the 1980s: in 2011 he was running walking tours of his work, highlighting the worrying sense that the barriers built as a 'temporary' measure in response to the violence were now a permanent part of the infrastructure of Belfast (BBC Northern Ireland, 2011a). In representing Northern Ireland's divided society, the walls and barriers that litter many of its towns and cities have always been a potent symbol. For those living alongside them, they can be both a comfort and a source of stress. The idea that they can simply be removed now the 'conflict' is over is naive in the extreme; and yet ignoring their existence allows the very landscape to continue to reflect division. Returning to the issue repeatedly over the years enabled *Hearts and Minds* to continue to put pressure on the authorities to address one of the fundamental issues of the Troubles. It also allowed the programme to demonstrate ways of addressing those issues, by showing how residents were taking control themselves in tackling the division.



This was all related to the other issue I returned to in several films – the inability of the Assembly to agree a *policy* on dealing with Northern Ireland's divided society. In 2009, I made 'Shared Future' (BBC Northern Ireland, 2009c), which showed life in the integrated community of the Springfarm Estate in Antrim, where unionists, nationalists and immigrant communities lived together peacefully thanks to hard work by the community. It contrasted this with the stalemate at Stormont over agreement on the Cohesion, Sharing and Integration document (Devenport, 2010). In 2012 I made a short film, designed to set up a studio discussion on the issue, which set out a history of the various government documents devised to address divisions (BBC Northern Ireland, 2012). But the lack of a strategy, and therefore the policy and funding to deal with the legacy of division, had also featured in previous films, looking at mixed housing in 'Girdwood Barracks' (BBC Northern Ireland, 2008) and the growing attacks on members of the 'new' communities in Northern Ireland in 'Racism' (BBC Northern Ireland, 2009d). I was conflicted about this film, which featured a (white) community worker, who was offering his own version of diversity training to local schools, where the pupils were also predominantly white. However, I felt this problematic situation was further evidence of the log-jam in policy that the Executive's failure to agree on a strategy had created, and yet another example of the way *Hearts and Minds* was almost being forced into the position of adopting a 'journalism of opposition'.

In broadcast terms, the film segment functioned as a way of taking the *programme* out of the studio, but what was its significance in the post-conflict society of Northern Ireland? The Good Friday Agreement put in place a consociational model of government which operates at Stormont. This model required a mandatory coalition; members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) agreed to share power. Depending on how many seats a party had, it could choose which ministries it would like to control. This meant there was no structure for an opposition at Stormont.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In 2016, the SDLP and UUP opted to leave the Executive and form an opposition. This became possible after MLA John McCallister tabled legislation in 2015 that became the vehicle for the creation of an official opposition at Stormont.

Consociational theory was developed by the Dutch political scientist Arend Lijphart in the 1960s, in response to the view that the fragmentation of a society posed a challenge to achieving stable and democratic political rule (van Schendelen, 1985: 144). Basing his theory on the Dutch model of politics, Lijphart argued that a stable government *was* possible. In relation to Northern Ireland, much has been written about the effectiveness or otherwise of the consociational system of government. Lijphart himself considered it 'theoretically possible but unworkable in Northern Ireland'; and proposed that London and Dublin should impose the division of Northern Ireland into two (or more) homogeneous societies (Van Schendelen, 1985: 151), although he was analysing the Northern Ireland of the 1970s. Describing themselves as 'obviously revisionist consociationalists', Brendan O'Leary and John McGarry (2006: 45) have argued that it *can* work in Northern Ireland, complaining that: '[a]nti-consociationalism, implicit or overt, has formed a staple political diet for many in Northern Ireland, a diet we believe to be as bad for local public health as the "Ulster fry"'. They point out that 'despite local past and present hostility towards consociational principles', Northern Ireland has had an agreement based on those principles since 1998 (McGarry & O'Leary, 2006: 46).

I believed it was important to try to explain consociationalism to our audience, despite the challenge of 'translating' political theory into television; and outline how the theory was being applied to the new political system. In the autumn of 2007, I travelled to the Netherlands and Belgium to make two films about the history of consociationalism (BBC Northern Ireland, 2007b, 2007c). The news peg for the films was the political stalemate in Belgium at that time, where a consociational model was also in operation between the French speaking Walloons and Dutch speaking Flemish. At the time of filming it had been five months since the elections in Belgium, and yet politicians from the two main communities still hadn't agreed to form a power-sharing government, with speculation was growing that the country would split. I made two films – one about the situation in Belgium and one about the history of consociationalism. The Northern Ireland Assembly had only recently begun to operate: these films were a way of explaining the political system behind it and highlighted some of the complications attached to such a system. I argue that

these films, by interrogating the system, demonstrate a move away from a media stance that accepted, without question, the narrative that a devolved Assembly was a positive, regardless of how it was operating.

This was to develop further. While the consociational system allows for two opposing communities to share power, many believe that in practice the two largest parties – the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin – shared it *out*. They were held to divide power between themselves by taking key decisions in private meetings between ministers rather than debating them openly in the Assembly. By 2011, the films in *Hearts and Minds* were addressing the serious frustrations at the way the Stormont Assembly was operating. In 'Political Stalemate' Sam McBride, the Political Correspondent at the *News Letter*, the unionist-leaning newspaper, says: 'the Assembly is almost surplus to requirements. Anything serious that happens in the Executive, happens behind closed doors, happens between the parties' (BBC Northern Ireland, 2011b). This was a recurring theme and led to growing calls for an official opposition to interrogate the work of the Assembly (Gordon, 2013; McBride, 2016). In 2016, the independent unionist John McCallister introduced the Assembly and Executive Reform Bill. This legislation provided for an official opposition to be created at Stormont.

## Conclusion

The literature analysing the broadcast media's coverage of the Northern Ireland conflict up to the Good Friday Agreement has identified several themes, although, as I have pointed out, this often conflates local, national and international reporting. I have built on this by examining the work of local journalists in the period *after* the Good Friday Agreement, and specifically between 2007 and 2012. During this time, several key journalists in Northern Ireland, a place Mick Fealty has described as 'a consequence-free political zone' (Mick Fealty qtd Paul, 2016), were actively scrutinising the operation of devolution and the effectiveness of the consociational system. I argue that the consociational model of government, and the lack of regulation and intervention by Westminster or Dublin, meant that these journalists were the only group carrying out that scrutiny. This led to sections of the media in Northern Ireland adopting the role usually associated with a democratic opposition, developing a

'journalism of opposition'. The significance of this work went beyond that of simply scrutinising the operation of devolution. This was evidenced by the dialogue which developed between politicians and the media. Leading Sinn Féin and DUP politicians have often openly criticised the media, and particularly BBC Northern Ireland. In 2012, as the region saw a series of significant job losses, the then First Minister and DUP leader Peter Robinson used a speech at an Assembly Business Trust event to lambast economists, commentators and BBC Northern Ireland for their 'relentlessly negative' portrayal of the NI economy (Meban, 2012). He argued that 'negative coverage of the economy by the media leads to negative impacts on the economy'. He continued, without irony to state that the media have a duty to provide the full facts'. In 2014, Mandy McAuley's two *Spotlight* programmes on MLAs' expenses (BBC, 2014), uncovered so many anomalies that the Police Service of Northern Ireland launched an investigation and Sir Alistair Graham, the former chairman of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, said it appeared to him there was a 'real danger' that 'bogus organisations' were channelling public money to political parties. In response, Sinn Féin's Francie Molloy described *Spotlight* as 'a rubbish of a programme [sic] (qtd. in BBC Northern Ireland, 2014a); whilst Arlene Foster of the DUP said it was 'typical of the parasitical nature' of the BBC (BBC Northern Ireland, 2014b). This type of response, I believe, demonstrated how the parties which dominated the Executive table regarded the media, and how in turn sections of the media found themselves in the role which should have been fulfilled by an opposition. However, further research is needed as to whether this was only relevant at this specific point in Northern Ireland's history, and what effect it had.

In addition to *Hearts and Minds*, the BBC Northern Ireland investigative programme *Spotlight* has often turned its glare on politics, exemplified by programmes on Iris and Peter Robinson in 2010 and 2011. In 2017, the sustained and excellent journalism around the failure of the Assembly to deal with the scandal surrounding the Renewable Heat Initiative, which at the time of writing looks set to cost the taxpayer £400 million, was a key factor in the moves which resulted in the collapse of the Assembly. This was instigated by *Spotlight* (Spackman, 2016); and was continued by the Stephen Nolan show on BBC Radio Ulster, and political editor Sam McBride at

the Unionist *News Letter* (McBride, 2017). The continued coverage of this story has laid bare the defects of the system of government at Stormont, though this work began long before the RHI scandal. In addition to journalists at the main newspapers in Northern Ireland, *The Detail* website has developed a sizable body of work analysing how Northern Ireland works. The manner in which journalism across Northern Ireland evolved after the Good Friday Agreement is an area that needs greater and more in-depth research. However, in many ways, *Hearts and Minds* stands alone as a microcosm of that development.

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### Competing Interests

From 1996 until 2012, I was employed by the BBC as a Broadcast Journalist. From 2006 until 2012, I was the Assistant Producer of *Hearts and Minds*, the BBC Northern Ireland programme.

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