Political Contest and Oppositional Voices in Postconflict Democracy: The Impact of Institutional Design on Government–Media Relations

Rice, C. and Somerville, I.

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Introduction

The media are considered to play a crucial democratic role in the public sphere through representing political issues to the public (Gelders et al. 2007); facilitating deliberation, public opinion formation and political participation (Habermas 1989); acting as the 'watchdog' of powerful societal institutions (Norris 2000); and in assisting in the development of civil society in politically fragile and divided contexts (Taylor 2000). Journalists are expected to perform their news reporting within the framework of public interest values, such as objectivity, impartiality, public service, autonomy, and a critical questioning of power (Street 2001). Yet, it is acknowledged that political, cultural, organisational, economic, and relational factors affect this journalistic ideal (Davis 2010). In deeply divided, post-conflict societies, ethno-political antagonisms are fundamental to almost all aspects of civic life, yet there is limited research into how government-media relations operate in such contexts. Most media-politics studies focus on Western majoritarian parliamentary or presidential systems - that is, any system that has clear 'winners' and 'losers' after elections - and where institutional factors are considered, the focus is largely on how party systems impact on journalism (e.g. Çarkoğlu et al. 2014; Hallin and Mancini 2004; Sheafer and Wolfsfeld 2009). This focus however, neglects important institutional variables, such as mandatory coalition, proportionality and special cross-community voting arrangements, which pertain in more constitutionally complex democracies and which may have a significant impact on media-politics relations.

A good example of such complexity is the consociational institutions designed to encourage post-conflict democratisation in Northern Ireland. However, while relatively unusual in Western societies, it should be noted that Northern Ireland is not as unique in this regard as one might think, for example, since 1989, 82 peace agreements across 20 sub-Saharan countries have included provisions for consociational power-sharing institutions (Aroussi et al. 2013). Consociationalism has also been central to the political system in divided societies such as Bosnia, Macedonia, Switzerland, Belgium, Iraq, Nigeria, Lebanon, and South Africa. Thus we use contemporary Northern Ireland as a strategic case study to investigate how consociational political institutions impact on the roles and relationships of the actors responsible for communicating political issues in non-majoritarian democracies. We analyse data from 33 semi-structured interviews with political journalists and the two key groups of government communicators in the Northern Ireland political system, civil service Government Information Officers (GIOs) and Ministerial Special Advisers (SpAds). By examining government-media relations in this context, we demonstrate the importance of considering the *institutional design* of the democratic system, rather than just 'party systems' when attempting to develop a comprehensive, internationally applicable theory of media-politics. By 'institutional design', we refer to "the mix of institutional structures and processes… [developed] in order to avoid democratic perversions" (Olsen 1997: 223).

Political contest, party systems and the media

It is commonly accepted that the media can shape, rather than merely reflect, the political agenda (Walgrave and Van Aelst 2006). This is because, as scholars have noted, in many Western polities the media can be understood as a political institution in its own right, in the sense that it can: "create a picture of political reality that categorizes and directs political action" (Sparrow 2006: 150). This relationship is nonetheless complex in that while the media operates according to its own standard practices, routines and institutional pressures, it is simultaneously in close collaboration with political institutions (through interdependent source-media relations) making these institutional boundaries more fluid (Cook 2006).

Wolfsfeld's (1997) political contest model illuminates how political dynamics shape a society's political journalism. Put simply the theory: "attempts to move away from more media-centric approaches in political communication by emphasizing the ways in which the political environment has a dominating influence on how the news media cover political actors and events" (Sheafer and Wolfsfeld 2009:149). However, Wolfsfeld's argument is not that political processes influence a passive media; the agency and influence of media actors must also be recognised. Wolfsfeld (2004) used the model as a lens through which to analyse the Northern Ireland peace process. His study explored the largely supportive role of the media in the Northern Ireland peace process, in contrast to the antagonistic and arguably destructive role of the media in the Israel-Palestine peace process. His analysis concluded that a combination of the impact of elite consensus or dissensus, journalistic norms, and the level of societal violence and polarization, explains the role that the media played in each political context. Sheafer and Wolfsfeld (2009) contend that long-term structural and cultural differences are an important indicator of the role that 'oppositional voices' play across

political environments. In particular they argue that in multi-party/polarized societies (e.g. Israel), as opposed to two-party systems (e.g. the United States), the media will provide more room for 'oppositional voices'. The presumption here is that: "the greater the number and span of political parties, the more we would expect the news media to be open to a variety of dissenting voices, including those coming from extra-parliamentary actors" (Sheafer and Wolfsfeld 2009:149). Their work adds a useful amendment to Bennett's (1990) "indexing hypothesis" which envisages little space in the mainstream media for oppositional voices from extra-parliamentary actors outside mainstream political elites.

In research exploring how political and media systems interact, a significant amount of attention has been paid to analyzing how different party systems and media systems impact on political communication. One of the main reference points for this work is Hallin and Mancini's (2004) 'Three Models of Media and Politics' based on the Mediterranean, Northern/Central European, and the North Atlantic experience respectively – the 'Polarized Pluralist', 'Democratic Corporatist', and the 'Liberal' models. Hallin and Mancini (2004) distinguish these models based on four dimensions: the structure of media markets; political parallelism, journalistic professionalism, and the role of the state.

While broadly useful in explaining media-politics relations, significant limitations with their approach have been highlighted, most importantly, that many countries display elements of more than one model or even all three (Hadland 2011). Significantly, while the 'nature of the state' and 'the development of civil society' is highlighted as crucial to understanding the role of the news media, there is little reflection on the purposeful

design of state institutions. Instead there is a focus on how much the state intervenes in media systems through laws, ownership, or funding, albeit according to historical and social developments, or the role of party systems (i.e. number of parties, degree of polarization) in explaining similarities and differences between country case studies. More recently Hallin and Mancini (2011) themselves have acknowledged that their previous work: "deals with only a limited number of types of party systems, excluding, among others, all forms of noncompetitive systems…Such a case clearly requires a different conceptualization of the relation of media and politics than anything we develop in *Comparing Media Systems*" (Hallin and Mancini 2011: 294).

It is also clear that different cultural and political environments affect a region's political journalism in different ways (Avraham 2003; Donsbach and Patterson 2004). For example, Taylor's research, has outlined how the media has been used by governments in a diplomatic capacity, building alliances to encourage nation building within divided or conflict afflicted societies such as Kosovo and Bosnia (Taylor 2000). Uribe's (2013) work on Chile has shown that during its democratic transition, government communication was used to promote national unity, stability and civil liberties, with the media being largely supportive of this aim. He traces the different phases of government-media relations as democracy stabilised in the country and government communication became more presidential, better resourced and the media more critical of government. This suggests that in post-conflict political contexts how the constitutional arrangements can impact on government-media relations is an area worth exploring. Indeed, there have been calls for more attention to *government systems* rather than just focusing on party systems (De Albuquerque 2011). Furthermore, the variables which pertain in consensus style democracies, such as

centralization or decentralization, have been specified as providing potentially significant revisions to Hallin and Mancini's models (Humphreys 2012). Therefore, it is imperative for greater understanding and theoretical development to investigate government-media relations in a context where party systems are not necessarily the defining institutional characteristic. Investigating a consociational government system offers such an opportunity.

Consociational Government

Lijphart (2008) observes that to ensure socio-political stability in deeply divided, post-conflict societies, specific types of constitutional architecture tend to be embedded in peace agreements. Typically this includes: *grand coalitions* between the main groups/communities; *mutual veto* meaning a simple majority is never enough in decision making processes to guarantee widespread confidence in emerging civic institutions[i]; and, *proportionality* to ensure fair representation for all sides in key societal institutions, such as political office, the civil service, the police, etc. It is acknowledged that power-sharing is a useful measure at least in the short term to end violence (Samuels 2009), enabling a coexistence of different societal groups (Le Van 2011). However, Lijphart (1999) would go further and contend that consociational democracy is a 'kinder', 'gentler' form of democracy that encourages deliberation and compromise between divided groups, vital for post-conflict co-habitation. For example, it has been argued that consociationalism can lead to greater overall equality in societies, a greater satisfaction with the democratic system, and a higher quality of democracy (Norris 2005). Conversely, there are significant criticisms of consociationalism. One central criticism concerns elite cooperation and the fact that

political elites themselves are often a catalyst in political and societal divisions by making social, ethnic or religious divisions 'salient' (Andeweg 2000). Other criticisms are directed at consociational mechanisms and design. For example, the inclusive nature of consociationalism is said to limit the accountability of the political parties in power as: "inclusion alters direct relationships between citizens and politicians by reducing the ability of voters to punish or reward performance" (Le Van 2011:39). In the next sections, we briefly explain some of the implications of consociational institutional design for the governance of Northern Ireland and in addition contextualise the political and media background.

The Northern Ireland context

Following thirty years of political conflict over its constitutional status, Northern Ireland has for the past two decades been governed by all of the mainstream political parties in a consociational system. There is no provision for an official opposition in the 1998 constitutional settlement which ended the long ethno-political conflict between unionists/Protestants and nationalists/Catholics[ii]. Northern Ireland established a mandatory coalition government from 1998-2016 consisting of four, then five, political parties from across the political and constitutional spectrum all of whom held ministerial cabinet responsibilities.

Governance in Northern Ireland has several distinctive features. Firstly, it is a devolved polity, with many responsibilities of government 'redistributed' from Westminster to the national/regional[iii] legislature. Secondly, it operates on a mandatory consociational power-sharing basis – the governing coalition is comprised of the major political parties

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from across the political divide[iv]. Thirdly, there is no provision for any parliamentary speaking time, nor any access to funding for an official opposition party under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement[v]. Lastly, the post-conflict context adds an additional level of complexity to the political environment

The media context in Northern Ireland also has some important distinguishing features. The main broadcast outlets are *BBC Northern Ireland*, *Ulster Television* and several independent radio channels; these organizations strive for impartiality in their news coverage of Northern Ireland and promote themselves as serving the whole population (unionist/British and nationalist/Irish). However, of the three national daily newspapers, only *The Belfast Telegraph* positions itself to appeal to both communities in Northern Ireland. The *Irish News* targets the nationalist community while the *News Letter* is staunchly unionist in its outlook and this longstanding "political parallelism" (Hallin and Mancini 2004) is also a feature of the local press. At the same time, the key constitutional and institutional changes identified above mean that political journalism has changed over the past two decades. Northern Ireland journalists now cover news in a post-conflict society, governed by a devolved power-sharing administration, which means that local politicians and their policies come under more scrutiny now than they have done in the past 40 years (McLaughlin and Baker 2010). Despite this distinctive environment, there is remarkably little empirical research into how government and media interact in post-conflict Northern Ireland. Some studies have examined the early stages of the peace process (Spencer 2000) and devolution (Fawcett 2002) but none so far have focused explicitly, as we do, on examining the link between the new political context, the institutional design of government and the role of the media in relation to the evolving political system. Our research questions are therefore:

1. How does the consociational nature of government in Northern Ireland affect government-media relations?

2. What can we learn from the impact of consociationalism on government-media relations to enable the development of a more comprehensive theory of media-politics?

Method

A combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed to recruit appropriate individuals for semi-structured in-depth interviews. Interviews were carried out between February and May 2012. In Northern Ireland's political system (and indeed across the UK), public relations activities are managed by Government Information Officers (GIOs), civil servants whose role is to communicate government business impartially; and Ministerial Special Advisers (SpAds) who are personally appointed by a departmental minister to assist him/her in a political capacity, and thus these are the groups we included in our sample, in addition to political journalists. The sample consisted of 16 political journalists, 9 senior GIOs (69% of the total), and 8 SpAds (42% of the total), 33 interviewees in total. The journalists who participated were from the main press and broadcast organizations in Northern Ireland, and all were at section editor or overall editor level. All GIOs interviewed held the rank of *Principal Information Officer* in the civil service and, as with the SpAds who participated, worked across a number of different government departments for all five coalition government partners. All participants were offered interviewee anonymity and all selected this option. The analytical framework adopted in this study was interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) which gives primacy to the perceptions of

respondents, since the objective is to generate knowledge in relation to their lived experience of a phenomenon (Langdridge 2007). While we have a large amount of rich empirical data from the interviews, space restrictions require us be selective in presenting our findings and analysis. Thus we report and analyze the themes which recurred most frequently across participant groups. In our findings representative quotations are italicized and have been edited (to remove repetitions, stutters and non-verbal sounds) for ease of understanding.

Findings and analysis

A number of generic themes emerged from our data in relation to the working relationships of journalists with GIOs and SpAds. There is evidence of the 'traditional' tensions and mutual stereotyping, contest and reciprocity, between journalists and government communicators identified in much previous research within Western political systems. Many of our journalist participants described an increasingly challenging working environment, due to technological change and cuts in their resources, while at the same time government public relations resources increased. Aside from these issues, we highlight four key themes articulated frequently by our interviewees. These themes merit deeper analysis if we are to develop a more comprehensive theory of media-politics which includes the constitutionally complex, democratic society represented by the Northern Ireland case. These themes of course overlap but for the purposes of the findings and analysis section we hold them conceptually apart in order to draw out some of the theoretical implications, which we will return to in our discussion and conclusion sections.

The role of the journalist in a deeply divided society

In line with much of the previous research findings on journalism's professional ideology, the journalists we interviewed articulated perspectives on their 'role' which tended to revolve around normative ideals. They identified public service as a fundamental aspect of their profession. That is, the journalist plays the role of a 'disseminator' of objective and impartial information, a 'mobilizer' of civic activity, an 'adversarial' critic of institutions, an 'investigator' of officialdom and a truth seeker (Tandoc et al., 2012:8). One journalist summed up the views of many of our interviews when they said:

> *"there's a certain sort of service element you just tell the public what's going on but, it's also to provide analysis, to say...here's where they* [government ministers] *are contradicting each other...the people who make the big decisions we've gotta hold them accountable...show the public what they are really like"* (J5).

Most of the journalists interviewed articulated this 'watchdog' or 'fourth estate' (Davis 2007; Norris, 2000) role of journalism and many argued that 'aggressive' styles of reporting were quite legitimate (Deuze 2005:447), linking the notion of impartiality and an 'adversarial' attitude towards political figures to the need to maintain the trust of their audience.

The concept of press impartiality does however pose a dilemma for some newspaper journalists working in Northern Ireland. Many scholars (e.g. Armoudian 2015) have noted how in Western-style professional journalism, extreme portrayals of 'the out-group', or 'the others' are usually filtered through journalism norms and structures, including the idea of impartiality, so that the tone is softened and the language rendered more neutral. However, during violent conflicts: "journalists tend to focus on the most violent events and reinforce identities, demarcating 'us' from 'them' and cover the 'others' based upon 'their' impact on 'us', while ignoring 'our' impact on 'them', which exacerbates hatred between foes" (Armoudian 2015:361). In Northern Ireland, the forces of political ideology and identity politics still powerfully influence working practices in the post-conflict phase. One newspaper journalist explained: *"We've very strong political coverage and...obviously have a very predominantly unionist readership, and we would address that readership. So you know our focus would be very much on unionist politics and the unionist perspective on things"* (J1). For many newspaper journalists in Northern Ireland it is clear that Van Dijk's analysis (1988:155) holds true, the news stories they write: "reflect the class, gender and ethnic position of the journalists". This press partisanship is acknowledged by GIOs and SpAds and incorporated into their PR activities. One GIO stated: *"the Irish News isn't gonna take a story about Ulster Scots, it's not their readership, the News Letter isn't gonna take a story about GAA, it's not their readership. So, it's just being aware of that"* (G5). Overall our findings suggest it is much easier for broadcast journalists, than newspaper journalists, to prioritize the norm of impartiality, indeed many of them work for media organizations (e.g. BBC, ITV) whose mission statements explicitly include and reinforce this concept. For most newspaper journalists, the socio-political environment comprising the two separate (unionist and nationalist) 'spheres of legitimacy' (Sheafer

and Wolfsfeld 2009), impacts on their journalistic role and their professional behaviour meaning they adapt their professional ideology to the particular political and professional context in which they operate (Vos 2013).

The legacy of violent ethno-political conflict on journalists and news values

Media negativity and an over-concentration on 'soft' political issues or scandal instead of serious policy issues is a frequent complaint by political actors across democratic societies (McNair 2000). In Northern Ireland these kinds of complaints are articulated but framed differently because of the recent historical context. When asked about their views on the political journalists working in Northern Ireland some of the GIOs, and the majority of SpAds we interviewed, agreed that most of the journalists they encountered had been, as one SpAd put it, *"shaped by the conflict"* (S3). Another SpAd commenting on political journalists said:

> *"They don't understand policy issues, and in many cases don't want to understand them...the media have had bombs and bullets and paramilitaries and gangsters and conflict, and they're struggling to get to deal with the detail of policy and normal stuff"* (S8).

This assumption that journalists are overly fixated on constitutional issues and political disputes instead of important policy issues was repeatedly articulated by SpAds. One explained: *"there's criticism…that they* [the political elites] *don't talk about bread and butter policies but whenever you hold a press conference...on some matter of detailed*

policy, the press don't cover it" (S2). GIOs and SpAds considered this media focus to be particularly detrimental both to the image of politics in post-conflict Northern Ireland and to the positive concrete progress being made by Northern Ireland's power-sharing government. For example, one GIO stated:

> *"the media, don't seem to take their responsibility in a democratic society seriously…in order for a democracy to work, people have to vote for the people they think are going to represent them as best they can, so they might base that one decision every four years on something that they read, and if that is over-sensationalized, unfair or untrue, that could be the difference in that person voting for a different party, not placing their vote at all, being utterly apathetic"* (G2).

Wolfsfeld (2004:16) suggests that positive political progress in deeply divided societies is not always considered newsworthy by journalists because they are trained to value: immediacy; drama; simplicity; and ethnocentrism. The consequence of this, according to Wolfsfeld, is that journalists devote more attention to reporting political conflict than peace, even though they may, as individuals, value peace. Most journalists we interviewed did acknowledge the important influence the conflict had had on them professionally but most insisted that their journalistic priorities had moved on since a relatively stable power-sharing government had emerged over the previous decade. In a view that was typical, one argued:

> *"up until about five or six years ago, we were fixated by politics and violence, now the news agenda has changed dramatically... journalists are paying far*

more attention to the social issues, health, welfare and you know jobs, the
economy, education and general wellbeing...So it's things that matter in day to
day life...most people...they just want to get on with their lives...we have to
reflect that" (J10).

At the same time, several journalists insisted that the slow pace of political progress and continual sectarian disputes often fuelled the media's focus on politically controversial issues. In this sense the political agenda setting power lies with the politicians. One journalist stated bluntly: *"instead of addressing* [an issue] *on an intra-community basis, it's addressed on a* [unionist or nationalist] *community basis…More often than not...the politicos are the people who are perpetuating that dark past"* (J14).

The impact of new democratic institutions on political communication

Many of the journalists we interviewed referred to what they perceived to be the detrimental impact of Northern Ireland's new institutional structures on the flow of information from government to the media. One direct impact of consociationalism has been to greatly strengthen political party control over government departments, turning them into *de facto* party 'fiefdoms' (Wilford 2007) ruled by the minister and his/her advisers. Interviewees from all groups agreed that there is a lack of trust from political parties toward the civil service which has resulted in GIOs losing influence over government communication and greatly increasing the control and status of SpAds. A journalist explained that: *"the government end of things in Northern Ireland is very much second fiddle to the parties...we are a highly politicized system of government*

here…They [the parties] *only trust their own people really and run their own ships really strictly"* (J16). Another journalist specifically pointed out how this had impacted on GIOs:

> *"one of the big differences that we've seen with devolution, with local parties taking over and because of the nature of the government that we have, is that...this is a politically driven government whereas previously it was a kind of administration that was largely driven by the civil service"* (J7).

The result of this is that SpAds, with more 'inside' knowledge on political issues, are often journalists' preferred sources. One journalist noted: *"when you're speaking to the Special Adviser you know you're speaking to the minister…they can be more helpful in sort of steering you to stories"* (J13). Journalists realize that in the current structure GIOs have to 'clear' information with SpAds before they can disseminate it to journalists, and indeed many commented on GIOs' resentment of SpAd involvement in departmental communication decisions. Several journalists also noted the dangers in this situation because it was restricting their access to information, one recalled:

> *"recently we were blocked by...* [names political party] *SpAds, a straight forward press enquiry was held up for twelve days because the civil service press officer had to get clearance to release information...the Freedom of Information request subsequently showed that the SpAd had vetoed the release of the piece"* (J15).

SpAds, when questioned about the changes in government communication since the development of devolved consociational government, suggested that the new structures discourage collective government responsibility and encourage competition between ministers from rival parties. They also acknowledged that this can impact both on the autonomy of GIOs, and their ability to develop a coherent cross-government information dissemination strategy. One SpAd observed:

"the will of the ministers will always over-rule this central [government communication] *mechanism, which means that you could in any one day have a situation where government could be making three or four very important announcements and they all clash...a lot of them* [ministers] *try and get the best piece of PR for themselves…rather than looking at the Executive as a whole"* (S6).

SpAds and GIOs agreed that this "*silo mentality*" (S6), was a by-product of the consociational political structure, that has encouraged the inter-departmental competition between ministers to infiltrate departmental information dissemination. One GIO articulated a common complaint: *"I'm competing with ten or eleven other departments, to try and get my stuff in the papers"* (G3). This point was corroborated by several journalists, with one noting of the government's central communication arm: *"the Executive Information Service is a mirror image of the very monolithic, compulsory coalition that we have"* (J15). Another explained that increasingly a large amount of a GIO's time:

"is devoted to protecting their minister and protecting their department at all costs...Even though, they [GIOs] *at each department are paid out of public funds to supposedly just communicate with the public, very often they'll be at open warfare with each other"* (J4).

The noted lack of collective cabinet responsibility among ministers is a particular problem for government communication (Rice and Somerville 2013). As Birrell explains, this stems from mandatory coalition:

"After the 1998 Agreement there was no legal requirement or guidance laid down that decision-making would operate on a formal basis of collective responsibility...without collective responsibility ministers were [and are] able to disagree in public, in the Assembly and its committees and in the media, both with the declared Executive policy and with other ministers...with no consequences for their place in government" (2012:55).

McEvoy further notes that: "As ministers are simply nominated by their parties rather than being appointed by a prime minister and they are not subject to parliamentary ramification, they owe their allegiance to their party" (2006:459). This has led to increasing party political (rather than government) control over departmental communication with overall negative consequences for media access to transparent information. The result is that relationships between government communicators and the media have become in many cases more antagonistic and less conducive to fulfilling democratic norms of public service and transparency.

The media as the unofficial political opposition

A strong consensus exists among political journalists and indeed among many SpAds and GIOs, that political communication in Northern Ireland tends to be negative and antagonistic. As noted above the political structures and recent political history play a role in this; even though they are in government together, parties also act in an oppositional capacity to some extent. Arguably this is to some extent, because maintaining difference and distinct identities from other governing parties through the designation mechanism, is considered by many to be essential for their very survival in the consociational system. Indeed it is clear that in Northern Ireland: "...formalized divisions of power along identity or ethnic lines...may have the perverse effect of entrenching the ethnic and divisive positions that have fuelled the conflict" (Samuels 2009:182). But while oppositional voices within the multi-party coalition government are reported in the media, the lack of an *official* opposition is a significant feature of the political environment much commented on by all participant groups in this study. It is an issue which creates a dilemma for the media, because reporting friction inside the Northern Ireland government is one thing, finding coherent opposition voices to the governing administration has been much more difficult.

A crucial theme which emerged from this situation was a strong criticism of political journalists, by GIOs and particularly SpAds, for being overly cynical towards the political class, and indeed for adopting an 'opposition' role. A typical comment along these lines was:

"the press here, because there's no formal opposition at Stormont, probably take the view that they effectively are the opposition…which can be a bit damaging for the political process. In the UK as a whole, you would have some of the large national papers be broadly sympathetic to one party, some sympathetic to another, most of them are just generally hostile here" (S2).

Davis (2009) notes that political actors sometimes make similar comments in the UK Westminster context and McNair (2000) suggests that the media may assume this role in light of ineffective political opposition. However, the fact that for the past two decades Northern Ireland's constitutional settlement actually permitted no official opposition party, means that media 'opposition' to the government is of a different order or is certainly widely perceived to be of a different order. This represents a fairly dramatic shift for the media in the current post-conflict context because initially the mainstream press were very supportive of the implementation of the power-sharing system (Baker 2005; Wolfsfeld 2004). This is also an interesting development because it appears to distinguish the role of the media in Northern Ireland's consociational political system from other polarised/multi-party (but majoritarian) systems where the media report a wide range of oppositional voices (Sheafer and Wolfsfeld 2009). It is fair to say that in recent times the media has been the consistent *external* critical voice on government and therefore can at times seem to play the role of a quasi-opposition party (Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2010). Certainly, it has come to be viewed as *the* opposition by many government actors.

The journalists we interviewed articulated a range of views on this issue. Some did feel, given the structure of Northern Ireland's political system that 'opposition' was an

important aspect of their professional role. One journalist commented: *"I think most journalists would see their role as, probably being in opposition actually...there's obviously not an opposition here at the moment politically...it is very important to have someone who's asking questions and not just accepting everything that's said"* (J4). Another specifically identified the consociational institutional design noting: *"particularly given the nature of our political arrangements at Stormont where there isn't an official opposition to scrutinize things, I think the media has a certain role to play there"* (J1). Another agreed: *"the system of government here is a coalition of five parties, in many ways the media has to be the opposition...that's a good thing...you don't actually have an official opposition here so that makes it even more important"* (J11). Nevertheless others stated that this was absolutely not their responsibility: *"all this crap that journalism has become the opposition, that's a ridiculous notion, nobody elected us...it is our job to ask the awkward questions but you know, it's not our job to formulate alternative policies"* (J16). It should be noted that there are important differences in how 'opposition' is being defined by different interviewees. For example, opposition seems to be understood as 'hostility' by one journalist (J2), while others refer to it as 'scrutiny' (J4 and J1) and for the journalist just quoted (J16), 'opposition' entails proposing alternative policies. One journalist reflected on the perceptions that may exist amongst government actors:

"sometimes they'll probably see you as that [the opposition] *simply by virtue of the fact that you're challenging them but...it's not that we're challenging them from a political point of view, we're challenging them to justify their actions, and that's our job on behalf of our audience...that's a function of a democracy and I think it's a pretty important one"* (J7).

Overall regarding the design of Northern Ireland's democratic system, all of our participant groups voiced considerable frustration with its impact on political debate. One SpAd summed up the broad consensus among the majority of SpAds, GIOs and journalists that a more traditional political system would lead to better governance, as well as better government and media communication:

> *"ultimately I suppose it has to go to government and opposition, that's normal and that works, it's been proven to be effective and then maybe that brings the journalists along better...journalists start to see there's two different views there's the government view and the opposition view and they get public debate going in, a more substantial way"* (S8).

A move to a traditional government-opposition (and particularly a majoritarian) system is of course risky in a post-conflict society, it means winners and losers, but it would perhaps help facilitate spaces for political voices, and therefore media coverage, outside of the narrow unionist/nationalist constitutional debates. This in turn may lead to opportunities to develop capacity for deliberative debates about policy alternatives, a normative objective of the democratic opposition role (Wilford 2010).

Discussion

In some respects, the results of our research echo the findings of previous academic studies on media-government relationships characterised by control, contest, reciprocity, trust and distrust (Davis 2010; Larsson 2002). However, one might

reasonably expect from comparative systems studies, or Lijphart's (1999) theory of 'gentle' consociational democracy, that the multi-party polarized consociational system in Northern Ireland would enable broader sources of political information for the media, stimulate greater deliberation and consensus-building within government and produce a broader range of oppositional voices in the media, but we find this is not the case. It is clear that far from providing more 'room' for oppositional voices, the Northern Ireland media focus on reporting, albeit frequently negatively, designated Unionist or Nationalist elite voices within the confines of existing "institutional power blocs" (Bennett 1990), with little attention paid to extra-parliamentary oppositional voices. Our study therefore challenges much of the theorising of government-media relations which focuses on party systems and produced three main findings.

Firstly, the mandatory nature of coalition in Northern Ireland means that relations between the parties of government are particularly antagonistic and distrustful. The fact that government departments have become party fiefdoms has greatly strengthened the power of SpAds, at the expense of GIOs, and this is reflected in the communicative relationships between all three groups. SpAds are integral in facilitating their political party's permanent campaigning, constantly promoting their party agenda to the media within the governing grand coalition. The result is that there is no coherent or collective message communicated to the media about most *government* decision making or policy and the information they do receive is filtered through a partisan lens.

Secondly, the lack of an official political opposition within the consociational system means that there is no clear political oppositional voice for the media to report. Instead, opposition to government policy is either ubiquitous within government or internalised

among private inter-party negotiations reducing debate and deliberation in the public sphere. For many participants, across all our interview groups, the media, increasingly a consistent critic of Northern Ireland governance, is considered to be the main extra-parliamentary dissenting voice (Sheafer and Wolfsfeld 2009). This arguably diminishes the media's normative ability to be an effective critical watchdog of government that is respected by political actors and clearly has ramifications for the trust between government sources and journalists and the management and flow of information from government to the media, and ultimately to the public. The deterioration in media-politics relationships since the early years of the peace process (e.g. Wolfsfeld 2004) reflect one of the negative impacts of implementing mandatory consociationalism as a long-term solution to conflict (Rothchild and Roeder 2005).

Thirdly, the fact that Northern Ireland's power-sharing arrangement requires politicians and parties to designate themselves as 'Unionist' or 'Nationalist' in the legislature, means it is in their interests for parties to perpetuate this division in order to retain their share of political power. Division is institutionalised in the consociational system and this is reflected in both the expectation from the media to have a unionist and nationalist 'side' to a story and by their focus on political conflict over policy issues. Thus the divisive and often sectarian discourse of Northern Ireland politics is reproduced in the media, and this arguably preserves the political parallelism of the press. Indeed, our findings demonstrate that for some newspaper journalists, impartiality and objectivity are concepts which are filtered through a partisan viewpoint where loyalty to one's ethically segmented audience is of central importance. In this sense our study highlights some of the complexities of the journalist's role vis-à-vis

government communication in a deeply divided post-conflict society, supporting the work of others in this area (e.g. Avraham 2003).

All of this leads to a political context where negative political discourse dominates the public sphere, deep societal division is solidified rather than addressed, and government-media relations are largely antagonistic in character. This kind of political communication does not represent the interests of those citizens who do not identify with Unionist or Nationalist identities - or arguably even those who do - and is thus contrary to the ideals of consensus or multiparty systems (Hallin and Mancini 2004). This is not to say that reciprocity does not develop in government-media relations in Northern Ireland at times, or that the media does not play an important role in challenging government, they do, but they tend to avoid challenging the underlying ethno-political tensions which the consociational government is designed to ameliorate. On balance, political communication in Northern Ireland is contrary to the ethos of consociational government and like this *because* of the particular form of consociational design of government which embodies the post-conflict context.

Future research will need to explore the impact of recent changes to the Northern Ireland government. During the drafting of this article, the government passed an 'Opposition Bill' to make provision for an official opposition within the Assembly[vi]. However the consociational guarantees remain in place (there is still a 'grand coalition', mutual veto rights, and proportionality based on ethno-political identities), which means that the nature of the parliamentary 'opposition' is still limited within the consociational framework. Nonetheless, comparing our current findings with what

might develop in the future with this particular form of official opposition is an exciting future research opportunity.

Conclusion

Our paper makes an important contribution to media-politics theory building in the following ways. We demonstrate that while consociational institutions are designed in order to accommodate the polarized interests within a post-conflict society, and to encourage deliberation and enhance democratization, the kind of multi-party systems this constitutional architecture produces can actually be detrimental for political communication and government-media relations. This has broader relevance for scholars working in this field who have largely discussed differences in media-politics interactions at the level of political party systems (e.g. Sheafer and Wolfsfeld 2009). It is clear that the 'party system' is too crude a variable to explain the media's role in complex political cultures including consociational democracies. We suggest that in such democracies there are a number of key variables impacting on political communication and government-media relations. These are: whether coalition formation is on a voluntary or mandatory basis; the presence or absence of an official political opposition; and whether ethno-political or religious designation characterises a parliamentary system - thereby reducing the range of legitimate 'voices'. More empirical research in other consociational contexts is required to develop the evidence base but our study indicates that the notion that multi-party political systems lead to a greater diversity of 'voices' and increased open spaces for critique in the media's political coverage is overly simplistic. Our research also demonstrates that an institutional design which is 'good' for building post-conflict democracy can in the

longer term be detrimental to developing normative ideals of government-media relations. We support the call for different approaches to media-politics analyses that give more credence to the impact of particular institutional features and processes on this relationship (Humphreys 2012; Roudakova 2011). The institutional design variables we identify will assist in producing more nuanced and comprehensive accounts of media-politics across the varied and complex political environments in contemporary societies.

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[i] In Northern Ireland this includes the 'petition of concern' which if brought forward by a party in the Assembly, means that a vote will only be passed through the Assembly if supported by a weighted majority of members designated as both unionist and nationalist, and thus is often used to 'veto' the passing of legislation.

[ii] For a fuller explanation, see: Roche, Patrick J. and Barton, Brian. (eds.) 2013. The Northern Ireland Question: Myth and Reality. Tonbridge: Wordzworth.

[iii] Unionists like to refer to Northern Ireland as one of the 'nations' which make up the United Kingdom while Irish republicans view it as a 'region' of Ireland. Many institutions get round this issue by referring to the entity as a 'national region'.

[iv] Currently, the following political parties are entitled to ministerial posts in the current governing administration: *The Democratic Unionist Party* (British unionist), *Sinn Fein* (Irish republican), *The Social Democratic Labour Party* (Irish nationalist), the *Ulster Unionist Party* (British unionist), and the *Alliance Party* (cross-community).

[v] This is correct at the time of writing this article, however elections have recently taken place (May 2016) and an 'Opposition Bill' to make provision for an official opposition has been passed within the Assembly. An official opposition now exists, however the constitutional arrangement with its consociational guarantees remains in place (as outlined in our discussion and conclusion section).

[vi] The new Northern Ireland Executive comprises the DUP (largest) and Sinn Fein (second largest) together with Independent unionist Claire Sugden as Minister for Justice; the SDLP and UUP are now

in official opposition, with the Alliance party resuming a 'backbencher' capacity after rejecting the offer of the Justice ministry.

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