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Shifting securities in Northern Ireland

'Terror' and 'the Troubles' in global media and local memory

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ABSTRACT   Drawing on interviews conducted between September 2004 and April 2006, this article examines the interaction between perceptions of security generated within Northern Ireland and those shaped by the international media concerning 'global terrorism' post 9/11. It offers insights into a society where security concerns are shifting from large-scale political violence to the consequences of social separation and paramilitary-related criminality. It argues that the local conflict provides frames which shape attitudes to the media (typologically and sceptically), and that Northern Irish society sheds light on the effects of long-term exposure to heightened security concerns and transnational media.

KEYWORDS   *framing, identity, media, Northern Ireland, public sphere, religion, risk society, security, social memory, stereotyping*

Introduction

This article examines perceptions of security in Northern Ireland in the context of the confluence of discourses stemming from 'the Troubles' (1968–94) and their aftermath, and new security-related discourses generated in the wake of the 'War on Terror' following the attacks of 11 September 2001, the contentious invasion and occupation of Iraq, and the attacks on London on 7 July 2005 (7/7). This multilayered production process is examined through the lens of semi-structured interviews conducted over an 18-month period from September 2004 to April 2006 among a sample of 10 from across Northern Ireland (six Protestant, four Catholic), and five from Dublin and the border counties of the Republic of Ireland (four Catholic, one Protestant). Pseudonyms have been used to protect the participants' anonymity.

In the context of a project on the multilingual news consumption of racialized minorities (predominantly Muslim, 65%) in the mainland of the

United Kingdom, a white Northern Irish-focused sample is of interest for several reasons. Northern Ireland can offer insights into the long-term social effects of heightened security concern; also, it has long been a site of politicized religious identities and competing and contested national identities, as well as national and 'quasi-national' media systems. Media produced in Britain, the Republic of Ireland and within Northern Ireland itself are widely received and read across Northern Ireland. Bairner uses the term 'quasi-national' for Northern Ireland-specific media, suggesting that 'the people of Northern Ireland have greater access to media output, in all its forms, than any other group either in mainland Britain or the Republic of Ireland' (1996: 174). This comment preceded the widespread dissemination of multilingual news media via digital and satellite television and the internet: given this increased access for diverse ethnic and linguistic groups across the UK, Bairner's point probably does not hold today. However, Northern Ireland may still offer a unique opportunity, within the UK, to research long-term exposure to transnational and multi-source media outputs, whether in terms of the interpretation of, and attitudes towards, news sources, the perceived legitimacy of government policies, or the fragmentation of the public sphere, as audiences tend to select sources which confirm their existing views.

Given the new prominence of religious, and specifically Muslim, identity in post-9/11 media discourses, Northern Ireland provides a long-term case study of the politicization of religious identity, and of arguments over the boundaries between religion and politics in relation to the production or amelioration of conflict (Brewer, 2004; Merryman, 2005; Mitchell, 2005). Northern Ireland also provides distinctive insights into the interaction between the media and other powerful sources of social memory. Media-focused sources tend to emphasize the centrality of the media in shaping contemporary perceptions of news (Cottle, 2006), whereas these interviews testify to the persistent vitality of local communities of interpretation which exert an independent influence on social memory, and powerfully shape the manner of consumption of mass media.

This article argues that the participants' perceptions of security are shaped by discourses circulating at three main levels:

1. local community networks and structures, principally transmitted face-to-face and by word of mouth (churches, neighbourhood networks, Orange lodges i.e. loyalist associations,[1] paramilitary organizations);
2. local and regional (quasi-national), Northern Ireland-based print and electronic media; and
3. British and Irish media (mostly print and electronic) which circulate new discourses on international security in the wake of 9/11, impacting on Northern Ireland residents both directly through their consumption of these media and indirectly through international diaspora networks.

There is a dialectical relationship between these levels of discourse. The Northern Irish conflict provides frames which shape attitudes to the

media, as well as points of comparison, while international events (especially the 'War on Terror') also impact on attitudes to the situation in Northern Ireland. Thus some believe that the arrival of terrorism on American shores with the 9/11 attacks has changed US perceptions of the viability of 'armed struggle' in Northern Ireland, making it more difficult for armed groups to claim legitimacy. As Susan put it:

> The twin towers bombing changed things politically, because romanticism in America about terrorism had persisted until then – people were prepared to turn a blind eye to a couple of thousand people here dying, but the twin towers brought terrorism home, and made it much more difficult for terrorist groups here.

This does not mean that such groups have 'gone away'. Ongoing paramilitary activities, and experiences of threat and violence, despite the ceasefires, are significant for perceptions of security.

Context

The media in Northern Ireland

In 1971, at the height of the Troubles, a group of Ulster loyalists wrote to *The News Letter*, the main organ of unionist opinion (and indeed the oldest surviving newspaper in the UK, first published in 1737), in 'protest against the gross irresponsibility of the BBC and ITV in the reporting of day to day troubles in Northern Ireland'. They complained:

> No time or expense is spared in the interviewing of the gunman … Yet hundreds of Protestant families are without homes, having been evicted at the point of the gun, loyalist women and their children are living in fear, business premises have been burned and looted, and little of this side of the story is told. (quoted in Cathcart, 1984: 22)

This illustrates the longstanding and controversial nature of the media's relation to events in Northern Ireland. Since the start of the Troubles in 1968 there have been accusations of media bias from both nationalist and unionist sides, with some unionist opinion seeing the British media as giving sympathetic coverage to the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA), while nationalists argued that British media acted 'as channels for the dissemination of government propaganda' (Bairner, 1996: 175).

Notoriously, the Irish and British governments attempted to deny 'terrorists' 'the oxygen of publicity' by banning the voices of members of named 'terrorist' organizations (including Sinn Fein, the Republican political party) from broadcast media. These bans (between 1972 and 1994, and 1988 and 1994 respectively) must be among the least effective attempts at censorship in media history, since they were repeatedly circumvented by having actors read the words of politicians. This history has produced widespread scepticism towards media sources in Northern Ireland, and sensitivity to attempts to manipulate the media for propaganda purposes.

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The television stations of Britain (BBC, ITV) and the Irish Republic (RTE) are widely, if patchily, available across Northern Ireland. Several participants complained that RTE was unavailable in predominantly Protestant areas, although the reasons for this are unclear. British and Irish Republic radio stations are widely available, as are stations broadcasting from within Northern Ireland, including BBC Northern Ireland, Belfast Community Radio, Cool FM, Downtown Radio and the Irish language station Radio na Gaeltachta (Bairner, 1996). Newspapers from England and the Republic are widely sold, as are Scottish newspapers in Protestant areas. Three daily newspapers are produced within and circulated across Northern Ireland: *The News Letter*, *The Irish News* (founded 1855, and mainly serving the nationalist community) and *The Belfast Telegraph* (founded 1870, and with a wide cross-community circulation in spite of its unionist origins). The first two are considered a significant factor in reproducing 'sectarian attitudes' and 'the politics of division' (Bairner, 1996: 178).

Several theories have been proposed concerning media influence on the course of the conflict. Some argue that the conflict has been aggravated by manipulation of the media: on the one hand by the Irish and especially British governments (more than 100 television programmes about Northern Ireland were banned, censored or delayed as a result of British government policy between 1968 and 1993; Bairner, 1996), or on the other hand by terrorist groups (Bairner, 1996). An alternative view is that the external media have had little impact, but a significant role may be attributed to the local and quasi-national media in stoking sectarian fires on both sides. Most work has focused on the analysis of media content rather than audience or reader interpretation. The present study aims to make a modest contribution to filling that gap. The overall impression from the interviews is that media reports, especially by British, Irish and official channels of information (e.g. police statistics, government reports), and word of mouth reports by the participants, are widely divergent. The latter suggest a far higher level of insecurity due to ongoing intimidation and violence, and failure or absence of policing and other forms of state control.

Conflict and division in Northern Ireland since the Belfast Agreement 1998

In spite of the reduction in large-scale political violence and demilitarization (with the once-ubiquitous British Army largely confined to barracks), Northern Ireland remains a highly divided society, and some divisions even appear to be deepening. In 2005, 95 percent of schooling occurred in separate Catholic or Protestant schools (McKernon, 2006). In 2004, 35 to 40 percent of people lived in 'entirely segregated' neighbourhoods, while 80 percent lived in streets where one or other group comprised 80 percent or more of the population (Hewstone et al., 2005). Most or all of their friends are Catholic, say 75 percent of Catholics; among Protestants, the equivalent is 55 percent (Hewstone et al., 2005). Sport, leisure, shopping and

cultural facilities are pursued largely or used predominantly by one community or the other. The voluntary sector is organized mostly on an integrated, cross-community basis (66%, according to Millward Brown Ulster, 2006), but delivery of services is often on a single community basis, limiting face-to-face encounter: only 22 percent of those who claimed to do voluntary work which involved helping others said that they did so regularly on a cross-community basis. Crucially for community relations, as one study comments, 'much contact is superficially courteous, but does not challenge stereotypes' (Hewstone et al., 2005: 273–4). Such stereotypes are fed by long memories which are renewed each year, in particular during the 'marching season' (climaxing on 12 July, when Protestants commemorate the 1690 Battle of the Boyne). Dorothy, an elderly Catholic, recalled:

> On a summer evening, I was very young, and I was in bed early … They have a horrible ominous sound, the Lambeg drums, a really sinister, horrible sound. And from a very early age I remember they used to march down in front of the Catholic church, and stand there, and beat the drums.

Violence and intimidation remains a problem. Large bombs and frequent shootings may hopefully be a thing of the past, but paramilitary organizations remain in operation and some are active in extortion, drug-dealing and other forms of criminality. Effective policing remains highly problematic at a local level, as several participants testify.

Religion, identity and conflict

Obviously, religion is associated with the conflict in Northern Ireland, but the nature of this involvement is contested. In the scholarly literature, assertions that religion 'really' has nothing to do with the conflict have become rare, although they persist in the press, including the religious press (Merryman, 2005). The view that religion merely represents or coincides with ethnic and political identities has been displaced by a view of religion as playing an active part in constructing social differences, social identities and political ideologies. These all play a significant part in perpetuating social divisions (e.g. on Catholicism, Mitchell, 2005; on Protestantism, Mitchell, 2003; on militant Protestantism, Southern, 2005). In spite of declining belief and religious participation among mainstream Protestants (in fact a modest decline from a much higher level than in other parts of the UK; Brewer, 2004), religion continues to play important social and political roles in Northern Ireland (Brewer, 2004). The Catholic Church is important in education, and both main traditions are active in social welfare, community development and cultural life. This includes peace and reconciliation movements and ecumenical activities which contest divisions, which are significant for some participants (see the following section). Religion remains a central determinant of political identification: in 1998, 75 percent of Protestants identified as unionists and 1 percent as nationalists; 61 percent of Catholics as nationalist and 1 percent

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as unionist, showing very low political identification across religious traditions (Brewer, 2004).

Interviews

Sample

The sample ($N = 15$) reflects a mixture of urban ($N = 9$) and rural ($N = 6$) backgrounds. The gender balance was 10 women to five men (age range 24–85, median = 45). Their occupations included electrician, psychologist, librarian, teacher, archivist, businessperson, administrative assistant, university chaplain and Franciscan friar. The participants were recruited through several routes, but mostly through the author's role as lecturer at Trinity College Dublin's Belfast Centre for Reconciliation Studies from October 2004 to September 2005. Some were recruited through the centre's outreach programme, 'Communities of Reconciliation', which supports small mixed groups of Catholic and Protestants across Northern Ireland and border counties in the Republic to form and develop study, discussion and support groups. Another source was via talks on Islam that the author presented in community centres in Protestant areas of North Belfast. A third was an evening adult education course in conflict resolution in Dublin.

This recruitment base would be expected to bias the sample towards individuals with liberal attitudes; but this is not necessarily the case, as both the preliminary conversations and subsequent interviews confirmed. Motivation for participation in community relations activities is complex, and may include a desire to represent one's community: for example, following the experience of becoming a victim of violence, or the relative of such a victim. Hence there may be no correlation with liberal attitudes.

Interview topics

The interview schedule followed a similar design to the mainland British interviews, addressing topics related to the UK's involvement in Iraq, the 7/7 attacks, and most recently the controversy surrounding satirical cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad. But other subjects concerning the peace process in Northern Ireland were also introduced, including the stalling of talks between the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Fein in Autumn 2004 (over the issue of photographic evidence of weapons decommissioning), the Northern Bank raid, the McCartney murder and its aftermath, specific issues involved in UK elections in Northern Ireland, perceptions of security associated with the marching season, and the strange coexistence of increased prosperity, political polarization and criminality.

Media use: plural or divided publics?

Most of the participants had access to terrestrial broadcast sources and newspapers from both the Republic and the UK, but patterns of usage

differed widely. A Catholic participant, living on the Falls Road in West Belfast (95% Catholic), and a volunteer visitor to Republican prisoners in high security jails, only listened to and watched radio and TV from the Republic, and only read *The Irish Times* (the most popular newspaper among the nationalist community in the North). Another participant, a Protestant born in Dublin but now living in a loyalist area of north Belfast, where it is not possible to receive RTE, only listens to and views UK-based TV and radio. Other participants, however, showed eclectic patterns of media use, drawing on a range of sources and exercising selective judgement in relation to each. The sample demonstrates the potential for an increasing range of media sources both to shrink the public sphere by allowing consumers to select their sources to filter out dissonant messages, and to extend it by giving a wider range of people access to a wider range of sources.

Results

Sceptical and intersecting schemas

As Bairner (1996) argues, the Troubles have provided a sceptical frame, or schema, for considering the veracity of both government and media sources – a scepticism arguably deepened by the faltering political process since the Good Friday Agreement 1998. The sample certainly provides evidence of this scepticism towards the motivation for, and execution of, the campaign in Iraq. The following statement by Elisabeth, an elderly Protestant respondent, refers initially to Geoff Hoon, then defence minister:

> He seemed to me wholly incompetent, you know. I mean, if you go to war you don't want any feeble kind of leader. He didn't strike me as having any real authority, and also Blair becoming shifty. I haven't liked New Labour but I thought Blair was very able and competent and everything else, but the war changed my opinion of Blair and I wouldn't vote for him under any circumstances. And I think a lot of people think that, particularly the women.

Such scepticism does not seem to require a Northern Irish context, but another participant made the link explicit. Note that these Protestant participants might be expected to be more supportive of the British government's stance, and indeed here, Malcolm states that he was initially disposed to support the invasion. However:

> I guess I don't find our PM [prime minister] a man that I can trust. His lies and deception with regard to the Northern Ireland situation, with regard to the agreement and all that, y'know, the five handwritten pledges that he had given, that he would stand by them, I should have been more discerning when it came to the Iraq War, but I wasn't. It was a war against terrorism, it was fairly soon after 9/11, and there were a lot of things playing in my own mind that led me to think this probably was the right thing to do. But I feel something of a heel at having believed the rhetoric of our PM. And I hope I don't fall for his lies and deception again.

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Some Protestant participants (e.g. Malcolm, Andrew) spontaneously expressed suspicion of the media in general as biased against them, a view which receives some support in the literature (Parkinson, 1998), as well as in informal conversations with the author during the fieldwork period. For example, in one conversation a Protestant associate alleged in outraged tones that not a single political editor working for the BBC in Northern Ireland is Protestant, 'not a single one'. Another conversation yielded a story that unionist politicians and spokesmen reportedly carry a stopwatch into media interviews, and complain bitterly and publicly if their allotted time is 'underrepresented'.

A further comment by Malcolm evinces both scepticism towards the British Government (especially Tony Blair), born out a sense of betrayal of unionist hopes in Northern Ireland, and a tendency to support state-sanctioned force. Here he comments on the shooting of Brazilian Charles de Menenzes, mistaken for a suicide bomber:

> When the Met Police actually got that guy and took him out. There was initially a sense of relief. And I thought, 'Well done, boys.' Because this guy – well this is what Ian Blair had said – I don't know if he has any connection to the other Blair, but it could well be because they have both told lies.

Perceptions of threat associated with paramilitary violence and locally-produced discourses of terrorism interact with new discourses on transnational terror in diverse ways. Some of the participants saw little direct threat to them arising out of 9/11, while others felt that the media-presented threat of global Islamic terror had influenced their perceptions. Angela reported her initial relief on observing that an abandoned vehicle in her street did not have local UK or Irish number plates (fearing that it could be a car bomb); but that relief turned to fear when Arabic writing was seen on a sticker in the car's window. Another (Andrew), expressed concern that IRA weapons could fall into 'Islamic fundamentalist' hands: this made agreement on paramilitary weapons decommissioning all the more pressing. Global events are viewed through the lens of local experience, and perceptions of an 'Islamic terrorist threat' are mediated through a social memory which includes a longstanding association of the Republicans with the Palestinian cause, and which has seen both Israeli flags flown in loyalist areas and Palestinian flags in nationalist areas. In this way, local situations provide 'types' which are then transposed onto international contexts.

The interviews provide a distinct Irish inflection on perceptions of American influence in the region and across the world, and distinctive perspectives on perceptions of security connected to immigration. Both north and south have experienced an increase in racist violence against immigrants in recent years (Police Service of Northern Ireland, 2006). As Andrew put it: 'We're developing a new line in racial hatred.' Some evidence from the sample suggests that 9/11 and especially 7/7 have

exacerbated this problem. Here, Malcolm describes his feelings on passing through London in July 2005, shortly after the 7/7 bombings:

> So what was going through my mind at that time is – because we have allowed so many Islamic people into the UK, how many of them, you know, were involved in this … Islamic fundamentalism? How many potential terrorists are there out there? And because their own lives aren't precious to themselves, the lives of ours weren't precious to them either. So they could blow themselves to smithereens, you know, without any compunction whatsoever … Because these guys that did this … were in the main 'coloured' guys from the Asian community, it almost made me suspicious of anybody that came from that community. You know, we were flying over to, we were flying over to England, you know, a couple of times that summer – towards the end of July … And when you saw anybody from an Asian background – people who were easily identified as Asians – you said, 'Well, they're probably Muslims,' and you wonder. Well, I, really I wonder. These guys are getting on to the same plane as us. What if?

Perhaps not surprisingly, northern Protestants also showed a greater sympathy for the dilemmas facing security forces in Iraq, and tended to volunteer this perspective unprompted, in contrast to Catholic participants both north and south. Malcolm is a self-identified victim of violence, who works for a Protestant victim's group in rural County Tyrone. He commented:

> The soldiers were just humans, the soldiers had seen dreadful things … and I think for them payback day had come when they arrested these Iraqi insurgents, and they wanted probably to put them through something they had experienced … And it doesn't give me any pleasure whatsoever, but I can understand, given they had terrorized their own people for so many years, and had terrorized the American forces, they were receiving some of that sort of payback treatment. How that pans out from an ethical point of view, again is another question, but I can understand why it was done, even if I don't approve of what was done.

Although this was a very small sample so that it is not possible to generalize with any confidence, patterns of response, especially where marked, may be taken as possible indications of wider trends. Responses to government anti-terrorist legislation again followed a similar pattern to initial support for the war in Iraq, although one Protestant respondent (Elisabeth) was very strongly opposed to what she saw as any erosion of civil liberties. Southern respondents (e.g. Clare, Maria) described an ambivalence in the Irish press's attitude towards Tony Blair: on the one hand supportive and even admiring, but on the other hand, critical of a tendency towards military adventurism. They perceived Irish television as tending to cover the humanitarian aspects of international conflicts more thoroughly than the British press, which was seen to have more of a focus on power politics.

Government actions: conspiracies and incompetence

Several Protestant participants – Malcolm, Andrew and Angela – held an apparently contradictory view of the British Government and security forces as both all-knowing and at the same time incompetent. Andrew, a Protestant electrician and parish worker from East Belfast, said that he thought that the security forces had information about who had committed certain crimes, but refused to act on it for political reasons. Yet at other points he indicated that he thought that surveillance measures were more for show than effect:

> Someone can walk through security looking scruffy and they're bound to be picked up, but you can walk through with your briefcase and suit and a bomb in your bag and no one'll stop you.

Malcolm perceived a conspiracy between the British and Irish governments to suppress evidence of continuing IRA activity, yet at other points he also argued that the governments 'hadn't a clue' what the 'terrorists' were up to, and that the terrorists were 'far too clever for them'. This ambivalence provides a ready frame within which the events of the security story leading up to the Iraq invasion could be interpreted. The 'dodgy dossier' of February 2003 (the notorious UK government briefing which claimed that Saddam Hussein could deploy chemical and biological weapons within 45 minutes) could be ascribed at the same time to the incompetence of the government and security forces, and to a cynical plan to deceive the public and disguise a hidden agenda for invading Iraq.

Stereotyping and complex identities

The sample illustrates classic effects of stereotyping, understood as projecting a property of one member of a group onto all members. Malcolm referred to all northern Catholics as 'terrorists', arguing that since about half of them (as judged by the then most recent Assembly elections and opinion polls) supported Sinn Fein, and since Sinn Fein was inextricably connected with the IRA and hence a terrorist organization, at least half of Catholics supported terrorists. And how could one tell which half, or which among them would move from support to action?

More complex processes of boundary construction were also evident. Andrew spoke of working as a TV repair man at the height of the Troubles:

> As a television repair man I had unusual freedom, even at the height of the Troubles. We were one of the few people who could work in Republican areas. Painters and decorators couldn't do it, but we could. I could be inside a barracks and up the Falls Road the same afternoon. The first time I worked up the Falls they came round to check on me, as I had short hair and British plates and was fairly young at the time. But after that they let me alone.

Even at a time of great tension and violence, some boundaries remained porous. Another participant, a Protestant woman born into a well-to-do

Anglo-Irish family in Dublin in the early 1920s, but now living in a mostly loyalist area of North Belfast, recalled her early experience:

> I remember the triumphalism of the Catholic Church, because Ireland had become Catholic, Gaelic and Irish. We were English. We weren't English, I would never call myself English, but we were Anglo, so my father had awful trouble because he realized that there was no future for us, being Anglo. It's hopeless, so he informed us, my brother and me … that we were now Irish. (Elisabeth)

Boundaries which now seem fixed and ancient were in fact constructed within living memory, and could be changed by decision rather than simply inherited. Marie, a Catholic participant from a village near the border in County Fermanagh, showed how even today, sympathies are not always straightforward. The complexity of her feelings – resentful of IRA use of their border farm – was such that she found it more difficult to hear testimony of Catholic suffering than that of Protestants when she was exposed to both in an ecumenical discussion group:

> The IRA were very active along the border and our farm runs down to the border, and they used the place, and it was quite a scary place at times. As a result of that, I … have – and had – great difficulty in understanding the pain of our own side, if you like, because quite frankly my experience was pain inflicted from our own side. So I found, in the Communities of Reconciliation, I heard some of the pain that I have difficulty in hearing.

Emotional identification is subject to the same complexity as other forms of identity formation.

These kind of examples challenge the very strong identifications and binary oppositions between Catholic and nationalist, Protestant and unionist, which are frequently assumed, and are robustly supported in survey data (Brewer, 2004). They indicate what ethnographic interviews of media audiences can achieve, beyond survey data, by affording insight into the complex processes of identification.

Security in Northern Ireland: still better and still worse

Both the Protestant and Catholic participants confirmed that the most spectacular aspects of the Troubles – large bombs, military presence on the streets – have gone, but separation of communities remains the norm, policing is ineffective and vigilantism and criminality are rife. Criminal gangs operate in urban and rural settings alike:

> There have been a few instances here in the village of … people being attacked, and … car tyres slashed. Nobody goes to the police … They bring in these fellas in balaclavas, who threaten you and say, 'If you don't behave yourself, we'll come back!' (Nuala)

Malcolm reports growing distrust of the police among rural unionists, referring here to the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA, a Republican paramilitary group) and the NIO (Northern Ireland Office of the British Government):

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One week ago on Monday, a member of ours came in here. He was annoyed, he was concerned, he was anxious. Wanted me to help him with an application for a personal protection weapon. Former security force member. And he told me the INLA had placed him and his family under death threat. Eight of them were going to be wiped out. The police are involved in it. He has informed the police. They're kept appraised of what is happening. But if you were to go to the police and ask them, 'How are things in West Tyrone? How are things in the Straban, Omagh areas?' they would probably say to you, 'Well, things are improving. Crime is down by so many percentage points.' But what they won't tell you is … that the number of people reporting crimes to the police is also down. So they're able to massage the figures to give the impression that things are better than what they actually are on the ground … That scenario that I've painted there or described, is not in the public domain. If it did go into the public domain, it would not only jeopardize the life of the guy – the member of ours, but it would be denied right, left and centre by police and by the NIO – of that I have no doubt.

Violence and the threat of violence are present in urban areas too. Andrew described how a loyalist gang 'took over' a housing estate in East Belfast for a couple of days, controlling who went in and out, while the police, in his opinion, refused to take action against them:

Here was these about 100 boys standing … with baseball hats on … and hoods. So, we just went down to see them, and he, the Archbishop of Armagh, Robin Eames, spoke to a few of them, and I spoke to a few of the soldiers and policemen, and then a couple more parishioners, and it went on.

In a shopping centre near where the author lived, in a middle-class area of East Belfast, incendiary devices were exploded three times in the course of a couple of months in 2005 – at night, causing no casualties. This was probably to insist on protection money. Such unspectacular violence attracts no international media attention, and hardly disrupts the impression of peace and prosperity returning, in the context of significant inward investment, expansion of tourism, and material regeneration, despite continuing political deadlock. But this impression also allows governments (British, Irish, as well as the US and European Union) to say things are now better in Northern Ireland, and therefore to cut support to the large voluntary sector which struggles to bring communities together.

Analysis: local memory and global media

Several literatures are pertinent to the construction of perceptions of security within local communities in the context of global media penetration. These include discussions on the dynamics of social memory, theories of the risk society and the information society, and studies of the role of subcultures in the mediation of global flows of goods and information.

The data gathered here may be fruitfully analysed through a critical engagement with debates generated by Ulrich Beck's (1992) risk society thesis. In discussions of security in the international relations and politics

literatures, the focus is on inter-state relations and (increasingly) on intra-state and terrorist threats. Beck's sociological conception of security situates shifting sources of violent threat in the context of broader social sources of manufactured risk, ranging from nuclear energy to food production and biotechnology. Beck's concept of 'organized irresponsibility' identifies the institutional risk management processes whereby governments and scientific institutions seek to reassure the public, yet remain unable to protect public health from exposure to risk. In this perspective the BSE (bovine spongiform encephalitis; 'mad cow' disease) episode of the early 1990s has obvious resonances with the affair of the 'dodgy dossier'. In each case an interaction of government, security, scientific and media institutions produces and disseminates 'expert' information which is shown to be flawed, and government management of information is exposed as less than transparent and at best incompetent, at worst malign. The 'dodgy dossier' exposes the institutions of 'organized irresponsibility' in a more sinister light: rather than seeking to minimize public fears, as with the BSE episode, the apparent aim was to foment fears in order to justify military intervention in Iraq. Like Bauman (1988), Beck sees modernity as defined by the ever-expanding reach of technological intervention, with intrinsically unforeseeable consequences. Increasingly disorganized irresponsibility is inevitable, and the growth of the media gaze corresponds to an ever-diminishing governmental capacity to exercise control.

Beck's theory stresses the central role of major institutions in defining public risk. However, this study examines how narratives of risk disseminated by major institutions are reinterpreted by audiences using personal, local and communal frames and narratives. Beck's rather under-developed account of media production and effects fails to capture the possible distorting effects of the media as 'global economic forces which … continue to transform media from a space of rational discourse to one of figural entertainment and spectacle' (Mythen, 2004: 94). For critics who advocate some version of Habermas's (1989[1962]) idea of a public sphere characterized by rational discussion, this structural shift from print to visually-dominated media and from discourse to spectacle has worrying implications for the possibility of informed public debate. This study suggests that such media spectacles are reinterpreted further in the light of locally-produced narratives which, rather than being flattened and erased by the media blast, use internationally-produced media discourses to fuel locally-built fires.

These Northern Irish interviews also provide strong evidence of social memory-shaping contemporary perceptions of security, whether in the form of childhood memories of Lambeg drums or the IRA's use of the family farm, or as theories linking 'Islamic terrorism' and Republican violence. A 'dynamics of memory' approach (Schudson, 1997; Schwartz, 2000) provides a nuanced way of analysing social memory. In contrast to dominant ideology or popular memory approaches, which stress the determining

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power of contemporary political forces in shaping social memory, a dynamics of memory approach envisages a more complex process of interaction and negotiation between individual and collective actors and institutions, and this seems to fit the evidence presented here. Such an approach stresses the interdependence and mutually-constraining interaction of history and memory. The past

> continues into and shapes the present personally, as it is transmitted through individual lives, socially, as it is transmitted through law and other institutions including media, and culturally, as it is transmitted through language and other symbolic systems. (Schudson, 1997: 6)

The dynamics of memory approach 'stresses the presence of the past in the present through psychological, social, linguistic and political processes' and asks 'how, why and when some social events are more likely to form part of collective memory than others' (Misztal, 2002: 71). By examining the microdynamics of diverse audiences' reception of media texts, and their translation of them into perceptions of security, it is vital to grasp this diachronic dimension of the role of collective memories, contested and diverse as they are, in shaping contemporary interpretations of the media.

This approach can help to make sense of the fact that, on some occasions and for some actors, locally-produced discourses win out over internationally-produced ones, and vice versa. By presenting threats to security on transnational stages, the media play an important role in producing perceptions of threat – recall the participant who was worried by seeing an Arabic sticker in an abandoned car – to the extent that this sense of threat exceeds that generated by local, familiar and rationally more warranted threats. Yet this process coexists with a strongly oppositional attitude to the media, especially among some Protestant participants, whose identity is sustained in part by opposition to the British, Irish and international media, and affirmed through local and quasi-national institutions and practices such as churches, families, Orange lodges and marches, the newspaper *The News Letter*, and other local newspapers.

Some understandings of cultural change tend to see such local traditions as threatened by globalization, but others more helpfully show how subcultures are capable of reproducing and even strengthening themselves by being able to maintain their own readings of global information flows. For example, Smith (1998) argues that American evangelicalism thrives by sustaining its own subculture constructed in critical tension with, but not radically apart from, mainstream American culture. The case of Northern Irish Protestantism suggests that this is possible even without the kind of resources for media production which American evangelicalism possesses. As Liebes (1997) has shown for Arab Israelis, in the presence of social barriers a counter-hegemonic reading of the dominant discourse can be sustained for long periods with only limited access to media production.

Liebes also showed that, in the presence of continued spatial and social segregation, polarization of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic readings tended to increase across the generations, a finding which gives some cause for concern in the Northern Irish context.

Conclusion

Some conditions long prevalent in Northern Ireland – heightened security concerns, availability of transnational media sources, politicization of religion, contested legitimacy of government action – have now become more widespread in the UK (and indeed elsewhere). But Northern Ireland is no microcosm of the UK: it is distinctive in many respects. The legitimacy of governments is contested much more vigorously in Northern Ireland, and the main ethnic and religious mix is of longstanding and now approximately equally-sized communities, rather than a product of rapid immigration creating a multicultural, multi-religious society within a couple of generations (although diversity in Northern Ireland is increasing rapidly from a low base; see Yousuf, in this special issue). But some findings are suggestive for wider UK research. First, people tend to become accustomed to extra security measures quite quickly, but a culture of suspicion may have long-lasting cost for trust and social cohesion. Second, in terms of media consumption, the participants divided broadly into those who choose to engage with plural media, and those who select only those that confirm an existing standpoint. Thus Northern Ireland highlights the general challenges of creating inclusive forums for public debate where real engagement can occur, in a context of stark community division: polarized political opinion, fed by largely separate quasi-national and local media; and division in terms of housing and social, cultural, educational and religious institutions. Third, some media (notably the BBC), while not uncontested, were used and regarded as having some authority by most of those interviewed in both communities. The quasi-national daily *The Belfast Telegraph* also crosses community boundaries. This sample of participants also testified to the considerable efforts within churches to create bonds across communities. Finally, research on divided societies in general suggests that contact between individuals needs to be more than superficial if prejudice is to be broken down. Cooperative interaction to achieve shared goals is needed (Hewstone et al., 2005). Other parts of the UK may benefit from the lessons learned in Northern Ireland in developing ways to achieve such interaction (Connolly et al., 2006; McEnvoy-Levy, 2006).

Note
1. Some specific Northern Irish terminology may need explaining.
   The Orange Order (with local 'lodges') is a key Protestant organization.
   'Unionist' refers to those who favour continued political union with the rest

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of the UK. 'Loyalist' (from 'loyal to the British Crown') refers to a sub-group of unionist opinion which is generally more militant, working-class and uncompromising; 'loyalist' is always used in connection with Protestant paramilitary groups. The unionist population is now almost entirely Protestant, although at the time of partition (1921) there was a significant Catholic unionist minority. 'Nationalist' and 'Republican' refer to those who favour union with the Republic of Ireland: this is a majority of the Catholic population.

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