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Facing reality: The media, the past and conflict transformation in Northern Ireland

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Abstract
The media can contribute to the reproduction of violent conflict in societies either through direct bias or more silent acquiescence. When wars end, therefore, the question arises as to the media’s past role and the possibilities of reconstructing the media in such a way that it contributes to conflict transformation. This article looks at one specific situation, Northern Ireland, where during the violent political conflict over three decades there was a professional and sophisticated broadcasting environment. Broadcasters have been frequently charged with bias in relation to reporting the conflict, but their record in reporting the peaceful transition has been less well researched. The broadcast by the BBC of three programmes in March 2006 presents a timely case study in the ability of the media to come to terms with peace. Collectively titled Facing the Truth, these three programmes brought together victims and perpetrators with a view to eliciting repentance and forgiveness. Characterizing the approach as ‘reality television’, the article concludes that the genre cannot adequately deal with many of the major issues involved in conflict transformation. Moreover, the framing of the programmes was such that the producers created an ideal type victim, but in doing so excluded the voices of other victims and survivors.

Key words
conflict transformation; Northern Ireland; media; reality television; truth

INTRODUCTION
The role of radio and television in stirring up and reproducing conflict has been well documented in Rwanda, Bosnia and elsewhere (Article 19, 1996; Thompson, 1999; Windrich, 2000; Li, 2004). In consequence, the modernization and professionalization of the media are often essential elements of reconstruction in war-torn societies (Thompson and Price, 2002). International organizations become involved in funding,
delivering or supporting programmes which aim to train journalists in professional routines, establish legal independence for broadcasting organizations, guarantee security and safety for journalists and broadcasters, or educate society to see the media as objective and fact-based rather than as propaganda (Frohardt and Temin, 2003; Twumasi and Keighley, 2004; Kumar, 2007). In effect, they seek to establish in war-torn societies the principles which have emerged in developed democratic societies to underline the existence of a fair, professional and independent media sector.

Consequently, such programmes and interventions would seem to have little, if anything, to offer in terms of assessing what needs to be done to improve the media in other post-conflict societies where such principles are taken to be already well established. One such society is Northern Ireland, a society coming out of three decades of violent conflict in which an established and robust media existed. To understand such a situation it is necessary to examine how the media coped during the conflict and what, if any, are the consequences of its past behaviour in terms of coming to terms with reporting peace.

One revealing way into this is to examine how the media in Northern Ireland reports on the legacy of the conflict in the wider society. An excellent opportunity for just such an examination is presented by a recent media intervention in Northern Ireland: ‘Facing the Truth’, three programmes broadcast in March 2006 by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in which victims and perpetrators in the Northern Ireland conflict met face to face.

The purpose of this article is to examine the programmes in depth with a view to assessing the potential role of television in conflict transformation in Northern Ireland. But, before doing so, it is necessary briefly to set the scene.

NORTHERN IRELAND, BROADCASTING, CONFLICT AND PEACE

Two television organizations dominate in Northern Ireland: the publicly-funded British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and the commercial Independent Television. Both are British-based organizations and both have local stations: BBC Northern Ireland (established in 1924) and Ulster Television (UTV, established in 1959) respectively.

From the point of view of the mainstream British media, the conflict in Ireland which emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s was too close to home: a short distance away across the Irish Sea, or worse, on the streets of British cities. Although a story of violent conflict, and therefore instantly attractive to the media with its immediacy and drama, the conflict in Ireland seemed to elude one of the key news values: simplicity. Why should people on a neighbouring island, who looked like ‘us’ and spoke the same language as ‘we’ did, do such alien things as kill each other, and even worse, turn their attention to killing ‘us’? A substantial explanation would have required painstakingly recounting the history of the relationship between the two islands, and would have led to complex and perhaps divisive explanations of colonialism, imperialism, sectarianism and state repression. This task was too huge for the British media, so they settled on
a fourth news value: ethnocentrism. As Elliot (1976: 399) argues, the British media performed a key role for the British public, that of ‘social cauterization’, in effect salving the wounds that such proximate bad news caused the British public by applying ‘field dressings’.

As a result, while ‘facts’ were in abundance, what was missing from media coverage was explanation, and the Irish conflict appeared as a series of decontextualized atrocities. News coverage therefore served less to enlighten or encourage dialogue which might lead to political resolution than to enable the public to close ranks around a number of agreed responses to ‘mindless violence’. A number of familiar tropes quickly emerged: the Northern Ireland problem was about ‘terrorism’; the army was there to keep the peace; and there was a ‘hierarchy of death’ (Greenslade, 1998) which ensured that some victims were more newsworthy than others.

The British media thus played a key role in building a consensus around the issue of Ireland and conflict. More crucially, that consensus was closely aligned to the state’s explanation of the conflict. The organizational independence of the media therefore did not lead to an alternative set of explanations from those of the state. The match between the media and state was not watertight; the media did run foul of the state from time to time when it appeared to break the common consensus and engaged in hard-hitting investigative journalism which showed the state in a bad light. Programmes on miscarriages of justice and human rights abuses by the state met with official responses of innuendo, threat, legal restraints, and on one occasion (Real Lives, July 1985), a direct request from the Home Secretary to pull the programme (Leapman, 1986). A handful of broadcasters consistently delivered programmes which revealed the contradictions involved in the state claiming to uphold the rule of law and human rights while simultaneously undermining these ideals. That said, in many ways these investigative programmes were exceptions which proved the rule. For the most part the British media settled into a shared consensus with the British state in terms of interpreting the conflict in Ireland. Within that state dependency the much vaunted independence of the media, especially the broadcasting media, was compromised.

BBC and ITV were frequently accused of both anti-republican (Curtis, 1984) and anti-loyalist (Parkinson, 1998) bias; the response of the organizations tended to be that they must be doing something right if they were alienating the violent extremes. They saw their role as standing above the conflict, representing the wider society. According to Tim Cooke (1998: 8), a former senior broadcaster with BBC Northern Ireland, the broadcasters shared with government the overall paradigm that ‘terrorism is illegitimate and irrational’, that broadcast organizations are ‘representatives of the wider society’s anti-terrorist stance’, and that they should give no ‘spurious respectability’ to terrorists. ‘The negative response to paramilitary violence has been ritual and overt, reflecting the disapproval of the community . . . and of government’.

The wide availability of accounts of the media’s role in Northern Ireland during the conflict is in stark contrast to the paucity of research on the media’s reporting of peace in the past decade (McLaughlin and Miller, 1996; Spencer, 2001; Fawcett, 2002). That said, the lesson of that research is that, in the words of one commentator (Cooke, 1998), old habits die hard. To take one example: the old anti-terrorism paradigm continued
to influence decisions so that the media became practically fixated on one item, the need for militant republicans to give up their arms (Brown and Hauswedell, 2002: 52). Accustomed to reporting war, the broadcasters found it difficult to find imaginative ways to report peace.

Facing the Truth presents the most significant and imaginative example to date of the broadcasters not merely vigorously reporting on conflict transformation but also attempting to contribute towards such transformation. Hence the aim of this article is to provide a detailed consideration of the dynamics involved in the dramatic encounters between victims and perpetrators with a view to assessing the extent to which the broadcasters have indeed aided conflict transformation.

**FACING THE TRUTH**

Facing the Truth constituted the centrepiece in what the BBC billed as ‘truth week’. The three programmes were overseen by a panel of three, consisting of: Archbishop Desmond Tutu; Leslie Bilinda, a former aid worker whose husband had been murdered during the Rwanda genocide in 1994; and Donna Hicks of Harvard University.

Each encounter followed a clear format: brief opening statements from each of the participants who were clearly identified in the introductions as either ‘victim’ or ‘perpetrator’, followed by extended time for each to elaborate on their position. Then each was invited to respond to and/or question the other. There was an expectation that each encounter would conclude with spoken words of forgiveness or regret or a handshake between victim and perpetrator, and the main task of the panel appeared to be to move the proceedings along the prearranged trajectory to this conclusion.

*Programme 1* (4 March 2006) involved two encounters:

1. Mary McLarnon and Clifford Burrage: Mary McLarnon’s brother, Michael, a resident of Ardoyne in North Belfast, was shot dead by a British army sniper on 28 October 1971 (McKittrick et al., 1999; Ardoyne Commemoration Project, 2002). The soldier concerned was Clifford Burrage. McLarnon’s family insisted that Michael was innocent, while the British army maintained that an identified gunman had been targeted. In early 1975, Burrage wrote to the McLarnon family stating that he had acted out of revenge following the killing of a number of his colleagues in the area. As a born-again Christian, he sought the family’s forgiveness. However, in a subsequent court case he was adamant that he had targeted Michael McLarnon because he was carrying a weapon.

2. Malcolm Craig and Ronnie McCartney: Ronnie McCartney was a member of an IRA (Irish Republican Army) unit in Southampton, England. On 23 December 1976 their safe house was raided by police. They fled on foot, pursued by an unarmed police officer, Malcolm Craig. McCartney fired at Craig, seriously wounding him. McCartney made it safely back to the Irish Republic, but on a later visit to Northern Ireland was arrested and jailed for 21 years.
Programme 2 (5 March 2006) involved three encounters:

1. Michael Paterson and Tommy McCrystal: Michael Paterson was an officer in the RUC (Royal Ulster Constabulary). An armoured vehicle in which he was travelling came under IRA rocket attack on 28 September 1981. The driver, Constable Alexander Beck, was killed instantly; Michael Paterson lost his arms (McKittrick et al., 1999). Tommy McCrystal was an IRA man given two life sentences for involvement in the murder of two part-time soldiers: John Graham, on 25 April 1979 and John Hannigan, on 19 June 1979 (McKittrick et al., 1999).

2. The Brett family and Alec Calderwood: Michael and Phyllis Brett’s 18-year-old son, Gavin, was the victim of a sectarian murder in 2001. Targeted as a Catholic by loyalists, he was in fact a Protestant, the child of a Catholic father and Protestant mother. Alec Calderwood was a youth member of the loyalist paramilitary UDA (Ulster Defence Association). On 3 January 1980 he participated in an attack on two Catholic men, one of whom escaped. Calderwood beat the other man, Alex Reid, to death with a concrete block. Eighteen months later, Calderwood flagged down an RUC patrol and confessed to murder. He was sentenced to life imprisonment and released in 1993. While in prison, he became a born-again Christian and disassociated himself from the other UDA prisoners (McKittrick et al., 1999; Ardoyne Commemoration Project, 2000).

3. Josette Foster and Joe Doherty: Josette Foster is the widow of Sergeant Major Walter Beard, who was blown up by the IRA at Narrow Water, Warrenpoint on 27 August 1979. Six soldiers had been killed in an initial roadside explosion. Half an hour later, 12 others – including Paratrooper Walter Beard – were killed by a second bomb as they were evacuating the dead and wounded (McKittrick et al., 1999). Josette Foster was accompanied by another paratrooper injured at Narrow Water, Tom Caughey, and fellow paratrooper Graham Eve. Joe Doherty was a member of an IRA unit which was surrounded by a British army undercover patrol in North Belfast on 2 May 1980. Captain Herbert Westmacott was shot dead in the encounter. The IRA unit subsequently surrendered and was charged with his murder. The day before judgement was passed in their trial, they escaped from jail. Joe Doherty was later arrested in the United States and, after a protracted period in prison in New York, was extradited to Northern Ireland (McKittrick et al., 1999).

Programme 3 (6 March 2006) was devoted entirely to one encounter, that between Sylvia Hackett and Michael Stone: Sylvia Hackett’s husband, Dermot, drove a bread van. On 23 May 1987 he was shot dead by the UDA who claimed he was an IRA member. Loyalist Michael Stone was sentenced to life imprisonment for the murder, after confessing to police that he had personally carried out the killing. Dermot Hackett’s family insisted from the outset that he was not an IRA member but had been in effect set up as a target because of undue and unwarranted RUC attention (McKittrick et al., 1999). Sylvia Hackett was accompanied by her brother-in-law, Dermot’s brother, Roddy.
FACING THE TRUTH AS REALITY TELEVISION

The programme makers undoubtedly saw the series as fitting comfortably in the stable of current affairs broadcasting. Yet there were many ways in which the programmes more closely matched the reality television format.

Reality television is often dismissed as the dumbing-down of television; however, it requires sophisticated media literacy on the part of the audience. There are no hidden cameras; the contrived nature of constant surveillance is proclaimed openly. But a ‘reality contract’ (Jones, 2003: 414) is reached between performers and audience whereby viewers ‘suspend their disbelief and look for the reality created within the artifice’ (Roscoe, 2001: 485).

Even if the situation they are in is contrived, these are real people, not actors. The audience’s judgement of them is on the basis of their ability to be ‘real’, ‘to reveal their authentic reactions and to just be themselves’ (Andrejevic, 2002: 261). In the last analysis, authenticity is based on self-disclosure. Ultimately the attraction for the audience is that ‘these are real and ordinary people, not professional actors, and there are therefore possibilities for identification’ (Andrejevic, 2002: 263). Or as Bennett (2005: 176) puts it, ‘clearly, what reality TV offers is an instant connection with feelings about ordinary people . . . who are either like us or appallingly not like us’.

It is often claimed that reality television has a democratic thrust in that it allows people who do not normally get to speak through the mass media to have their say. But it would be a mistake to exaggerate the supposed democratic credentials of the genre: ‘the success of these new-style media products is predicated on their ability to recreate the illusion of a democratic media product, one where reality is presented through a synthetic constructed environment’ (Jones, 2003: 401). The fundamental fact is that ‘such programs are simulations’ (Lunt, 2004: 332). No matter how invisible, the hand of the editor, of big brother, is always there, framing the encounter. Further, the element of voyeurism involved runs the risk of turning reality television programmes into nothing less than ‘freak shows’ (Dovey, 2000).

Facing the Truth has distinct parallels with reality television – the artificial encounter between victims and perpetrators in a confined space under the ever-watchful eye of the cameras; the invisible but crucial hand of the editors behind the scenes; and the expectation that the audience will be making judgements on the authenticity of the self-disclosure of participants.

As such, the programmes presented the powerful, emotional and riveting self-disclosure of participants, in particular victims. The participants – even the perpetrators – were revealed as ordinary people rather than actors. On the other hand, the unnatural, staged nature of the situation in which this ‘reality’ occurred was obvious, as was the pressure on participants to self-disclose, and the power of the producers and editors who framed the programme and packaged the results.
FRAMING: THE TYRANNY OF EXPECTATION

It was evident from the introduction to each programme and in the way in which the encounters were framed that the over-riding goal was to facilitate remorse and forgiveness.

Participants were obviously aware that this was the framing. In particular, the expectation of a final, healing handshake was built into the frame as a form of symbolic closure. Thus, participants could be prompted when the time for the handshake was ripe and did not seem to be surprised at this cue. For example, Archbishop Tutu asked Malcolm Craig and Ronnie McCartney, ‘How do you want to leave here? I mean, do you want to maybe shake hands?’ The speed of their response is evidence that the Archbishop is reminding them that it is time for the hoped-for outcome; the possibility of a handshake was not sprung on them out of the blue.

In some cases, such prompting was unnecessary, even if there was a complex social dynamic involved before the denouement could be reached. For example, Clifford Burrage arrived predisposed to the remorse–forgiveness format. In his preliminary statement he expressed the wish that Mary McLarnon ‘might be able to forgive me for what I did. And that would be the most wonderful thing there is’. This eagerness appeared to give Mary hope; Donna Hicks asked her, ‘What would help you?’ She replied, ‘If the soldier could say to me that he might have made a mistake and in his heart of hearts tells the truth’ (emphasis added). This in turn appeared to encourage Clifford to refine his position. Thus, when asked by Archbishop Tutu if he is certain he hit the gunman, he replies that he was certain then, but that in the subsequent court case he stated, ‘I was aiming at the gunman but there’s the possibility (emphasis added) I could have shot somebody next to him’. There was ‘a definite shadow of doubt’.

A few minutes later Clifford returns to the point and adds that he ‘probably’ (emphasis added) hit Michael McLarnon while aiming at a gunman. He then speaks directly to Mary: ‘I don’t think (emphasis added) he was the man I shot at’. Mary relaxes at this point and replies, ‘Thank you very much’, which encourages Clifford Burrage to go even further: ‘I’m willing to say I’m certain now that the man I shot at was a gunman but that I hit Michael and he was just there, but he wasn’t the man I, he wasn’t the man I . . .’ Mary McLarnon: ‘He wasn’t the man you aimed at’. Clifford Burrage: ‘I’d aimed at, no, definitely not’ (emphasis added).

The balance of remorse/forgiveness was not always so symmetrical in the encounters. Most perpetrators tended to resist the thrust towards remorse. While all claimed to have changed their views from when they had committed their offences and to now advocate a non-violent route to political goals, most did not wish to disown their past and the causes to which they had devoted so much time and energy.

Thus, when Leslie Bilinda asked Ronnie McCartney if he had any regrets, McCartney replied in very general terms: when you’re involved in a conflict, you have to accept the consequences; people get killed and injured. Donna Hicks continued the cross-examination by asking McCartney if he could see the policeman he had shot as a fellow human being, rather than as a soldier. ‘Do you have feelings towards him?’ McCartney replied, ‘Of course I have feelings. What do you want, tears here? (emphasis added)’
Joe Doherty was likewise pushed towards expressing remorse, but resisted the script. Archbishop Tutu asks him, ‘How do you feel about the choice you made of opting for violence? Are you remorseful? Regretful?’ Joe replies, ‘No. I don’t have any remorse. I’m very concerned about this remorse because it means guilt; it means that I am guilty of something’ (emphasis added).

At the same time, perpetrators did arrive at a point in the encounter where they could express regret if not actual contrition. For example, Raymond McCartney says, ‘I feel for anyone who has been affected in this here conflict, Malcolm especially’ (emphasis added). And Joe Doherty, referring to the man he shot dead by his first name, says, ‘Herbert should be with his children now’. Even the bête noire of the programmes, Michael Stone, claimed that he had regrets; he has become jaded and now acknowledges that he has caused pain.4

The tyranny of expectation of remorse and forgiveness is more worrying in relation to victims. Sylvia Hackett tells Michael Stone at the beginning of their encounter, ‘I won’t forgive you’. But this is not how the encounter seems to end. Sylvia is invited to address Stone and states, ‘I forgive you, but I tell you one thing: I can face my Man above; I hope you can face yours’. Stone is then invited to address Sylvia and her brother-in-law, Roddy, and says that they were brave to come to confront him; he could not have done the same if their positions had been reversed. ‘You’re better people than I am’, he says. Roddy Hackett then tells Stone, ‘We are the human side of what you actually done’. He adds that he is glad to have met Stone because it has helped ease things a bit. At this point Sylvia Hackett sobs, ‘I’m lost’, and hugs Roddy tightly. Archbishop Tutu then intervenes and says very slowly,

_We have reached an extraordinary point here . . . If you are able . . . there was earlier on what Sylvia suggested about shaking hands . . . but that must be something that comes from yourselves. Perhaps more than from yourselves, it is God who is present in this moment, a moment we could not contrive._

At first neither Sylvia nor Roddy responds to this prompt, but then Roddy whispers to Sylvia, ‘Go right now and give him a handshake. Go ahead’. She crosses the room and shakes Michael Stone’s hand. Stone says, ‘I’m really sorry’ and Sylvia rushes away shouting: ‘Oh my God! Let me go’. Roddy then shakes Stone’s hand while Sylvia cries loudly in the background. The drama of this sequence is apparent. But equally palpable is the pressure this widow was under within the framing of the programme to engage so personally with her husband’s killer.

**CONTEXT: THERE IS NO REALITY OUTSIDE THIS REALITY**

In reality television the focus is on the here and now, the interaction between participants. Although some background information about the participants may be provided this is at best secondary to the focus on how they interact in the present.

To first appearances, this could not have been the focus in relation to Facing the Truth. After all, the reason the participants were selected was precisely because of their
respective histories, because of the past. Yet, the programmes were presented as a unique opportunity for victims and perpetrators to meet. Paradoxically, therefore, the participants were in effect presented as having a reason for participating but without a history which brought them to the point where they might be willing to participate. The programmes gave the impression that they were just starting out on their individual roads to recovery.

This impression is reinforced on a number of occasions by Archbishop Tutu. At the end of the encounter between Clifford Burrage and Mary McLarnon, he tells them that they have opened themselves to the possibility of being hurt again ‘in the hope that perhaps you might begin the process of healing’ (emphasis added). Yet it is clear that Clifford Burrage is well into this process; he wrote to the McLarnon family in 1975, four years after the death of Michael McLarnon and 30 years before the broadcast of the programme, asking for their forgiveness. Likewise, Mary McLarnon’s participation in the programme was undoubtedly based on her own journey, beginning with the event, to clear her brother’s name.

A common factor for both victims and perpetrators was that participation was a stage in a journey they had already begun, often many years before. Tommy McCrystal began to have doubts about armed activity shortly after his involvement in the killing of part-time soldier John Hannigan: ‘What I felt then was, we’re filling the prisons, we’re filling the graveyards and we’re not beating them and they’re not beating us. There has to be an alternative’. That was in 1979. Alec Calderwood was illiterate when he went to prison in the 1980s. Having learnt to read, he began reading books on Irish history, and came to realize that not all Catholics were in the IRA. He became a born-again Christian, and since he was released has been helping people and will, as he put it, continue to do so for as long as he can.

This journey each individual took was often concealed by the format of the programmes. Thus Sylvia Hackett had wanted for a long time to confront Michael Stone in order to clear her husband’s name: ‘It’s something I’ve always wanted to do, to face Michael Stone’. And on another occasion she said, ‘I made that vow to myself a long time ago. It’s something I wanted to do. Right, I’m going to meet you one way or another’. And Roddy Hackett concurred, ‘The opportunity to meet Stone was put in Sylvia’s lap but she would have met him one way or another’. But these revelations were not provided in the programme itself. Sylvia’s first statement quoted is from Let’s Talk, broadcast on 9 March 2006, and her second from Spotlight, broadcast on the same evening, both events occurring after Facing the Truth. Moreover, unlike Facing the Truth, neither Spotlight nor Let’s Talk were available to viewers in Britain who therefore were not provided with this context. Roddy Hackett’s statement quoted earlier is from a local newspaper (Irish News, 8 March 2006), again after the Facing the Truth broadcast.

An even more startling lack of necessary historical context is evident in the case of Michael Paterson. His journey after his horrific injuries took him away from the police and into clinical psychology. He is now an established clinical psychologist, specializing in trauma management and recovery. Not only did Facing the Truth not
inform viewers of this, but it left out the section where Michael Paterson himself emphasized the point. As he recounted on Let’s Talk (9 March 2006),

*Something was edited out of the programme which I felt might have been better if it had been kept in. As I got up to shake his [Tommy McCrystal’s] hand, I said – ‘people whom I would work with clinically’, I’m a clinical psychologist, ‘might feel angry to see me shaking this man’s hand. I’m not shaking the hand of an IRA man. I’m shaking the hand of somebody who wants a better future for this country’.*

**CONTROL: THE HIDDEN HAND OF BIG BROTHER**

From time to time there was evidence of manipulation on the part of the programme makers and apparent collusion in this manipulation on the part of the panel. This is most obvious in relation to the encounter between Michael Stone and Sylvia Hackett.

In the advance publicity for the series and in the opening sequence played for each of the three programmes, Sylvia Hackett is shown saying to Michael Stone, ‘You said you had your hand on the gun . . . If your hand was on the trigger, who pulled it?’ The question seems strange: it seems to infer that there might be some doubt about Stone’s role in the murder of Dermot Hackett. In fact there was. In his original statement to the police, Stone had acknowledged that he had fired the shots which killed Dermot Hackett. But in his later autobiography he said that he did not (Stone, 2003). This contradiction was strongly hinted at by Stone in his opening remarks. He stated that he had been convicted in 1989 of six murders. He said he had pulled the trigger in four of those killings; in two others he was involved in conspiring to kill the victims concerned; one of those two was Dermot Hackett. Archbishop Tutu seemed agitated and interrupted Stone to tell him that he would have time later to elaborate on his opening statement. In the light of what transpired, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the Archbishop feared that Michael Stone was not merely moving the process forward too quickly but was in danger of revealing the dramatic punch line of the programme.

When Sylvia Hackett finished her elaboration, there was another apparently odd question, this time from Donna Hicks: ‘What is your understanding today of who is responsible for the killing of your husband?’ Sylvia Hackett answered, without hesitation, ‘Mr Stone’.

At this point Michael Stone was invited to give his elaborate statement. He did so. At the end, Leslie Bilinda asks the third apparently odd question: ‘What else did you have as your role?’ Stone says that he had test-fired the weapon, and then adds, ‘I don’t wish to distance myself from Mr Hackett’s death because morally I conspired to assassinate the man. I done everything but pull the trigger’. He adds that he pulled out several days before the operation, and that the killing was carried out by others.

This was one of the most dramatic moments in the series, not least because it was such an unexpected revelation for the audience. But the manner in which the panel behaved would seem to indicate that it was not unexpected as far as they were.
concerned. They stopped Michael Stone making the revelation at the beginning of proceedings. They pressed Sylvia Hackett to reiterate her firm belief that Michael Stone was guilty as charged of the murder of her husband. And they prompted Michael Stone as if to remind him that it was now time to make the revelation. There is little doubt that programme makers and panellists knew of Stone's admission in advance of the programme but withheld it from Sylvia Hackett until well into the proceedings. Why they would have done so is no mystery – the dramatic effect of this moment was unmatched.

There was great care not to unveil this dramatic revelation too early. Thus on the day before the programme was broadcast, Archbishop Tutu was interviewed on BBC radio's *The Nolan Show* (6 March 2006). Host Stephen Nolan asks the Archbishop, ‘Michael Stone murdered that lady's husband in 1987. Do you think he was vulnerable when he was sitting there?’ Desmond Tutu answered, ‘He can’t have been comfortable . . . it isn’t easy to say, “I am the one who pulled the trigger” (emphasis added) and to say it under the glare of the television lights’. But that is precisely what Michael Stone did not say. The audience did not know that, as the programme had not yet been broadcast. But Desmond Tutu, present when the programme was recorded months earlier, did know.

**FOCUSING ON THE VICTIMS**

In an early account of its plans, the BBC represented ‘Facing the Truth’ as ‘a Truth and Reconciliation Commission for Northern Ireland’; the programmes ‘will be public service broadcasting at its best – no other channel could embark on such a challenging undertaking’.5

Apart from the hyperbole involved in seeing three programmes as the equivalent of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), the analogy is poor. In some senses, the BBC programmes were more innovative than anything that had happened in South Africa. Despite the key role of the media in South Africa in terms of reporting the deliberations of the TRC, and particularly in broadcasting the public hearings of the Human Rights Violations Committee (Bird and Garda, 1997), thereby grabbing the attention of the public (Hamber, 1997) and having profound effects on at least some of the broadcasters (Krog, 1998), the media acted in a solely reactive manner in relation to the issue of truth. The relationship between the TRC and the media was not merely symbiotic (Krabill, 2001); the reliance of the media on the TRC led some to fear that such a lack of initiative would leave a legacy in terms of the post-TRC media’s inability to undertake investigative journalism (Garman, 1997).

*Facing the Truth*, on the other hand, involved a bold and imaginative step on the part of the media. On the other hand, the focus of the programmes did not emerge in a vacuum; rather they slotted into an ongoing and sometimes lively debate in the wider society on the issue of dealing with the past (Rolston, 2002). To date this has involved interventions by politicians, church leaders, community activists, police chiefs and others, with some strongly opposed to ‘digging up the past’ and urging society to ‘draw
a line’ and move on, while others have argued that, as in other transitional societies,
the ‘unfinished business’ of the past must be dealt with if it is not to hamper future pro-
gress (Rolston, 2000). The debate has had a number of institutional outcomes, such as
the establishment of the Saville Inquiry to examine the killing by British paratroopers
of 14 civil rights marchers in Derry in January 1972, and the inquiry into the murder of
solicitor Pat Finucane in February 1989 (Scranton and Rolston, 2005). Most recently,
in June 2007 the British government has established a consultative group led by the
former Church of Ireland primate, Robin Eames, and the former vice-chair of the
Northern Ireland Policing Board, Denis Bradley, to advise on the merits or otherwise of
a truth commission for Northern Ireland.

According to Jeremy Adams, the producer of Facing the Truth, the idea for
the programmes emerged from conversations he had had in South Africa with
Desmond Tutu. He asked the Archbishop about the lessons of the South African TRC
for Northern Ireland, and Tutu replied that one strength of the South African experi-
ence that could be of value was the ‘opportunity to give people, particularly the victims,
the dignity of telling their own stories’ (Seven FM, 3 March 2006).

The TRC saw its central purpose as ‘helping victims to become more visible and
more valuable citizens through the public recognition and official acknowledgement
of their experiences’ (South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1998). Victi-
ms were to gain that public recognition through telling their stories, through
narrative. These two elements – the centrality of victims and the focus on narrative –
were at the core of the Human Rights Violations Committee hearings which were
widely broadcast on television and radio. The hearings of the Amnesty Committee
approximated a judicial trial; proceedings were adversarial, and the role of the victims
was to provide evidence which might or might not hold up under cross-examination
(Leman-Langlois, 2000). But in the Human Rights Violations Committee scenario, the
approach was entirely different: victims provided testimonies which were not subject
to anything other than the mildest of questioning. This was the clearest example of the
TRC operationalizing its commitment to give victims centre stage.

Such a commitment is honourable, and matches the rhetoric in many, if not most,
post-conflict societies, not least in Northern Ireland (Bloomfield, 1998). But in South
Africa the reality fell short of the promise in at least two important ways. First, ‘victims’
were defined in such a manner as to distinguish them completely from ‘perpetrators’.
This rigid binary did not allow space to consider victims who may have collaborated
in conflict – as insurgents, for example, or citizens who turned a blind eye to the human
rights abuses of the state – or for perpetrators who had themselves been brought
into violence as a reaction to the violence inflicted on them.

Second, the TRC in effect created the ‘ideal victim’ and was abetted in this task by
the media. For the most part the victim was presented as a ‘truth holder’ rather than
a ‘truth seeker’ (Leman-Langlois, 2000). The amnesty hearings may have allowed for
the latter, but in the human rights hearings, the former was paramount; there was
no cross-examination, no questioning of the narrator, no doubt that the account of
the experience of suffering was true. In the wider world, victims may seek reparation,
justice, revenge, but none of these was possible within the brief of the human rights
hearing. Instead, the victims came to stand as living exemplars of the TRC’s motto: ‘Truth – the road to reconciliation’. As such, the message to the rest of society, watching and listening avidly, was that reconciliation is the highest goal – more dignified than revenge, more satisfying than compensation, more healing than justice. The amnesty hearings compounded this last point. They were based on the notion that viewing justice as being realized only through retribution was too narrow a view. Restorative justice was not only an alternative but, for the victims, an improvement on retributive justice. Justice was traded for truth, and narrative truth was said to provide the victims with dignity and closure. Whether it did or did not for individual victims is not the point (Picker, 2005); the victims stood as signifiers beyond their individuality, with an exemplary message for the rest of society.

Undoubtedly, some victims were unable or unwilling to stick to this framing. For some, justice was more important than narrative truth. But they were going against the flow of this new and powerful social consensus envisaged by the TRC and given an imprimatur by the media.

Compared to the human rights hearings of the South African TRC, Facing the Truth was a small-scale intervention. At the same time, the parallels between Northern Ireland and South Africa are obvious.

For a start, the entire framing of the programmes was founded on a strict distinction between victims and perpetrators. The perpetrators were reluctant to accept that distinction. They insisted that if it had not been for the war situation, a conflict not of their own making, they would never have been involved in violence. The republicans – Ronnie McCartney, Tommy McCrystal and Joe Doherty – began their opening statements by situating their personal histories within the history of their community. All stressed that discrimination against or repression of their community had led them to join the IRA. The loyalists responded similarly. Alec Calderwood stated that, although he did not wish to justify what he had done, he was ‘a victim of circumstances’ that led him to get involved in loyalism. Michael Stone said that what had occurred in Northern Ireland was a civil war and that he was ‘a product’ of that. Infuriating as these justifications might appear to those who had been at the receiving end of their violence, there was an important truth contained in that apparent denial of culpability: they too were victims, not merely in the general sense of having been caught up in a conflict, but also more directly; their own experience of harassment, repression or violence often played a key role in drawing them into conflict.

But the panel was at pains to have the strict binary division stick. Thus, as Joe Doherty was elaborating on how his experience of repression led him to resist, Donna Hicks interrupted to ask him how it felt to kill: ‘Tell us what happens when you pull that trigger’. This question was not asked of Tom Caughey, one of the ‘victims’ who was sitting opposite, despite the fact that he belonged to an elite British army regiment noted for its skills in warfare. Even more starkly, Clifford Burrage, whose involvement in killing Michael McLarnon was beyond doubt, was not asked how it felt to kill.

Moreover, the way in which the programmes centred the needs of victims was by allowing them space to tell their stories. The format did not lend itself to uncovering
truth in the forensic, as opposed to the narrative, sense (i.e. hard evidence about the
details of the offence). There was no investigative element in the programmes, and
this was compounded by the approach of the panel, focused more on psychological
or inter-personal rather than forensic matters. To take one example: Sylvia Hackett
was anxious to discover where Michael Stone obtained the information that led him
to target her husband. Stone was loath to reveal anything other than to say that it
came from trusted loyalist intelligence sources. The obvious follow-up question would
have been to ask if these sources had, as suspected, obtained the intelligence from
state security forces. While Sylvia and Roddy Hackett did push Stone on this matter,
they got no support from the panel. Yet, what could have been obtained from some
rigorous questioning was revealed in the subsequent interview of Michael Stone on
ighted on

The files I read, intelligence files, were provided by loyalist paramilitary intelligence
officers . . . they beg, borrow and steal from whatever source, perhaps even official
sources . . . The intel was high grade – from movements to video tapes to large
black-and-whites to, in some cases, aerial photographs, and to my knowledge,
loyalist paramilitaries have never had an air corps. So you can take from that what
you want.

Also, as has been emphasized throughout this article, the goal of each encounter
was reconciliation between victim and perpetrator, symbolized powerfully in the
handshake. As in South Africa (Chapman and Bell, 2001), there were pronounced
religious overtones in this process. Two of the three panellists had strong religious
motivations for involvement in conflict resolution: Archbishop Tutu, and Leslie Bilinda,
who acknowledges the role that her Christianity played in coming to terms with the
murder of her husband in Rwanda.7

That religion should be a means for some to come to terms with personal grief
should be neither remarkable nor a cause for criticism. However, religious sentiments
became an essential part of the framing of the programmes, especially as under-
stood by Archbishop Tutu. Thus, when Mary McLarnon had finished her extended
statement, he responded, ‘This is holy ground . . . We hope Clifford will enhance
the sense of God’s presence’. At the end of their encounter, he concluded, ‘God enlists
your participation in the process of trying to make Northern Ireland a place where
people can actually live together’.

Similarly, when Michael Paterson and Tommy McCrystal shook hands, Archbishop
Tutu stated, ‘We hope that you can be some of the most powerful instruments for
God to make God’s world a far better place’. And, after Sylvia Hackett shook Michael
Stone’s hand, Archbishop Tutu added, ‘It is God who is present in this moment, a
moment we could not contrive’.

The foregrounding of Christianity by a leading member of the Anglican community
may be entirely predictable, and may indeed have meshed with the sentiments of
self-acknowledged born-again Christian participants such as Clifford Burrage and
Alec Calderwood. However, by locating reconciliation and forgiveness as religious,
specifically Christian concepts, the framing allowed no space for those with more secular definitions or who rejected the religious paradigm entirely. The dominance of Christianity became in effect a denial of a political approach to dealing with a past that looked beyond interpersonal encounters to the structural causes of conflict and violence.

As in the TRC, the BBC programmes in effect laid down the prerequisites for the perfect victim. The role of the media in creating the ‘ideal victim’ has been poignantly examined by criminologists. For Christie (1986: 19), the media play a key role in defining the characteristics of the ideal victim in relation to everyday crime: she (more usually than he) is weak, ‘carrying out a respectable project’, and in a place ‘where she could not possibly be blamed for being’; the offender on the other hand is big and bad, and unknown to the victim. In relation to media coverage of war, this definition can be elaborated; the ideal victim, again predominantly female, can appear in five stereotypical frames: ‘the passive refugee’, ‘the waiting wife’, ‘the female body torn apart’, ‘the rape survivor’, and ‘the ‘touchy-feely’ peace activist’ (Del Zotto, 2002: 145–8).

In the specific context of post-conflict Northern Ireland, the BBC programmes, similarly to the South African TRC, expanded the representation of the ‘ideal victim’ further. The message was that narrative truth leading to reconciliation was the best way forward for victims, and by extension for society as a whole. Consequently, the perfect victim was one who could forgive. Forgiveness brought closure, healing, an epiphany that was practically religious in its intensity. As producer Jeremy Adams stated, ‘The participants all said it had been a worthwhile, even helpful experience. We were waiting for the first person to say they wished they had never done it, but that never happened’ (Daily Mirror, 8 March 2006). Indeed, a number of participants expressed their satisfaction. Mary McLarnon felt vindicated by Clifford Burrage’s acknowledgement that he had shot her brother in error (Spotlight, 7 March 2006). Sylvia Hackett was clear regarding the value of her participation: ‘Nothing can bring my Dermy back. But meeting his killer won me back some strength . . . After all this time, all this hurt, I was able to face my demons and look him straight in the eye’ (Daily Mirror, 9 March 2006).

At the same time, the participants had invested a great deal of emotional energy and were undoubtedly under intense psychological pressure not to conclude that that effort had been wasted. In this light, their reactions were perhaps more ambivalent than first appears. Thus Sylvia Hackett may well believe that Michael Stone told the truth when he said he did not actually kill her husband, but, as she pointed out, she is no closer to knowing who did, nor indeed who supplied the files that indicated he was a ‘legitimate target’ (Daily Mirror, 9 March 2006).

But, finally, the individual victim’s satisfaction in one sense was not the point. As a number of media commentators pointed out in the aftermath of the programmes, the value of Facing the Truth lay in the example the series provided to society of the possibility and benefits of dialogue. For example, veteran broadcaster Don Anderson said that while there may be a great deal of conflict transformation going on behind
the scenes, it is not visible to most people. Television programmes such as these give such people a window on the world and show them what is possible (The Nolan Show, 6 March 2006). Earlier we noted Bennett’s (2005: 176) conclusion: ‘Clearly, what reality TV offers is an instant connection with feelings about ordinary people . . . who are either like us or appallingly not like us’. But in a very important sense, Facing the Truth stood to win whichever side of that judgement the viewer chose. If we, like the victims portrayed, agree that narrative truth is the way to reconciliation, then we have a potential role to play in conflict transformation. On the other hand, if we are incapable of forgiveness, the victims portrayed stand as a challenge to goad us into becoming like them and thus contributing to conflict transformation. No less than in South Africa, truth is seen as the road to reconciliation for society overall.

Yet perhaps most significantly of all, they closed down the space for the range of victims’ voices which exist in society: those who, while not opposed to telling their story, seek justice, either through a formal truth–recovery mechanism or judicial proceedings; those who seek recognition for some victims, but not for all; those who cannot yet forgive; even those who seek vengeance.

Conclusion

At a superficial level it would seem that the goal of centralizing victims and the promise of reality television match neatly, because reality television can ‘expand the range of personal voices that are available within public television beyond the mainstream areas of society that are typically marginalised’ (Hight, 2001: 394). But a deeper analysis leads to a different conclusion: ‘It is not clear that . . . the emerging reality genre can support the monumental issues of politics . . . Some cultural and emotional issues may simply be too big for reality TV’ (Bennett, 2005: 176). In the case of Facing the Truth such issues include justice, dealing with the human rights abuses of the past, and building a culture of human rights protection for the future.

But the problem of media involvement in conflict transformation is more fundamental than a question of genre. Elsewhere broadcasters have utilized various other genres. For example, Nashe Maalo, a children’s drama series, involves ethnic Macedonian, Albanian, Turkish and Roma children dealing with prejudice and stereotypes (Shochat, 2003). In South Africa, a documentary series (Africa: Search for Common Ground) allows groups of ordinary people to tell their stories. In Liberia and Sierra Leone, Golden Kids News is produced by and for children. Even in Northern Ireland, there have been initiatives to use the media to encourage young children’s interest in conflict transformation (Connolly et al., 2006).

What these initiatives have in common is that control remains in the hands of one of the world’s most powerful institutions, the media; an institution which, despite a self-image to the contrary, was not neutral in the previous violent political conflict. The victims and survivors may speak or be spoken to, but the framing is still in the hands of the programme-makers. It is hard to imagine such a powerful institution handing over control to victims and survivors.
Interestingly, though, Northern Ireland does provide one small example that shows the value of even a small shift in that direction. An impressive series titled *Legacy* played on BBC Radio Ulster each morning during 1998; although the contributions were each only five minutes long and were edited by professional broadcasters, the victims and survivors were allowed to speak, uninterrupted by other voices. The challenge for the media in contributing to conflict transformation is to explore ways to make even bigger shifts in that direction.

Notes

This research is part of a wider study conducted for Belfast-based NGO Healing Through Remembering on the media's role in dealing with the conflict of the past. Thanks to Richard Carver, Brandon Hamber and Greg McLoughlin for guidance on sources and feedback.

1 Wolfsfeld (2004) identifies four news values at the centre of the media's selection and presentation of stories: immediacy, drama, simplicity and ethnocentrism.

2 The programmes were broadcast across the whole of the United Kingdom on three consecutive nights, between 4 and 6 March 2006. In addition, BBC Northern Ireland broadcast the following: three specials of the current affairs television programme *Spotlight* (7, 8 and 9 March 2006) which followed up on some of the participants in the *Facing the Truth* programmes; an edition of the local television programme *Let's Talk* (9 March 2006) where the issue of truth was debated. In addition, *Facing the Truth* was the topic of discussion in the radio phone-in programmes *The Nolan Show* (6 and 7 March 2006) and *Talkback* (7 March 2006), as well as radio's *Sunday Sequence* (5 March 2006). On 28 May 2007, in a follow-up programme, BBC Northern Ireland showed excerpts of the original programmes, returned to some of the participants for reaction, and made some rather grand claims regarding the contribution of the programmes to personal closure, reconciliation and indeed the uncovering of new evidence on some of the cases.

3 Michael Brett, a paramedic, was called to the scene of an assassination only to discover that his son Gavin was the victim. He died of cancer in June 2007, aged 53.

4 The sincerity of Stone's apparent remorse was severely in doubt when eight months after the broadcast he was arrested when trying to break into the newly convened Northern Ireland parliament with a bag containing a gun and grenades. His initial claim was that he was attempting to kill Sinn Féin leaders Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness. Later, during a court appearance, his defence was that, given his new career as a painter, it was in fact a piece of performance art.


6 See the case of the family of Stephen Biko who judicially challenged the TRC’s right to grant amnesty, thereby preventing them from taking a private civil action against perpetrators.

7 http://www.tearfund.org/Praying/Reflection/Between+Truth+And+Lies.htm

8 http://www.sfcg.org/Programmes/cgp/cgp_africa2.html

9 http://www.sfcg.org/Programmes/cgp/cgp_shorts2.html

10 A selection of the stories can be listened to on http://www.bbc.co.uk/northernireland/history/legacy
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