Traditions in Transition

A report for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister on the media representation of loyalism.

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**Introduction**

This is a report on the media representation of Ulster Protestants, unionists and loyalists. It draws upon contemporary research, all of which points to a general negation in the depiction of this broad and heterogeneous section of society. The potential consequences of this lamentable public portrayal are a bias against understanding the politics of Northern Ireland generally, as well as those of unionism and loyalism specifically; poor community self-esteem and alienation; and a hindrance to cross-community dialogue.

The report will suggest potential strategies to improve the public image and reputation of Ulster Protestants, in particular those sections of the community that feel most politically and culturally marginalized in public debate. But it will also reflect upon some of the problems in achieving a more satisfactory media representation, such as a hostile ideological and economic environment, educational underachievement and the burden of representation that falls upon representatives and cultural producers.

This is not a comprehensive review of media research and other relevant literature regarding the representation of Ulster Protestants and Northern Ireland. Nor does the report seek to offer in-depth accounts of the research mentioned. A short report such as this does not allow for such breadth and detail. Rather it strives to offer a representative sample of the scholarship in this area and summarise its perspectives and conclusions. The report also references some academic literature that looks beyond unionism and loyalism to the depiction of Northern Ireland more broadly. This is because the problem of Protestant media portrayal cannot be seen in isolation from that of Northern Ireland’s representation since they are constituents of that region.

The report is cognisant of the *Together: Building a United Community* strategy document from the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), and its vision of ‘equality of opportunity, the desirability of good relations and reconciliation’ (2013: 2) In particular this report speaks to one of the key priorities in the *Together* document: that is, to ‘create a community, which promotes mutual respect and understanding, is strengthened by its diversity and where cultural expression is celebrated and embraced (2013: 86). Media representation – whether in moving image, still image, audio or print – offer important forms of cultural expression in the contemporary world and open up potential routes to promote mutual respect and understanding. Indeed, the *Together* document
acknowledges the contribution of television and other media in building good relations among children in Northern Ireland, citing the Early Years’ Respecting Difference Media Initiative and the Sesame Tree programme (2013: 45).

A note on terminology
Throughout the report refers to ‘Ulster Protestants’, ‘unionists’ and ‘loyalists’ but it appreciates that this is a culturally and socially diverse group, with sometimes conflicting political points of view. For instance, not all Protestants designate as ‘unionists’, although most do; while not all unionists are Protestants. Essentially unionism espouses a political preference that Northern Ireland should remain part of the United Kingdom – a politics which does not necessarily assume or require any particular religious affiliation. Loyalism, on the other hand, has historically accrued various and shifting meanings: among them, a defence of Protestant ascendancy to the British throne; a militant form of unionism; a cultural expression of Britishness and the Orange tradition in Ireland; and more recently it has become increasingly and exclusively associated with working class unionists, often with derogatory connotations. These differences and nuances are worth bearing in mind, since it is the very complexity and variety within unionism and loyalism that the media representation often misses, and so defines the problem of their portrayal.

Traditions in Transition
This report has grown out of Traditions in Transition; a community based documentary film project looking at the Loyal Orders in Northern Ireland and was proposed by INTERCOMM as part of the Breaking the Cycle initiative. This initiative seeks to transform the fractured and damaged relations within and between the Ardoyne and Woodvale/Twaddell communities through the delivery of a three stranded approach that focuses on: community cohesion, conflict transformation and building for the future. To compliment this work, Traditions in Transition aims to use the medium of film to give cultural expression to a part of the community that feels misunderstood and maligned in the mainstream media. Specifically the documentary looks at elements of the Orange tradition and loyalist band culture, and it strives to move beyond the objectification of this group and the disabling shibboleths and stereotypes associated with them. The objectives of the documentary film project are various:
• challenge negative and derogatory images
• develop cultural confidence among the participant group, so facilitating entry into dialogue with others as self-assured, articulate agents
• encourage historically antagonistic social groups to look afresh at themselves and each other, in ways that might facilitate an exploration and acknowledgement of shared values
• invite critical reflection upon the often taken for granted processes of imagination and labour through which communities produce and reproduce themselves

To achieve these aims the project has employed Jonathan Hodge, a filmmaker with the Directory, an inter-community arts-based social enterprise, which promotes access to the arts in disadvantaged communities. The Directory, which works with Ulster University’s Belfast School of Art, has significant experience of delivering programmes in hard to reach loyalist communities.

The project has also drawn upon the knowledge and experience of Valerie Quinn, the Chairperson of the Confederation of Ulster Bands, and Iain Carlisle, the Operations Manager of the Ulster-Scots Community Network. Ms Quinn and Mr Carlisle identified suitable participants from the wider community, who have also contributed their knowledge and expertise, as well as being participants and subjects of the documentary. This approach – that encourages the subjects of the film to participate in the process of its production – is inspired by collaborative methods of filmmaking pioneered by others (McLaughlin, 2010; O’Neill, 2013). Creative collaboration is a way of assuaging the suspicions of participants that they will be denigrated or misrepresented, and instilling in them the confidence to tell their story.

Dr Stephen Baker, of the Centre for Media Research at Ulster University has provided academic expertise to the project and is the author of this report. He has published widely on the subject of media and cultural representation in Northern Ireland and is the co-author of two books, *The British Media and Bloody Sunday* (2015), and *The Propaganda of Peace: The Role of media and culture in the Northern Ireland Peace Process* (2010), and has written and researched on the question of loyalism’s media representation.
The process has been facilitated by Winston Irvine of INTERCOMM who brought the participants together, chairing and contributing to the group discussions that have been a crucial part of the process by which the *Traditions in Transition* documentary has taken shape.

**Media, politics and culture**

A report such as this one needs to first make the case for why questions of media representation matter. We need to take media representations seriously because of the integral role they play in our political processes and social life. For instance, the news disseminated by broadcasters and the press is the very life blood of democracy, playing a key role informing and shaping public opinion. To appreciate this we need only consider how the invention of the printing press, and the growth of a literate public, predate and make possible the rise of democratic forms of government (Keane, 1991; Curran, 2011). Without the mass media, modern mass democracies would simply have been unimaginable, since access to information and debates about current affairs remain prerequisites for democratic citizenship. Even forms that are perceived as relatively trivial, such as films and television drama, can be integral to our political process, since they also contribute to public understanding; and there are many examples of screen dramas igniting public debates about the issues of the day.

The media is also integral to the imagining of community and the formation of cultural identity (Anderson, 1983). Human beings, after all, are communicative animals; and human society is entirely contingent upon means of communication. In the contemporary world, both quantitatively and qualitatively, those means of communication are the modern media technologies and institutions that dominate cultural life. It follows then that changes in the media ownership, advances in media technology, the composition of personnel in media organisations, and the quality of the information they produce can have a profound effect upon the politics and identity of a region. Given the integral relationship that exists between media and society, it is hardly surprising that all the research into Northern Ireland’s portrayal by the press, broadcasters and filmmakers has at its core questions about the political and cultural life of the region.

**The media representation of Northern Ireland**
Changing news frameworks and onscreen transformations

To illustrate the relationship between media and society in Northern Ireland we can consider the shifts and variations that have taken place in how the region has been pictured in print and onscreen.

News coverage, for instance, has applied a variety of interpretative frameworks used by journalists according the times and circumstances they found themselves working in to make sense of the conflict. In the 1960s the region made international headlines with the emergence of the civil rights movement. At the time, images of youthful protest prompted journalists to draw comparisons with events elsewhere in the world, such as the black civil rights movement in the USA or the student uprisings in Paris and Prague. But as the situation in Northern Ireland deteriorated, journalists discerned something more troubling taking shape, and the story of youthful radicals campaigning for civil rights was replaced by reports of atavistic, intemperate sectarian conflict. With the deployment of British troops and the emergence of violent republicanism, the coverage changed again, configured this time as a struggle between the legitimate forces of the state and terrorists who could not be reasoned with. This interpretative framework would culminate in the Broadcasting Ban implemented in 1988, which banned the voices of republican and loyalist combatants from being broadcast on the airwaves. The ban remained in place until 1994.

With the advent of the peace process in the 1990s, the media had license to experiment with a new permissiveness in its coverage of events. Former loyalist and republican combatants lost their pariah status and appeared on television screens as credible participants in political negotiations. Rival local newspapers joined together to encourage political leaders to strive for peace and political accord. But the most remarkable transformation was in the image of Northern Ireland itself, which in this period became associated with hope, peace and reconciliation. It also underwent a process of rebranding, as it tried to shake off its reputation for the doldrums and economic dependency.

In film and television drama also, Northern Ireland has undergone a series of transformations that have been informed by economic and political circumstance. Early film production in the region portrayed the place as rural and comically charming, drawing upon a cultural repository of Irish stereotypes and shibboleths that were considered attractive to lucrative foreign audiences. Producers
from abroad – the US and Britain in particular – have been influential in defining the image of Northern Ireland onscreen, using the region as a location for stories of primordial violence and universal human tragedy that have paid scant attention to its history and politics, and so contributed little to public understandings of either. The stereotypes and political evasions preferred by foreign producers were challenged in the 1970s and 80s, as a generation of Irish filmmakers emerged who were much more critically and politically engaged in Irish life and its depiction in the media. However, Northern Ireland, tainted by the ‘troubles’, continued its association with images of futile violence, political backwardness and despair. The peace process brought some respite with a series of films funded by NI Screen that transformed Belfast on-screen from a city of belligerent gangsters into a setting for romantic comedies, part of a concerted effort to transform Northern Ireland’s image and reputation, and attract inward investment. This remains the strategy today as Northern Ireland has become globally recognisable as the location of HBO’s fantasy adventure set in a medieval-style universe, *Game of Thrones*.

*Analysis of news*

The representation of Northern Ireland, in both fictional and non-fictional forms, has inspired much bad tempered and often partisan debate. Academic research has not been immune to this. Nevertheless, the studies of news coverage of the region during the ‘troubles’ can usefully be broken down into two types: that which employs a propaganda model (Miller, 1994); and other studies that use a hegemonic understanding of the exercise of political and media power (Butler, 1995). What these approaches share is the view that the media in Northern Ireland have tended to privilege the interpretations and perspectives of the British state. This has skewed public understanding of the region’s politics and conflict in favour of the priorities and preferences of power and authority. More recent research into the media coverage of Northern Ireland during the peace process has begun to expose how powerful corporate interests, as well as the state, are increasingly influential in shaping the media agenda (McLaughlin and Baker, 2010). McLaughlin and Baker combine the propaganda model and a hegemonic understanding of political and cultural formations to examine the news, as well as film and television drama. They conclude that the media has endeavoured to actively persuade for peace, encouraging political representatives to strike out for a settlement, or in more subtle ways, by offering affirmative representations of the region and a preferred model of pacified citizenship designed to facilitate Northern Ireland’s entry into the global free market.
On the whole there has been overwhelming goodwill for the peace process – evident in regional, national and international media – yet political progress has often been slow, a reminder that media influence has its limits. Indeed, the role of local newspapers in shaping public opinion has been struck a blow by declining sales and the arrival of regional editions of British ‘red tops’ like the Sun and Mirror (McLaughlin, 2010). On top of this, local newsrooms are cutting back on staff and the public service ethos that underpins news and current affairs content on television is threatened by commercialisation. McLaughlin warns that as long as regional editors and journalists fatalistically buy into the rhetoric of the free market, they will miss the bigger picture here. What Rex Cathcart once described as that “contrary region” has emerged out of forty years of conflict to build a functioning civic society. An independent and democratically engaged journalism culture is indispensable to that task. (ibid: 41)

McLaughlin proposes that for news to serve democracy it needs to be subsidised and protected from the brute logic of profit and loss (ibid). The alternative is to leave news and journalism to market forces leading to a diminution in quality and the marginalisation of local perspectives and voices.

Analysis of film and television drama
Research into film and television dramas has been marked by similar concerns about the impact of economic imperatives upon the contribution that film and television might make to the political and cultural life of Northern Ireland. This is not a concern confined to Northern Ireland. Toby Miller more generally has spoken of the inevitable tension in media policy that exists between ‘the desire to build a viable sector of the economy that provides employment, foreign exchange and multiplier effects’ and ‘the desire for a representative and local cinema that reflects seriously upon society through drama’ (2000: 41). In the context of Northern Ireland, John Hill highlights that the recent and significant investment in regional film here has coincided with a period of economic and social restructuring within Northern Ireland that has placed a premium on the aspired-to economic benefits of film. But as he argues, ‘given the emotional and symbolic importance of the ways in which people and places are represented, and in which stories are told, in films relating to the North, the production of film in Northern Ireland is clearly much more than an economic matter’ (2006: 186)
More recently, Stephen Baker (forthcoming) argues in his analysis of Northern Ireland’s fledgling film industry that there is now a tendency to see film and television production purely in terms of inward investment and capital accumulation. Public money is distributed to global media corporations as an inducement to use Northern Ireland as a film location, the aim of which is to advertise the region on international film and television screens to potential foreign investors and tourists. In effect, Northern Ireland is rendered a commodity – its image on screen increasingly alienated from the history, politics and culture of the region and the people who live there. The exception to this has been films produced for British television where license payers’ money, a residual commitment to public service, and a tradition of social realism have seen a series of film dramas that speak to Northern Ireland’s historical and contemporary issues – for instance the BBC’s *As the Beast Sleeps* (Harry Bradbeer, 2002); Paul Greengrass’s *Bloody Sunday* (2002), broadcast on ITV; Channel 4’s *Sunday* (Charles McDougall, 2002) written by Jimmy McGovern’s and *Omagh* (Pete Travis, 2004).

The research into media coverage and representation in Northern Ireland has been concerned about how the state and other powerful political actors enjoy privileged access to and influence over the terms and conditions of debate in Northern Ireland. On the other hand, there are misgivings about the commercialisation of the press and the risks that this poses to its democratic role in informing local citizens. Similar arguments underscore the research into film and television drama, where it appears that beyond the sphere of public service broadcasting, the depiction of Northern Ireland on screen has been driven by economic imperatives that are disinterested in the region’s political and cultural life.

**The problem of Protestant media representation and cultural expression**

One of the main academic criticisms of the media’s representation of Northern Ireland is its tendency to decontextualise the politics of the region – removing it from any recognisable social environment – and so operating a bias against really understanding the root causes of the conflict and the motivations of its protagonists. In a seminal study of Irish film, John Hill (1988) draws attention to a longstanding tradition in cultural representation that is reluctant to deal with the politics and history that underlies the conflict. In effect, the ‘troubles’ are routinely reduced onscreen to an essential tragic flaw in the national or regional character, rather than a consequence of history and politics. All parties to the dispute over Northern Ireland have suffered from this
partial representation of the region’s politics. However, in this section the report looks specifically at the portrayal of Ulster Protestants, unionists and loyalists.

Alan F. Parkinson (1998) investigates the absence of sympathy and empathy for Ulster loyalism among British audiences during the ‘troubles’. He puts this down to the poor quality of information available through the various news and current affairs outlets. However more than this, Parkinson finds that the broadcasters’ efforts to steer a neutral or centrist path on the question of Northern Ireland meant that they were unsympathetic to republican militancy but that this did not translate into support or sympathy for unionism. Unionists, Parkinson argues, bear some responsibility for this: first of all because the divisions within unionism made it appear not only fractious and belligerent politics, but negative and uncompromising also. These qualities are deemed unattractive in a news agenda that prioritises consensus. Secondly, unionists were ‘unable to dismantle the communications barriers imposed by the initial stereotyping of their position’, while also being ineffective propagandists (ibid: 165).

Where Parkinson’s study highlights mainstream unionism’s flawed or absent media strategy, by contrast Graham Spenser (2010) reveals a sophisticated understanding of and approach to the media among the political representatives of the smaller loyalist parties. Spenser’s study looks at the attempts made by the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) and the Ulster Democratic Party (UDP) to influence the media agenda during the peace negotiations that lead to the Good Friday Agreement in April 1998. He concludes that loyalist spokespeople demonstrated an appreciation of the nuances of language in public communication and a willingness to exploit propaganda. Nevertheless, he finds that while the peace process provided a space within which an articulate loyalist politics could emerge, the press and broadcasters were not always receptive or able to accommodate such articulations because of a news agenda that prioritised conflict over conciliation.

This research into unionism and loyalism’s representation through the discourses of news and journalism highlights two problems. The first is unionist failings with regards its public presentation and communication; and the second is the difficulties in articulating often nuanced and novel political ideas through press and broadcasting organisations working to pre-existing frameworks. These are problems that might be remedied with media training but research into film and television drama reveals deeper ideological problems, which might, as Professor Martin McLoone suggests, need addressing at a political and social level (2008: 203).
McLoone concludes a brief essay entitled, ‘Representing the Unionists’ by saying that the future looks bleak with regards the media and cultural representation of Ulster Protestants (2008: 203). He suggests that unionists are caught between their negative representation at the hands of others and their struggle to find an agreed image of themselves. This problem of loyalist cultural self-expression is taken up by other academics and commentators and some of the criticisms have been harsh. Ulster Protestants are accused of being ‘disabled by an imaginative exclusiveness’ (Brown, 1985: 8), while unionism is indicted for being culturally ‘autistic’ (Butler, 1995: 102) or labouring under a ‘bowler-hatted inarticulacy’ (Nairn, 1977: 242). Brian Graham draws attention to what he sees as a fundamental crisis in Protestant identity. He argues that Ulster Protestants in general, and unionists in particular, suffer from ‘the lack of an agreed representation – or imaginary – of a place to legitimate and validate their domicile in the island of Ireland (1997: 34).

The question of place and landscape is central to Stephen Baker’s (2015) examination of film and television drama that highlights the tendency to decontextualise loyalism, rendering it incomprehensible and unconscionable. Baker suggests that film and television drama has had a tendency to mis-place loyalist characters, effectively positing them in a cinematic landscape (or mise-en-scene) in which they do not properly belong. As a consequence, Baker argues, loyalism is typically […] captured in the image of a gunman, as a monstrous outsider in cinematic Ireland, or alternatively viewed through the lens of generic conventions – horror and gangster films – where it provides an image of delinquent masculinity to trouble and thrill contemporary cinema audiences. Seldom is loyalism presented in any historical or social context that would help illuminate its politics or its actions; nor is it afforded any sense of political idealism, and as a consequence it is reduced to a form of psychopathology. (ibid: 84)

Earlier studies of British and Irish film by Brian McIlroy (1998) have drawn attention to a general elision of Ulster Protestants. For McIlroy, feature films have simplified the history and politics of Northern Ireland, reducing it to a dispute between the British and the Irish, viewed through the lens of ‘soft nationalism’ (1998: 1). Elsewhere he has argued that the cinema of the Thatcher-era ‘served
well the ideological position of the Catholic nationalist community’ (1993/2006: 88), and he goes on say:

The position of the security forces has been sketchily treated. The Protestant Unionist community has largely been ignored. Although narrative films can arguably play a crucial role in the cultural reconcilement of Northern Ireland’s communities, we find neither comfort nor proof in the productions made during the Thatcher years. We do, however, see bolder attempts than hitherto to articulate and anti-British politics (1993/2006: 88-89)

There are without question, films that have looked critically at the role of the British State in Northern Ireland, such as Ken Loach’s Hidden Agenda (1990) and others subsequently, most made by British directors. Also McIlroy’s assertion that Ulster Protestants are relatively absent from the big screen stands up to analysis. However his contention that films about Ireland and Northern Ireland are subject to a ‘soft nationalism’ is contested by those who argue that films about Ireland generally have tended to display a humanism, rather than any explicit constitutional preferences. Occasionally republican characters may be presented sympathetically but any commitment to violence is regarded as either a tragic or monstrous flaw (Hill, 1988). Indeed, in films made during the period of the peace process and after, any sort of political conviction is represented as a dangerous and deviant occupation (McLaughlin and Baker, 2010).

The temptation to compare how loyalists and republicans are represented on film is irresistible in the context of a political dispute that is fought also on the terrain of culture and propaganda. In truth, republicans and loyalists have both been treated to the same decontextualising portrayals that have rendered their political motivations and actions inexplicable and horrifying. Republicans have on occasions been depicted as having a modicum of political idealism not usual afforded loyalists onscreen, but they have also endured their fair share of mad, bad and dangerous gunmen in film and television drama. What republicans have perhaps benefited from by association is what Martin McLoone has referred to as the advent of a ‘cinema of national questioning in Ireland’ (1994: 168). He is referring to that generation, mentioned previously, of indigenous Irish filmmakers that emerged in the 1970s and 80s who began to defy the stereotypes associated with Ireland on screen and took aim at the shibboleths and essentialist myths of Irish identity. As McLoone sees it, these young filmmakers were representative of a broader cultural movement attempting to ‘reimagine
Ireland in new ways beyond the confines of traditional nationalism’, and as ‘explorations of the many-layered and contradictory nature of identity’ (ibid: 168). Northern Ireland has yet to achieve anything comparable that would facilitate the region self-consciously interrogating its political past and present, or the thorny question of identity.

**Loyalism and self-representation and cultural expression**

In November 2005, Belfast playwright, Gary Mitchell and his family were intimidated from their home reportedly by loyalists offended at his depiction of them on stage and screen. The news of the Mitchell family’s evacuation and the reasons for it gave credence to the harsh assessment that loyalism is lacking in cultural and artistic acumen (Brown, 1985; Butler, 1995; Nairn, 1977). Such perceptions were compounded by comments from a unionist MLA who in October 2013 said:

> The concept of 'the arts' is not something which the Protestant working-class community in this city buys into at any great level. Decisions by Belfast City Council and the regional government on investment in the Lyric and the MAC have been of great benefit and I welcome them. However, I am not so sure that they offer a tangible benefit to the people in Ballygomartín, Ballymurphy or Ballymacarrett.¹

The MLA’s comments fed the stereotype of the artless, cultural-less Prod. But this is a notion that depends upon an elitist conception of culture that equates it with ‘high art’, discounting the fact that Ulster Protestants avail of the same popular, commercial culture as everyone else. It also ignores the folkways of the Loyal Orders that are rich in symbolism, ritual, narrative and song. And it forgets the many artists that have emerged from Protestant backgrounds who perhaps do not necessarily wear their political hearts on their sleeves. In addition, in recent times there have been a series of plays that have emerged from loyalist sources with the launch of the Etcetera theatre group. Despite these cultural aspects and artistic achievements there is a perception that loyalism lacks cultural idioms that others can comfortably engage with. For instance, the public manifestation and cultural expression of the Loyal Orders has provoked criticism and incomprehension from sections of the broader community. Sometimes the disputes over flags, parades and bonfires are a consequence of long standing community tensions. But more generally, loyalism’s predilection for lively public

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¹ ‘Belfast theatres have little to offer working classes and Protestants in particular, claims DUP MLA William Humphrey’, *Belfast Telegraph*, 9 October 2013
celebrations and its ardent convictions sit uneasily with the emerging, preferred vision of Northern Ireland that prioritises consumer lifestyle choices over communal identity.

Finding a voice in austere times
The transformation taking place in Northern Ireland provides an important backdrop against which to understand the cultural predicament that working class unionism in particular finds itself confronted with, and this raises attendant questions regarding media representation. Northern Ireland, once better known for violent political division, ‘democratic deficit’ and a reliance on a large subvention from the British exchequer, now boasts a consociational style of politics, a democratic process and a determination to reduce its economic dependency. However the spoils of the new dispensation have not been spread evenly.

The Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report (2014) highlights how social and economic disadvantage is persistent among sections of the Catholic community, while working class Protestants face a series of problems, among them educational underachievement, low aspirations, acceptance of economic inactivity, physical and mental health problems, community fragmentation and lack of leadership (Northern Ireland Department for Social Development, 2004; Orr, 2008). As the Peace Monitoring Report notes: ‘In the past inequality was associated with discrimination; now it is the blind forces of the market that can shape the differential experiences of Protestants and Catholics, women and men and people from different ethnic backgrounds.’

The Peace Monitoring Report’s reference to ‘the forces of the market’ is significant since Northern Ireland’s entry into global capitalism has brought with it new discourses that emphasise the importance of economic competitiveness, both in terms of the region’s fitness to compete against other centres of commerce and production, and in terms of encouraging people to behave as competitive agents within Northern Ireland (Boland, 2014). While competitiveness is a requirement of success in this economic environment, in its most aggressive and unregulated forms it has the potential to deepen inequality in Northern Ireland, as it has done across the world (Piketty, 2014). This presents a specific challenge to the region since research indicates that inequality impacts adversely upon community cohesion and trust (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010, p 49-62), both of which are already in short supply in Northern Ireland. Indeed, fear and segregation remain major
obstacles to progress in Northern Ireland, despite the political achievements and the economic opportunities that the region has earned (Shirlow and Murtagh, 2006).

In this austere and divisive context finding forms of cultural self-expression are potentially crucial but a hostile economic environment may prevent it. Professor Nick Couldry has argued that the dominant economic rationality of our age privileges aggressive competition, privatisation and commodification, and this has a detrimental impact upon citizens’ ability to self-represent – or as he puts it, find a ‘voice’ (2010). Voice is ‘the process of giving an account of one’s life and its conditions’; to tell a story. Being able to narrate one’s life and circumstances is a fundamental feature of human action. As Couldry highlights, ‘to deny value to another’s capacity for narrative – to deny her potential for voice – is to deny a basic dimension of human life’ (2010, p 7). However, free market thinking places no value on voice and self-representation beyond that which can be monetised. In Northern Ireland this is most apparent in the millions of pounds invested in attracting US film and television producers to the region compared to the modest sums available for indigenous production. The rationale for this investment is clear and understandable – it is designed to promote Northern Ireland on the global stage, attract foreign investment and tourism, and create jobs and prosperity. But at the same time it renders the region a tabula rasa – a location overwhelmingly defined by economic activity and represented in a way that is far removed for the lives and experiences of people who live here. This has obvious dangers for a place emerging out of conflict that values dialogue and negotiations in which the voice of citizens is integral.

*Education and cultural confidence*

Even were the economic conditions more propitious there might remain barriers to positive forms of cultural self-expression. Some of these have already been referred to regarding educational underachievement in working class Protestants areas (Northern Ireland Department for Social Development, 2004; Orr, 2008). However it is important to recognise the intimate relationship that exists between education and culture, since low attainment can impact upon the ability of citizens to give satisfactory voice to their concerns and values. This is also a question of cultural confidence, as highlighted by this remark from an anonymous contributor to a grassroots discussion about the working class Protestants:
We knew full well that the media were short-changing us when it came to representing ‘our’ side of the story, but what was our side of the story? We couldn’t even explain it properly ourselves. And it’s still the same. There’s plenty of times people around here have refused to take part in cross-community meetings, not because we don’t want to sit down with Catholics, but because we don’t have the self-confidence to do so. Few of us can articulate our case the way they can theirs (Hall, 1994, p 8)

This comment is from 1994. Arguably the same lack of self-assurance is evident in working class Protestant communities today. What the quote highlights is the simultaneous sense of being misrepresented by the media but lacking the articulacy and confidence to give adequate self-expression to oneself. As the anonymous contributor makes clear, this impacts negatively upon the ability and willingness of working class Protestants to engage in cross-community dialogue and negotiations.

*The burden of representation*

Cultural confidence can also be sapped from a community that considers itself routinely maligned in the media. Indeed, one of the most nefarious impacts of negative media attention is that the denigrated group identifies with its own derogatory image and reputation. In effect, if you tell people often enough that they are aberrant and monstrous they come to *know* themselves as such. Breaking this cycle is an important step towards developing a better self-esteem and self-image of a social group, while at the same time encouraging its neighbours to look upon it more positively. However marginalised social groups should perhaps guard against the entirely understandable temptation to demand wholly positive public portrayals, as if by simply replacing negative stereotypes with affirmative images this will somehow remedy the problem of their media representation. Other marginalised groups have confronted this problem and provide a guide for how it might be addressed.

Black communities in Britain have in their own circumstances faced discrimination, underscored by media representations that demonised and stereotyped them. Initially black cultural producers were concerned to get access to the means by which they might give representation to black communities and begin to challenge negative stereotypes with positive portrayals. However, by the 1980s many
black artists had concluded that it was insufficient to simply replace negative images with positive ones. This was for a number of reasons.

First of all, while affirmative images brought some temporary relief from routine demonisation, they had the potential to quickly ossify into a new set of stereotypes that in their own way could be just as simplistic, trivialising and socially restrictive as the adverse depictions they set out to overturn. Secondly, black filmmakers and artists also argued that affirmative stereotypes left intact the essentialist notions of identity that racist ideologies depended upon (Mercer: 1988). Racism, they noted, insists that Others are ‘all the same’ and that there is something at the core of those Others that renders them fundamentally different and incompatible. Merely replacing negative with positive representations does little (or indeed nothing) to undermine this essentialising logic. As a consequence black artists discerned that they needed representational strategies that insisted on highlighting the heterogeneity and social complexity of black communities, and that could therefore resist reproducing simplifying stereotypes, no matter how well intentioned.

This is what Professor Stuart Hall (1996) referred to as the second ‘moment’ of black cultural practice – the realisation that simply getting access to the means of cultural production was not enough in itself to defy racist stereotypes. Black artists and filmmakers also had to expose the essentialist myths that underscored racism. This strategy was in large part inspired by the theoretical insights of the emerging academic discipline of Cultural Studies. The new discipline demonstrated that identity is not something people are born with – identity is not a given – it is socially constructed. Neither are identities stable and pure, rather they are fluid and hybrid, with individuals taking up multiple, overlapping subject positions according race, class, gender and sexuality etc. With these theoretical insights black artists and filmmakers were freed from the restrictive racist definitions of ‘blackness’ and able to set about illuminating ‘the extraordinary diversity of subjective positions, social experiences and cultural identities which compose the category “black”’ (1996: 443). As Stuart Hall notes, this signalled ‘the end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject’ (1996: 443).

The anti-essentialist notion of identity, and the end of the ‘black subject’, presents an obvious challenge to racist ideologies that depend upon the notion that social difference is inherent and unalterable. From the perspective of Ulster Protestants, it holds out a theoretical framework within
which culturally marginalised and social excluded sections of the community can begin to defy the
simplifying, derogatory stereotypes that they frequently labour under. This is important because it
offers a way to refute the casual dismissal of working class unionists and loyalists as being ‘all the
same’, which can result in missed opportunities to engage meaningfully with progressive elements
within the Protestant community. At the same time, anti-essentialist strategies make it difficult to
present the malignant behaviour of a few as somehow representative of the many.

While anti-essentialist strategies in media representation and cultural self-expression have the
potential to challenge the prejudices of others, they offer a distinct challenge to indigenous cultural
producers. As black filmmakers and artists found, they could no longer assume to speak for the
whole black community or a unified black subject, since no such subject exists. To do otherwise is
presumptuous and places an unrealistic burden of representation on individual artists and on
particular acts of cultural expression. On this point Stuart Hall is worth quoting at length.

We should put this as plainly as possible. Films are not necessarily good because black
people make them. They are not necessarily ‘right on’ by virtue of the fact that they deal
with black experience. Once you enter the politics of the end of the essential black subject
you are plunged headlong into a maelstrom of continuously contingent, unguaranteed,
political argument and debate: a critical politics, the politics of criticism. You can no longer
conduct black politics through a strategy of a simple set of reversals, putting in the place of
the bad old essential white subject, the new essentially good black subject. Now, that
formulation may seem to threaten the collapse of an entire political world. Alternatively, it
may be greeted with extraordinary relief at the passing away of what at one time seemed to
be a necessary fiction. (1996: 444)

Similarly, Stephen Baker, concludes his analysis of the malign representation of loyalism on film
with a call for a similar ‘critical’ approach to cultural self-representation. He writes:

Loyalism needs to be the subject of a politically informed cinema and it needs to be a
participant in a critically engaged film culture if it is to challenge and change its lamentable
image and reputation on-screen. In short, if loyalism feels it has been misrepresented and
misplaced in the films made by others then the obvious solution is for loyalists to make their own! (2015: 95)

Summary
Research into the representation of Ulster Protestants specifically and Northern Ireland more generally has delivered various findings, which are not always consistent with each other. Some studies point to a tendency in news coverage to privilege the State’s ‘official’ version of events, or those of other powerful political actors and latterly corporate interests (Miller, 1994; Butler, 1995; McLaughlin and Baker, 2010). Other studies in this field have highlighted the professional practices of journalists and the institutions they work within as inhibiting meaningful public debate about Northern Ireland (Parkinson, 1998; Spenser, 2010).

Contrary to news and journalism studies, some research into film and television drama has identified texts that are critical of the State’s role in Northern Ireland and view the conflict through a ‘soft nationalist’ lens (McIlroy, 1993/2006; McIlroy, 1998). However most research into film and television drama has highlighted a propensity to decontextualise the region’s politics and use the conflict as a backdrop against which to play out humanist stories of tragedy. Protagonists are then presented as being caught in an endless, hopeless cycle of violence, as if that is their fate, loyalists among them.

In the discourse of news, unionist and loyalist representatives have struggled against the preference of broadcasters for neutrality on the issue of Northern Ireland (Parkinson, 1998), or news values that prefer stories of conflict over those of conciliation (Spenser, 2010). However, it is in film and television drama that unionism and loyalism has fared worst. On the big and small screen, unionism has generally been ignored (McIlroy, 1998), and when it has been present, it has tended to appear in as deviant, alien and misplaced (Baker, 2015).

In such circumstances it is tempting to accuse the media, in all its forms, of bias; and without question individual incidents of bias and prejudice might account for some of the negative coverage that loyalism has received but it cannot account for all of it, or indeed the general, dreadful public profile endured by sections of the Protestant community. As Parkinson (1998) has suggested, some of this is self-inflicted with unionists appearing divided and negative, and lacking effective media
strategies that enable them to reach beyond their own constituency. We might add that there is also a lack of self-awareness among loyalists about how certain public manifestations of loyalism might look in the media.

These are issues that might be addressed with media training but this report has tried to consider some of the deeper cultural and structural reasons that are likely to impact upon the ability of disadvantaged Protestants to project themselves positively into the public sphere. These are educational underachievement, lack of cultural confidence and an austere economic environment that is disinterested in forms of cultural expression that are not part of a process of capital accumulation.

As a way out of this malaise the report has looked to the example of another social group that has felt socially marginalised and misrepresented – black Britons. In particular it has drawn attention to how many black artists developed a theoretically sophisticated approach to their cultural practices. With this in mind, this report recommends that culturally disenfranchised and misrepresented Ulster Protestant communities need to develop:

- educational programmes that advance and deepen a critical and analytical understanding of the media and cultural environment in which the community exists
- media training programmes that deliver key skills in public communication and presentation
- technical training programmes that deliver key skills in areas of media production to facilitate cultural expression and self-representation

None of these are separate strands but should be seen as interrelated programmes that exist within a framework of a sustained culture of criticism and self-reflection capable of testing and refining media and cultural practice. Two things would facilitate this. The first is the willingness of government to invest in media and cultural production beyond the creative media industries, and especially in areas generally deprived of the means of media self-expression. Given the shortcomings identified in the media research outlined in this report, it is a democratic and cultural imperative that steps are taken that enable communities to speak for themselves and to each other. Secondly, a democratic, civil and non-violent environment is a condition of stimulating intellectual
and cultural activity, since intimidation stifles free thinking, the exchange of ideas and ultimately robs cultural citizens of their voice.

The aim of such a grassroots media strategy is to enable disenfranchised sections of unionism and loyalism to better present themselves in public; to develop cultural self-awareness and community self-esteem, and so allowing them to become self-confident participants in cross-community dialogue and the broader democratic process. It will also encourage the community to reflect upon its own transformation within a reformed Northern Ireland, and in particular how it gives positive cultural expression to its place within it. The Traditions in Transition programme, with its collaborative method, has provided an important model in how this work might be carried forward.

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