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# British debate: how free is its press?

## BBC drops program on Ulster, sparks dispute on coverage of terrorism

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The British Broadcasting Corporation's cancellation of a television program about extremism in Northern Ireland has added to fears that the news media in Britain are losing more and more of their independence.

The board of governors of the BBC decided to view and then withhold the program "At the Edge of the Union" after Home Secretary Leon Brittan warned it would give the men of violence in Ulster undue publicity.

BBC chairman Stuart Young said Mr. Brittan's remarks had raised grave issues about coverage of terrorism.

Much of the government's concern arose from the fact that the film was to have included lengthy comments by the man thought to be chief of staff of the Provisional Irish Republican Army, Martin McGuinness. But BBC executives pointed out that Mr. McGuinness is also an elected member of the Ulster assembly set up by the government of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

It was clear that the ban had to be seen in the context of mounting pressure by the Thatcher government on the press and broadcasting to take another look at their policies on reporting of security-sensitive matters.

Outside Britain it is not always appreciated that journalists here enjoy considerably less freedom than many of their counterparts abroad — notably in the United States, where the First Amendment to the Constitution offers support for the independence of the press.

Among the limitations on the British media, the most important is the Official Secrets Act, which permits the authorities to prosecute when they believe national security has been damaged by the disclosure of information.

In two important recent cases the Thatcher government has prosecuted civil servants who passed information, either directly or indirectly, to newspapers.

Echoes of these cases were stirred when the governors of the BBC responded to Brittan's warnings about the Ulster film by taking the unprecedented steps of viewing it before airing and overruling top executives.

As the corporation's chairman argued that the integrity of the BBC had not been undermined, television and radio journalists called a one-day protest strike for Wednesday. Journalists in commercial television have decided to join the strike.

They saw the BBC's cancellation of "At the Edge of the Union" as a new case of the government applying unreasonable curbs to journalistic freedom.

Inside the BBC, executives noted that the Thatcher Government's attitude to the program had been colored by the Trans World Airlines hostage crisis at Beirut airport. Mrs. Thatcher believes the media should stop giving terrorists the "oxygen of publicity" upon which they depend. She and Mr. Brittan saw the proposed Ulster program as providing that "oxygen."

Controversy over the rights of the British media has

found the judiciary adopting conflicting standpoints. Lord Scarman, a staunch defender of civil rights, has argued that British media activity should be safeguarded by a code of conduct under the law. He says the European Convention of Human Rights, which Britain supports, should be codified into English law.

But in a high court case concerning the parental rights of a surrogate mother, a judge earlier this year ordered the press to refrain from publishing details about the father of the baby or his wife. Journalists critical of the judge's ruling claimed it reflected a growing tendency by the courts to set unacceptable limits to reporting.

The Observer newspaper is bringing a test case in the high court against magistrates who refuse to allow their names to be mentioned in reports of the cases they try.

Mounting concern over governmental pressure on the media has led to the formation of the Association of British Editors.

As the argument about the BBC's banned Ulster film continued, unnamed members of the corporation's governing board claimed the program was unbalanced and the correct administrative methods concerning control over its contents had not been followed.

In many parts of the BBC, the impact of the governors' decision was profound. Employees of the corporation's External Services, who pride themselves on being independent of government pressure, pointed out that immediately after the governors' ban became known, unfriendly governments claimed the BBC was obviously a tool of the British government. Among those making such remarks were the authorities in Libya and Iran.

But inside the Thatcher administration there were no regrets about the ban. Brittan said the corporation had not been pressured. The chairman of the Conservative Party, Selwyn Gummer, said it was a good decision.

Journalism and broadcasting do not operate in a vacuum. They have special responsibility to those who would suffer at the hands of people who recognize no obligation toward fellow human beings, Mr. Gummer said.

The leader of the Liberal Party, David Steel, accused the government of adopting a "mummy knows best" approach to media freedom.