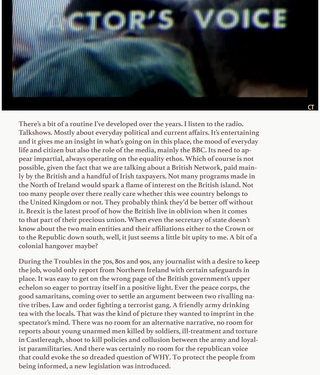
02 *Quiet*

"And we must try to find ways to starve the terrorist and the hijacker of the oxygen of publicity on which they depend. In our societies we do not believe in constraining the media, still less in censorship. But ought we not to ask the media to agree among themselves a voluntary code of conduct, a code under which they would not say or show anything which could assist the terrorists' morale or their cause while the hijack lasted?"

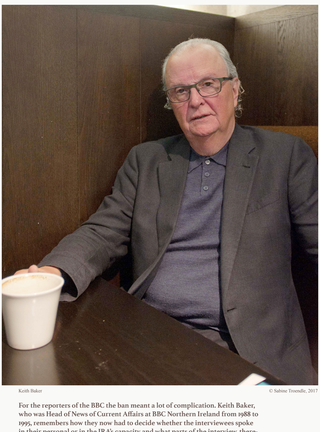
Margaret Thatcher, Speech to American Bar Association, July 1985



CT

There's a bit of a routine I've developed over the years. I listen to the radio. Talkshows. Mostly about everyday political and current affairs. It's entertaining and it gives me an insight in what's going on in this place, the mood of everyday life and citizen but also the role of the media, mainly the BBC. Its need to appear impartial, always operating on the equality ethos. Which of course is not possible, given the fact that we are talking about a British Network, paid mainly by the British and a handful of Irish taxpayers. Not many programs made in the North of Ireland would spark a flame of interest on the British island. Not too many people over there really care whether this wee country belongs to the United Kingdom or not. They probably think they'd be better off without it. Brexit is the latest proof of how the British live in oblivion when it comes to that part of their precious union. When even the secretary of state doesn't know about the two main entities and their affiliations either to the Crown or to the Republic down south, well, it just seems a little bit uptity to me. A bit of a colonial hangover maybe?

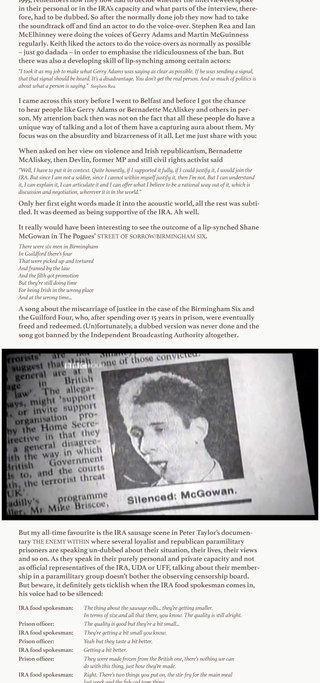
During the Troubles in the 70s, 80s and 90s, any journalist with a desire to keep the job, would only report from Northern Ireland with certain safeguards in place. It was easy to get on the wrong page of the British government's upper echelon so eager to portray itself in a positive light. Ever the peace corps, the good samaritans, coming over to settle an argument between two rivalling native tribes. Law and order fighting a terrorist gang. A friendly army drinking tea with the locals. That was the kind of picture they wanted to imprint in the spectator's mind. There was no room for an alternative narrative, no room for reports about young unarmed men killed by soldiers, ill-treatment and torture in Castlereagh, shoot to kill policies and collusion between the army and loyalist paramilitaries. And there was certainly no room for the republican voice that could evoke the so dreaded question of WHY. To protect the people from being informed, a new legislation was introduced.



From 1988 until 1994, the Tory government put a ban on broadcasting the voices of all those who support terrorism. They were particularly concerned about television, its huge audience and the great impact of visual images. The BBC was said to be more influential than Parliament, the press, trade unions, the civil service, the monarchy and the church together. Eleven loyalist and republican paramilitary groups were listed, however, the real target was Sinn Féin, a democratically elected party and an integral part of the political process. They practically disappeared from television with a few moments of airtime that could just as well have been an episode in Monty Python's FLYING CIRCUS. Not banning someone's ideas, but banning the voice, it's so bizarre and yet beautifully absurd.

Take REAL LIVES for instance. A documentary about Martin McGuinness, former IRA member turning Sinn Féin politician, and Gregory Campbell from the DUP, two politicians from two opposing parties, only that one of the parties, Sinn Féin, was under the broadcast ban and the other, the DUP, which also happened to be the leading party in Northern Ireland, was not. So whilst Gregory Campbell was free to promote the shoot to kill policy, Martin McGuinness and his wife had do be dubbed – at least partially.

"It was all really non-sensical. When you have Martin McGuinness' wife speaking as the wife of an IRA commander, her voice is done by an actress, but when she sights, she sighs in her own personal capacity, so it's her real sigh." Keith Baker



Keith Baker © Sabine Tvrzedlic, 2017

For the reporters of the BBC the ban meant a lot of complication. Keith Baker, who was Head of News of Current Affairs at BBC Northern Ireland from 1988 to 1995, remembers how they now had to decide whether the interviewees spoke in their personal or in the IRAs capacity and what parts of the interview, therefore, had to be dubbed. So after the normally done job they now had to take the soundtrack off and find an actor to do the voice-over. Stephen Rea and Ian McElhinney were doing the voices of Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness regularly. Keith liked the actors to do the voice-overs as normally as possible – just go dadada – in order to emphasise the ridiculousness of the ban. But there was also a developing skill of lip-watching among certain actors:

"I took it as my job to make what Gerry Adams was saying as clear as possible. If he was sending a signal, that that signal should be heard. It's a disadvantage. You don't get the real person. And so much of politics is about what a person is saying." Stephen Rea

I came across this story before I went to Belfast and before I got the chance to hear people like Gerry Adams or Bernadette McAliskey and others in person. My attention back then was not on the fact that all these people do have a unique way of talking and a lot of them have a capturing aura about them. My focus was on the absurdity and bizarreness of it all. Let me just share with you:

When asked on her view on violence and Irish republicanism, Bernadette McAliskey, then Devlin, former MP and still civil rights activist said

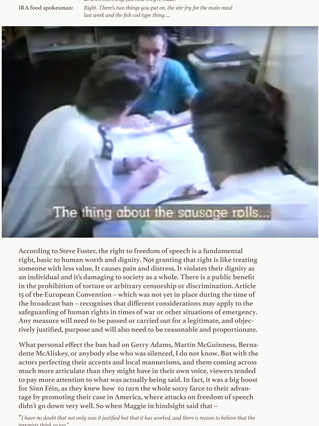
"Well, I have to put it in context. Quite honestly, if I supported it fully, if I could justify it, I would join the IRA. But since I am not a soldier, since I cannot within myself justify it, then I'm not. But I can understand it. I can explain it. I can articulate it and I can offer what I believe to be a rational way out of it, which is discussion and negotiation, wherever it is in the world."

Only her first eight words made it into the acoustic world, all the rest was subtitled. It was deemed as being supportive of the IRA. Ah well.

It really would have been interesting to see the outcome of a lip-synched Shane McGowan in The Pogues' STREET OF SORROW/BIRMINGHAM SIX.

There were six men in Birmingham
In Guildford there's four
That were jailed and tortured
And framed by the law
And the fifth got promotion
But they're still doing time
For being Irish in the wrong place
And at the wrong time...

A song about the miscarriage of justice in the case of the Birmingham Six and the Guilford Four, who, after spending over 15 years in prison, were eventually freed and conformed. (Unfortunately, a dubbed version was never done and the song got banned by the Independent Broadcasting Authority altogether.



But my all-time favourite is the IRA sausage scene in Peter Taylor's documentary THE ENEMY WITHIN where several loyalist and republican paramilitary prisoners are speaking un-dubbed about their situation, their lives, their views and so on. As they speak in their purely personal and private capacity and not as official representatives of the IRA, UDA or UFF, talking about their membership in a paramilitary group doesn't bother the observing censorship board. But beware, it definitely gets ticklish when the IRA food spokesman comes in, his voice had to be silenced:

IRA food spokesman:	*The thing about the sausage rolls... they're getting smaller. In terms of size and all that there, you know. The quality is still alright.*
Prison officer:	*The quality is good but they're a bit small...*
IRA food spokesman:	*They're getting a bit small you know.*
Prison officer:	*Yeah but they taste a bit better.*
IRA food spokesman:	*Getting a bit better.*
Prison officer:	*They were made frozen from the British one, there's nothing we can do with this thing, just how they're made.*
IRA food spokesman:	*Right. There's two things you put on, the stir-fry for the main meal last week and the fish end tape thing ...*



According to Steve Foster, the right to freedom of speech is a fundamental right, basic to human worth and dignity. Not granting that right is like treating someone with less value. It causes pain and distress. It violates their dignity as an individual and it's damaging to society as a whole. There is a public benefit in the prohibition of torture or arbitrary censorship or discrimination. Article 13 of the European Convention – which was not yet in place during the time of the broadcast ban – recognises that different considerations may apply to the safeguarding of human rights in times of war or other situations of emergency. Any measure will need to be passed or carried out for a legitimate, and objectively justified, purpose and will also need to be reasonable and proportionate.

What personal effect the ban had on Gerry Adams, Martin McGuinness, Bernadette McAliskey, or anybody else who was silenced, I do not know. But with the actors perfecting their accents and local mannerisms, and them coming across much more articulate than they might have in their own voice, viewers tended to pay more attention to what was actually being said. In fact, it was a big boost for Sinn Féin, as they knew how to turn the whole sorry farce to their advantage by promoting their case in America, where attacks on freedom of speech didn't go down very well. So when Maggie in hindsight said that –

"I have no doubt that not only was it justified but that it has worked, and there is reason to believe that the terrorists think so too."

– well, I just like to quote Keith again: *"It wasn't – aah – but they have to say that."*

Keith Baker, Interview on 6 September 2017
Liz Curtis, The Propaganda War, 1984
Brice Dickson, The European Convention on Human Rights and the Conflict in Northern Ireland, 2010
Steve Foster, Human Rights and Civil Liberties, 2008
Glenn Greenwald, Why Privacy Matters, 2014
David Miller, Don't Mention The War, 1994
Peter Taylor (Reporter), The Enemy Within, 1990