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Author post-print (accepted) deposited by Coventry University's Repository

Original citation & hyperlink:

Rice, C & Taylor, M 2020, 'Reconciliation isn't Sexy': Perceptions of News Media in Post-Conflict Northern Ireland', *Journalism Studies*, vol. 21, no. 6, pp. 820-837.

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2020.1724183>

DOI 10.1080/1461670X.2020.1724183

ISSN 1461-670X

ESSN 1469-9699

Publisher: Taylor and Francis

*This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Journalism Studies* on 12/02/2020, available*

online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/1461670X.2020.1724183>

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**'Reconciliation isn't Sexy': Perceptions of News Media in Post-Conflict Northern
Ireland**

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Abstract

**‘Reconciliation isn’t Sexy’: Perceptions of News Media in Post-Conflict Northern
Ireland**

News media play a key role in post-conflict contexts in helping to explain the peace process and report on current events. This research explores the perceptions of cross-community leaders about the role of journalism in reconciliation in present day Northern Ireland. The findings suggest that community activists perceive the media to be sustaining the legacy of the conflict and constraining debates about the way forward in Northern Ireland. We propose that they essentially advocate for a conflict sensitive model of journalism (Howard, 2004), underpinned by a communitarian ethical framework (Christians, 1997) which would better reflect the changed interests and needs of a post-conflict community.

Keywords: media roles, conflict, Northern Ireland, communitarianism, peace journalism, NGOs, information subsidies

Journalism serves as a particularly important voice in the production of public discourse (Sheafer & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2010). In a conflict prone environment, the consequences of inflammatory words or deeds can be magnified when disseminated through media coverage (Armoudian & Milne, 2019; Avraham, 2003). The nature of the media's reporting on the different actors and events in peace and reconciliation therefore matters a great deal.

Traditional (Western) values of journalism include objectivity (reporting facts), impartiality, public service, autonomy, and a critical questioning of power (Davis, 2007; Deacon & Golding, 1994; Deuze, 2005). These values underpin the argument that a 'free media' is a vital part of a functioning democracy (Street, 2001). The quality of media coverage may influence the development of post-conflict relationships and they help shape the political system (Galtung, 1998). Far too often, however, the media focus on conflict frames (Entman, 1993) that simplify the complexities of a post-conflict society (Galtung & Lynch, 2010). Simplistic representations of past grievances, issues, decisions and actors can undermine peace efforts.

But, as Schudson (2003) observed, there are many actors or "para journalists" who have a stake in the news. Nonprofit organizations (NPOs) (also known as Non-Governmental Organizations, NGOs) are one such actor that have been studied by scholars interested in the link between media, civil society and democracy. Substantial attention has been paid by scholars to how NPOs, working 'on the ground' with communities, have become valuable information sources for journalists (Meyer et al., 2018). This is especially the case in hard to reach conflict zones (Powers, 2018; Wright, 2018) where security risks and elite distrust make 'traditional' (elite) news sourcing difficult (Meyer et al., 2018). NPOs are an important actor to consider in media research since they, "produce and mobilize information to affect

policy agendas, they are embedded in political networks that aim to persuade public opinion and policy makers, and they communicate with various publics through various media platforms” (Waisbord, 2011, p. 142). Embodying what Gandy (1982) termed the “information subsidy”, groups may produce tailored media packages or facilitate field visits that garner media attention about their organization’s response to the conflict (Cottle & Nolan, 2007). Some media scholars have therefore been critical of advocacy groups’ influence on news production about conflict-affected areas because often the information that is passed on to audiences is no more than a fundraising platform (Powers, 2018).

Taking a different approach, Kunelius (2006) argues that feedback on journalism practice – as opposed to information for specific news stories - from non-profit organizations can help improve the validity of journalism or as he described it, *good journalism* (p. 687). When evaluating the journalistic field, it is helpful to have critical and informed respondents who can draw on relevant experiences with the media. If we want to know about how media is considered to impact on a post-conflict society, then it makes sense to talk to those “participants in the process of news-making” (Kunelius, 2006, p. 677) who are working for the cause of post-conflict stability and reconciliation. Even so, such important perspectives are scarce throughout the media and journalism literature (Powers, 2018). This article addresses that gap by exploring perceptions of news media contributions in the post-conflict context of Northern Ireland, through the voices of community leaders who work to create and maintain the peace. Their views provide insight into community expectations of the media and help us theorize media roles in post-conflict contexts.

The Northern Ireland context provides a useful lens to understand how media in an economically advanced Western nation operate in a post-conflict context. Media research that looks at local journalism in conflict zones has often focused on developing nations with weak

or new media systems (Gonen & Hoxha, 2019; Hussain, 2019; McIntyre & Sobel, 2018) or international war correspondents who “drop into” a war zone (Adebayo, 2016). Northern Ireland presents another type of case. Northern Ireland is a highly economically developed, “Free” (Freedom House, 2019) society that is emerging from 30 years of conflict. It thus provides a theoretically interesting case study of a “free media” sector working in a post-conflict context. How do frameworks such as conflict sensitive journalism and peace journalism apply to journalism practice in Northern Ireland according to those Non-Profit Leaders (NPLs) who work towards peace ideals? By NPLs we mean community and voluntary sector organisation leaders who work in areas such as community development, community relations, rights and advocacy, peace and reconciliation. We find that NPLs perceive the media to be sustaining the legacy of the conflict and constraining debates about the way forward in Northern Ireland. NPLs advocate for journalism which addresses changed societal interests and sparks new, and progressive debate. We propose that their words reflect the normative aspects of an interesting combination of existing media theory.

The first section of the paper explores the dominant frameworks that have been offered by media scholars to guide journalism practice in conflict and post-conflict contexts. The second section outlines the present-day Northern Ireland context. The third section outlines the methodology. The fourth section provides the results of the interviews to answer the research question. The final section uses the findings to identify roles for media in Northern Ireland that combine multiple media frameworks and support reconciliation.

Journalism Roles in Conflict Contexts

Peace Journalism and Conflict-Sensitive Journalism

Building on framing research, Galtung (1986, 1998) offered peace journalism as a competing framework to war journalism. War journalism was critiqued for being

propagandistic, biased and partisan. There are four aspects to peace journalism: peace/conflict, truth, people, and solutions. In their news reporting, journalists and media outlets that enact a peace journalism model embed discussions about the roots of the conflict and focus on the experiences of everyday citizens that go beyond the two “warring” parties. News stories seek to build empathy, understanding and at the most interventionist point of the spectrum, to provide possible solutions to the conflict. For example, Lynch and McGoldrick (2005) operationalized Galtung’s peace journalism and suggested that journalists should write stories that focus on solutions rather than differences. According to this approach, stories should feature ordinary people, instead of solely elites, as sources. News should report on more than just two sides of the conflict. Reporters should use precise language to describe events and issues. In a similar vein, McIntyre and Sobel (2018) describe peace journalism, ‘solutions journalism’ (stories including how people respond to problems) and ‘restorative narrative’ journalism (long term stories of recovery and resilience) as parts of the ‘Constructive Journalism’ paradigm that build on the social responsibility theory of the press (Siebert, Peterson & Schramm, 1956) – that media should be concerned with the public good. These theories have proved applicable in explaining post-conflict journalism. For example, in a study of journalists in Rwanda, McIntyre and Sobel (2017) found that while journalists described their roles using traditional Western ideals of objectivity, they also felt a duty to promote unity and reconciliation via their reporting. Likewise, Armoudian (2018) found at least some journalists in Northern Ireland felt their professionalism was constrained in the wake of the peace process, both by peace frames and their own personal desire for peace.

At the same time, such approaches have been criticised by scholars and practitioners alike for jeopardizing journalistic integrity and placing undue responsibility on, often ill-equipped, journalists to intervene in conflict and peacebuilding (Lyon, 2007; Hanitzsch, 2004; Rice & Somerville, 2017). Howard (2004) later identified a (potentially less

controversial) framework called Conflict-Sensitive Journalism (CSJ) that explains how journalists reporting from conflict zones should be trained (Howard 2015; Lynch & McGoldrick, 2013). The CSJ model suggests that journalists in conflict zones be engaged with people across and *beyond* conflicting parties to optimise conflict analysis (Howard, 2004, p. 12). Journalists should examine what the parties are seeking and the possibility for withdrawal, compromise or transcendence and write about these possibilities. With conflict analysis, journalists can understand what diplomats and negotiators are trying to do, and can report it more reliably. Howard (2015) argues that the CSJ model does not violate the normative roles and values of journalists. They can still serve public interests by providing reliable information and working to keep government accountable. Conflict sensitive journalism proceeds from an assumption that “conflict does not end by itself. One of the most important things to take place is communication...This is where good journalism comes in” (Howard, 2004, p. 8).

Whereas CSJ has a positive view of the role of media in contributing to peace, media portrayals of government or politics can influence how people understand the movement towards peace in less positive ways, for example through misinformation or unduly critical representations of political actors, activity and settlements (Ersoy, 2016; Ismail & Deane, 2008; Sheafer & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2010; Tsfati & Cohen, 2005). Wolfsfeld (2004) contends that on the whole, news of peace or positive political progress is not considered newsworthy by journalists because they are trained to value: immediacy, drama, simplicity, and ethnocentrism (p. 16). The unintended consequence of this, according to Wolfsfeld (2004), is that journalists devote more attention to reporting political conflict than peace, even though they may, as individuals, value peace. At the same time, Wolfsfeld argues that under certain favourable conditions, the media can play a constructive role. In a case study of Northern Ireland soon after the Good Friday Agreement, Wolfsfeld (2001, 2004) found that the local

media were supportive of the peace process, and even biased against opposing views (notably the DUP's opposition to power-sharing) because journalists felt ethically obligated to help end violence and encourage societal reconciliation. Wolfsfeld contends that this pro-peace stance was adopted by journalists because in Northern Ireland: “there was a large degree of elite consensus to support peace; there was little violence from those opposed to the peace process; the two communities had many shared news outlets and they spoke the same language; and the media exuded little sensationalism” (2001, p. 30). Fawcett (2002a) examined the discursive difficulties facing the advocates of a journalism practice that is proactive and oriented towards “win–win” solutions. Fawcett focused on a case study in the latter 1990s involving a nationalist and a unionist newspaper in Northern Ireland which joined together in a “peace journalism” initiative. Fawcett discusses some of the discursive shortcomings of a conciliation frame and the discursive attractions of a conflict frame, illustrating how rhetorical and narrative structures shape and constrain the way in which newspapers report conflict.

This paper builds on the past research and theoretical frameworks, outlined in this section, to explore perspectives on journalism in the present, post-conflict context. The next section outlines this context.

The Northern Ireland Political and Societal Context

Northern Ireland is the smallest part of the United Kingdom, which has a devolved, power-sharing government, known colloquially by its Parliament name, *Stormont*. Power-sharing is on a mandatory consociational basis, adopted in order to stabilize society after thirty years of violent ethno-political conflict between Unionists/Protestants and Nationalists/Catholics, and as a result of the 1998 *Good Friday Agreement* peace treaty¹. The

¹ For a fuller explanation, see Roche and Barton (2013).

Good Friday Agreement was signed by the British and Irish governments and the majority of the Nationalist and Unionist parties to signal (amongst other issues) support for the implementation of a power-sharing administration in Northern Ireland, based on a consociational model and a rejection of the use of violence to promote political aims. Deaths during this conflict, known as 'The Troubles', have been estimated as 3,700 (most of which were civilian), a significant proportion per capita, and Northern Ireland remains a deeply divided society (Hargie & Dickson, 2003; Hargie & Irving, 2017).

Consociationalism's most prolific theorist, Arend Lijphart, explains: "Consociational democracy means government by elite cartel designed to turn a democracy with a fragmented political culture into a stable democracy" (2008, p. 31). This typically includes grand coalitions between the main groups/communities in a region; a cross-community 'weighted majority' system of parliamentary voting meaning a simple majority is never enough in decision making processes; and proportionality to ensure fair representation for all sides in key societal institutions, such as political office, the civil service, and policing (Rice & Somerville, 2017). In Northern Ireland, all Assembly members must designate themselves 'nationalist', 'unionist', or 'other'.

There have been various suspensions and breakdowns since its inception, which is again the case during the writing of this paper (November 2019). But, from 2007-2017, the Stormont administration governed with relative stability². During this period, which includes our data collection phase (May 2016 - February 2017), the main parties, in order of parliamentary strength, were the (British Unionist) *Democratic Unionist Party, DUP*, (Irish Republican) *Sinn Fein*, (British Unionist) *Ulster Unionist Party, UUP*, (Irish Nationalist) *Social Democratic Labour Party, SDLP*, (Cross-Community) *Alliance Party*. While government composition illustrates the polarised nature of Northern Ireland politics,

² See the following link for an overview of the events leading to the most recent collapse of the Assembly: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-38612860>

paradoxically, a growing proportion of society in Northern Ireland now identify as the more inclusive category of 'Northern Irish', rather than 'British' or 'Irish', which exemplifies increasing cross-community integration (Hargie & Irving, 2017) and a rejection of the traditional Unionist/Nationalist identity dichotomy (Hayward & McManus, 2019).

The Media in Northern Ireland

The main broadcast outlets in Northern Ireland are *BBC Northern Ireland*, *Ulster Television* (UTV), and several independent radio channels. These organisations identify as impartial news providers and promote themselves as serving the whole population (Lafferty, 2014). However, of the three national/regional daily newspapers, only *The Belfast Telegraph* positions itself to appeal to both communities in Northern Ireland (McLaughlin & Baker, 2010). *The Irish News* targets the Nationalist community while the *News Letter* is staunchly Unionist in its outlook, and this long-standing "political parallelism" (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) is also a feature of the local press. It is also important to note that the media in Northern Ireland has been affected by the region's political history. Past research suggests that during the Northern Ireland conflict, the media tended to reflect the British government's agenda and local journalists had restricted access to government sources, meaning effective investigative journalism was limited (Fawcett 2002b; Franklin, 2004; Miller, 1994; Rolston 2007; Rolston & Miller, 1996). The media was later viewed as an advocate for the development and maintenance of the peace process (Baker, 2005; McLaughlin & Baker, 2010; Wolfsfeld, 2001, 2004). Monitoring of current media reporting indicates that the media have adopted a more traditional critical role, in terms of scrutinising the work of government (McLaughlin & Baker, 2012). At the same time, the press could be seen as propagating division in Northern Ireland given the elements of political parallelism which exist (Armoudian & Milne, 2019).

Following the development of power-sharing, journalists must now cover not just issues of constitutional importance and political disputes, but mainstream policy issues which are

under local government control. The media must also reflect the fact that a significant proportion of society value good cross-community relations (ARK, 2018). At the same time, journalists are repeatedly required, though much less frequently, to cover politically motivated demonstrations, sectarian violence and murders. Given wider political change in the form of Brexit which poses the reintroduction of a border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland's peace is particularly fragile and information on political developments crucial to peaceful community relations (Burke, 2016; Durrant & Stojanovic, 2018).

As outlined above, most studies of media and journalism in Northern Ireland are almost, or at least, a decade old, and/or relate to a different political phase to that which we find today (e.g. Armoudian, 2018; Armoudian & Milne, 2019; Lowenstein-Barkai, 2018). There is little more recent research (e.g. Rice & Somerville, 2017) into the media's role in communicating post-conflict matters in Northern Ireland. There are, to our knowledge, no studies concerning the media's role in aiding or hindering reconciliation from the perspectives of a highly significant public – non-profit cross-community leaders.

Community and Voluntary Sector in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland houses over 6000 community and voluntary organisations, spanning community development, community relations, children's services, education and training, health and wellbeing, advocacy and policy work (NICVA, 2016). Past studies of the sector have noted that during periods of political stalemate and conflict, community groups grew in number and in influence, countering a "democratic deficit" (Cochrane & Dunn, 2002, p. 151). Many community groups in Northern Ireland are considered to have played a role in bringing an end to the violent conflict, through advocating for the majority of citizens who supported the peace process (Acheson, Williamson, Cairns & Stringer, 2006; Knox & Quirk, 2016). Indeed, recent research statistics indicate the ongoing value of cross-community work; one study

showed that 77% of people who took part in cross-community initiatives consequently felt more positive towards members of another community (ARK, 2017). Cross-community organisations can be considered to reflect the ethos of a significant proportion of present Northern Ireland society who value cross-community integration, compromise and reconciliation (ARK, 2010, 2017, 2018). Given this, leaders' competencies and experiences, and that, "Most community relations activity operates within and through the community and voluntary sector networks" (Doran, 2010, p. 138), we believe that NPLs are an important route into understanding how media and journalism might impact reconciliation.

Research Question

We posed one overarching research question: *How do Non-Profit Leaders (NPLs) characterize the media's role in reconciliation in Northern Ireland (NI)?* Answers will provide media researchers with deeper insight into media roles in the post-conflict transition and explain expectations for media roles in present day Northern Ireland reconciliation.

Method

Ethics and Sampling

After an ethics application was reviewed and approved by the Principal Investigator's university ethics board, the team used both purposive and snowball sampling techniques to recruit appropriate individuals who had the experience to speak about media's role in the ongoing peace transition. All individuals were firstly contacted via email, where they received an informed consent form (for signature on the day of the interview, before the interview commenced) and a Participant Information Sheet which gave an overview of the research project. This approach enabled interested individuals to peruse the project information at their leisure and ask any questions in advance of agreeing to participate. We chose in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews because this approach facilitated the research team to elicit detailed information from our target group. The technique allowed

individuals to talk fairly freely about issues they felt were relevant, while also providing the interviewer flexibility to follow up on issues raised by interviewees or to pose ad hoc questions that became pertinent during the interview, given the study's exploratory nature (Bryman, 2016).

For both access and convenience purposes, we sought out leaders and key representatives of community based organisations currently operating in the Belfast/County Antrim area. Of the 17 key informants, all worked at organisations that either identify their mission as focused on 'cross-community' activities or were involved in cross-community work of some description. So, while a few of our sample organisations could be considered 'single identity' (i.e. because they are located in mainly nationalist or unionist areas), these organisations were heavily involved in cross-community initiatives and often based on physical interfaces between unionist/nationalist communities. We can categorise the organisations under three main headings: 1) community development (e.g. organisations which seek to develop and regenerate their (often deprived) locale, upskill and support local residents); 2) advocacy/policy organisations (e.g. organisations advocating for/supporting the policy development of some aspect of civic need); 3) peace and reconciliation organisations (e.g. organisations devoted to the cause of cross-community integration and societal reconciliation). We recognise that community organisations serve and reflect various agendas, whether pitched as cross-community or not (Marchetti, 2015). However, in selecting organisations, the research team sought not to make any kind of qualitative judgement on the nature of these organisations' work, rather we chose those that were established, useful points of entry to our sample³ which together represented a breadth of activities and experiences. Further, given Northern Ireland is a small place, and that opinion on virtually any aspect of community relations, peace and conflict, governance, representation and so on is easily

³ Organisations were deemed relevant due to the team's local knowledge, as well as reference to key databases e.g. NICVA (2016) *State of the Sector*.

politicised, together with the fact that the majority of these organisations rely on some form of government funding, the research team gave all interviewees personal and organisational anonymity. If the research team had identified individual organisations, it would have been possible for readers familiar with the context to identify those quoted. Anonymity allowed interviewees to speak freely on a range of relevant topics, including the one covered in this particular paper.

Procedures

One member of the research team visited the interviewees' workplaces and conducted interviews lasting approximately one hour. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in full. Each interview began by the researcher asking the individual for an overview of their professional role, organisation and daily duties, before asking exploratory questions about their opinion of the media in Northern Ireland. As part of the project's wider aim of investigating trust and democratic responsibility in Northern Ireland, the researchers followed a loose, pre-prepared topic guide⁴. The interviewer asked interviewees about how they sourced information about Northern Ireland politics and civil society and how they judged its quality - as key encompassing elements of the public sphere and the role of journalism (Borden, 2014; Habermas, 1989) - and how they understood the media's role in the transition to peace. Interviewees were encouraged to talk broadly and specifically about media and journalism. The interviewer used probes to follow up on interviewees' comments that were particularly relevant to the aim of exploring perceptions of media in the contemporary Northern Ireland context.

Data Analysis

Our qualitative data analysis utilised an inductive approach, with past research nonetheless guiding us in our identification of interviewee discourse that reflected well-

⁴ Included in appendix.

known terminology and concepts in journalism study. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps in thematic analysis, first the two researchers read and reread all of the transcripts. We checked consistency between each other's interpretations throughout the entire process. Next, we identified concepts and terms in each of our interviewee transcripts which related to our research question and overall research aim. Then, analysis shifted from inductive 'first-order codes' to inductive 'second-order themes' (Brown & Coupland, 2015). At this stage, we looked for places where we could combine, re-name or reduce codes through a constant process of comparison within and across transcripts. In essence, our themes therefore, "captured something salient about the data with regards to the research objective...and represented some level of meaning within the data set at a semantic level" (Kay, Reilly, Amend & Kyle, 2011). The second order themes were then refined further and grouped by frequency across the 17 interviewees to be located under one of our macro headings listed in the next section. When reporting quotes from our interviews, we denote individuals ranging from C1 to C17.

Results

Past research about Northern Ireland journalism (Armoudian, 2018; Rice & Somerville, 2017; Wolfsfeld, 2004) has indicated that some journalists view their role as contributing to reconciliation and their coverage to have changed dramatically since the peace process. However, our study finds that NPLs do not share this view, instead they consider the news media to play a largely destructive role in reconciliation. A number of themes emerged to illustrate and explain this shared perspective which we explain under the following main headings: 1) Journalists have a preoccupation with negativity; 2) NPLs expect 'special' media ethics in the post-conflict context; 3) Cross-community groups fill the gap in fostering reconciliation.

Preoccupation with Negativity: 'Bad News Sells Papers'

Interviewees were generally sceptical of the media's role in reconciliation in Northern Ireland due to their perceived undue focus on negative politics and societal unrest. Two subthemes comprise this finding. First, there is an awareness of the economic situation of the media. Reflecting NGO opinion in Kunelius's (2006) Finnish study, respondents noted that media were a firstly a business and that "their primary interest is to ensure they are successful" [C14]. Several NPLs noted that if there is "nothing in it for them" [C9], meaning a controversial 'hook', the media will not pursue the story. This means that positive community stories or important community issues are often neglected:

"my own natural issue with the media...[during bad weather] the kids were fantastic they were all out scraping and salting, doing clean ups... so you send them [journalists] a story, you send them the photograph, does it appear? No. But if there was one of them burnt a car out there, there'd be a queue out there with cameras" [C14].

Yet, some respondents acknowledged that some individual journalists are motivated by admirable intentions but struggle with the business model imposed on them and lack of resources [C13]. As one interviewee succinctly summed it up, "bad news sells papers" [C14].

A related sub-theme identified the prevalence of negative news and linked it to the increasing tabloid mentality of Northern Ireland media. Interviewees understand the power of agenda setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and framing (Entman, 1993). Many noted that the unrelenting focus on negative news is a problem which often over-simplifies complex issues: "Media stir things up and try to look for more controversial and negative story angles to generate interest." [C3]. The media sector as a whole is therefore essentially: "becoming more like a tabloid" [C3]. In particular, one media personality was considered to have the monopoly on shaping public opinion, or at least shaping the media agenda. If you can get your story on BBC *Radio Ulster's* Stephen Nolan show, to paraphrase one interviewee, it

becomes the news story of the day. Although widely recognized as an authoritative voice in the region, with a “big personality” [C9]—which assisted in his ability to make compelling arguments—many of the interviewees regarded Nolan as an impediment to ethical and responsible post-conflict dialogue rather than a facilitator. Nolan was directly linked to the market-driven logic of journalism in that he is a news “persona” that “[responds] to the perception of an audience” [C12]. As another interviewee stated, “There is a difference between non-directed journalism and directed journalism. And Nolan is very directed journalism” [C15]. Interestingly, while some criticized the persona-driven model of news dissemination exemplified by Nolan, other interviewees suggested that additional news personalities and commentators are required to “stand out” and make alternative arguments. The need for new perspectives was highlighted by one interviewee, who suggested that “there are a lot of very, very, tired opinions out there....with all the commentators...it’s all very, very predictable” [C6]. Another noted that positive media coverage is often lacking because: “reconciliation isn’t sexy...it doesn’t sell newspapers” [C2].

Overall, media sensationalism means now the media are not a “force for good” [C2]. The condemnation was across media formats with particular criticism of newspapers being “a lot of rubbish” not interested in content [C3]. There is a lack of trust not just in the local papers but also in national UK tabloids (e.g. *The Mirror*, *The Sun*). One went as far to say that the tabloids [are] perpetuating a vision of the “end of empire, Muslim invaders [that] fuelled Brexit” [C3], which generally incites intolerance. This speaks to a wider trend towards populism across the media that is, according to one NPL: “unhelpful but conforms to their business model where they have to get a ‘scoop’, they have to get a story reported in the news” [C13]. An interesting link was made between the public’s desire for sensational news and the media’s creation of sensational news: “I don’t know who is parasitical on whom” [C12].

NPLs Expect Media to Play a 'Special' Role in the Post-Conflict Context

Our next main finding was that NPLs propose that the media should play a 'special' role in Northern Ireland's post-conflict society. The first element of this theme concerns a concept of special media ethics, and the second concerns whose interests are served in the post-conflict context.

Special media ethics. There was general agreement across NPL accounts that the media has a special role in the post-conflict context, reflecting journalism research in other divided/conflict-affected societies from the perspectives of journalists themselves (e.g. McIntyre & Sobel, 2018). There is a desire for the media to fulfil a more active and positive role in explaining post-conflict sensitivities and providing information during difficult times that helps bridge past differences. There was an expectation that the media should be: "moving us forward. Media have a responsibility to play a role in [building] a country of our own with an ownership of place" [C9]. One NPL noted, "If they can use it [their power] for the good rather than to keep conflict going then, I feel that they have a responsibility to do that" [C7]. Another stated: "I think the media have a public interest and responsibility that many of them are not meeting" [C15]. Another explained the important role of the media in providing analysis to political decisions: "I'd like more analysis and a bit more insight, and I would like a bit more edge to it as well" [C4].

In addition to analysis, some noted that the role of media is in "holding government to account" [C11]. Government figures featured prominently in perceptions of the media's role in Northern Ireland. The media-government relationship is considered tenuous at best: "some parts of government will be open to giving [information] and will understand that's an important thing to do. Other parts of the government won't" [C11]. Many departments take unusually long times to respond to both journalists and NGOs, according to NPLs, and some "seem to try to ignore some of the requests for information" [C4].

Thus some saw the limited role of the media in post-conflict progression as tied to the divisive nature of the Northern Ireland political sphere. The politicians repeatedly “fight old battles” and anytime the public takes interest in “real issues” politicians “can almost press this button and then people go back into these old sectarian conversations” [C4]. This was not just a criticism of local newspapers who were politically aligned but of most local and regional mainstream media. The media fails to counter the conflict-frames of politicians, and instead “very much follow the government agenda....they will follow the government’s line, allow the government to frame whatever the issues are” [C4]. There was a consensus across interviewees that both political elites and the media perpetuate conflict. Although the perceived role of media as a government watchdog is common to many modern democracies (Davis, 2007), this role was touted by one interviewee as particularly important given the long history of conflict in Northern Ireland. Media do not “exercise responsibility....they just keep the negativity going” [C7].

A duty to reflect new interests. In this second related theme, NPLs question which direction media coverage is taking the peace process, arguing that the media should be widening the parameters of political and civic debate in a post-conflict society. Several respondents thought the media did not reflect or serve the interests of a post-conflict society:

“There are a lot of us that just want to move on, just get on and live together and you know, have a much more positive society here and I just feel the media help the parties to drag us back all the time. I feel there are certain approaches that the parties take when they are going down sectarian lines where the media could just cut them off...we are not going to give that any air time, we are not going to report that. But they do. They think it's of interest to people. It's not of interest to me” [C7].

Another simply stated: “[the media] need to go through a peace process as well, to help them report on normal things” [C5]. While covering political issues as either-or

propositions may make for a good story, and serves to communicate information to the public in a simple and digestible manner, interviewees suggested such an approach fails to advance the capacity for enlightened public discourse: “[the media’s] political sophistication isn’t terribly advanced” [C13] and therefore is “not terribly helpful” [C9]. Instead of investigating the particulars of an issue, the media choose to adopt the past-oriented conflict frames of politicians. Another agreed that there is a lot of superficial coverage: “media tend to be too inward looking,” [C6] cover petty partisan issues, and ultimately fail to engage in the “deep conversations” [C6] that are needed to transition to full societal reconciliation and which would reflect the new cross-community interests of the majority of citizens. The media do not accurately reflect the changing composition of Northern Ireland political and civic attitudes, evident in, for example, small but significant electoral changes, or changing social attitudes according to NPLs. One noted:

“[the media] framed [the election] as anti-politics and nobody was interested and yet the turnout was roughly the same. [The media] framed [the election] as an old spat between unionism and nationalism when actually there were things going on underneath that they had completely missed... all the stuff that goes on, on the ground, gets overlooked because that's too small, too radical, too dangerous, too questioning. And then they are surprised when [others] get elected - they hadn't noticed that there was something going on...that they hadn't got. So the media are not always ahead of the game and that creates a drag on social and political policy change” [C13].

That said, several NPLs clearly doubted whether the media had the intellectual or practical capacity to help the public engage in informed debates at all. Indeed, it is not only peace topics that are bifurcated by the media. One interviewee explained, the “media falsely dichotomizes issues” [C15]. For instance, the media portrays LGBT issues as bifurcated into

“two fundamental positions from either perspective, which I don't think is a fair reflection of the debate. It's not just on LGBT issues its on many other issues as well” [C15].

There is clearly a perception that the media labels, dramatizes and perpetuates conflict, however this was complex in that the media also undermines and stereotypes (often working class) people who identify strongly with unionist or nationalist identities. One interviewee explained this was evident through certain terminology used to describe certain groups: “you give someone a sub human name, so that it is easier for you to do bad things” [C5]. One interviewee gave an example of a story around an immigrant family living within a predominantly white Protestant area, stating that the media took: “such a cheap shot, to just say East Belfast loyalist paramilitaries racist, you know it's a very cheap line to take. I just thought ‘God, slow news day’ and you have put a lot of people's lives in question. You know that is deeply irresponsible and just sloppy” [C10].

Community Groups Fill the Gap for Reconciliation

Lastly, a view several NPLs held was that their organisations fill the civic gap left by the media's shortcomings. Understanding NPL perceptions of media in post-conflict Northern Ireland requires an understanding of how much things have changed throughout the last three decades. One NPL explained: “When you come into this area and you look at it now it's hard to see what it looked like in the 70s and the 80s during the lifetime of The Troubles” [C14]. Another noted that the present (relative) peace represents: “a remarkable transition” [C11].

Recognizing that the sample for this research is cross-community groups, it is not surprising that they articulated their own role in the peace process. When reflecting on the role of the media (and sometimes, interchangeably, government), several NPLs noted that it is at the community level that trust in the peace process emanates. One explained: “Community trust surpassed trust in government and media” and that “communities have

moved well beyond our politicians” [C6]. Another stated: “We are miles ahead of the politicians. And I think people would still be feeling now that politicians are moving much too slowly in terms of creating the kind of society that people would like to see” [C3]. Given this, as one NPL argued, the business and non-profit sector often acts as “the opposition [to the political class], because they have a policy instinct and a policy machine and policy devices that the media doesn't” [C13]. Community leaders see their own organisations as playing a much more productive role in facilitating “public conversations” [C10], and inter-community dialogue for reconciliation, a role ideally placed at the feet of journalists, according to our interviewees.

It appears that media are perceived to have a special, but unfulfilled role to play in post-conflict Northern Ireland. The next section discusses the findings and positions our study in the broader discussions about media frameworks guiding journalism in conflict prone contexts.

Discussion: Community Expectations Suggest a Communitarianism Model for Media

The 17 community leaders who are active in cross-community organisations in Northern Ireland noted that there was a gap between the potential role for media in a post-conflict society and the actual behaviour of the media in reporting on the peace transition. Overall we find that community representatives perceive the media in Northern Ireland to focus on conflict and therefore to make societal and political divides salient, rather than to engage in the kind of conflict sensitive journalism that is advocated by ‘constructive journalism’ scholars (McIntyre & Sobel, 2018), and desired by NPLs. Rather than engaging in deep analysis of political or societal issues in Northern Ireland that might help to ameliorate misunderstandings or create meaningful dialogue and negotiation across divides, NPLs witness the media rehearsing old debates from political elites. Further, community leaders are continually disappointed that their positive peacebuilding work is not promoted

by the media. They are frustrated that when their communities experience conflict which fits sectarian parameters, then it is highlighted by the media in a simplistic fashion, seemingly in a bid to 'sell' stories. Such sensational coverage is considered both damaging for community relations and for community reputation. NPL views on news media are clearly a useful route into understanding the narrative of 'culture wars' that exist in Northern Ireland, despite significant societal progress and integration (Hayward & MacManus, 2019). By listening to the voices of cross-community leaders we see that key civil society figures believe that the media in Northern Ireland are not adequately reflecting the changed interests and concerns of a post-conflict society. Community leaders see their organisations as building reconciliation, widening discourse outside of sectarian parameters, and being the change makers on the good things that are happening in Northern Ireland. They don't see media reflecting these changed interests. Clearly, a mismatch in professional values between NPLs/cross-community organisations and journalists/media underpin NPLs dissatisfaction (Kunelius, 2006).

Reflecting on the cross-community organisational leaders' perceptions of media, we argue that they essentially advocate for a CSJ model of journalism, but underpinned by a communitarian ethical framework which promotes the post-conflict 'common good' (Borden, 2014). Communitarianism ethics, proposed by Clifford Christians, may provide a lens through which media can better perform their role in modern Northern Ireland, according to NPLs. Communitarianism places the community, rather the individual, at the centre of decision making. When applied to media, Borden (2014) argues that communitarianism is a normative media theory. Christians et al. noted that: "reporting grounded in a communitarian ethics requires that decisions about news coverage be driven by community norms, not by markets or mechanical efficiency" (1993, p. 86). The media should cover news in such a way that reflects and extends community morality. Indeed, drawing on the African form of

communitarianism (*Ubuntu*), Christians outlines several elements that mirror the sentiments of our interviewees:

In this perspective, reporting must be grounded historically and biographically, so that complex cultures are represented adequately. Interpretative accounts must reflect genuine features of the situation under investigation, and not represent the aberrations or hurried conclusions of observer opinion. Journalists committed to a merged ubuntu communitarianism seek to open up public life in all its dynamic dimensions. It means taking seriously lives that are loaded with multiple interpretations and grounded in cultural complexity. (Christians, 2004, p. 248)

It could be argued that NPLs are expecting 'too much' from local journalists, indeed some would suggest that journalists already do exude an implicit cross-community peace ethos, often to the detriment of rigorous political analysis (McLaughlin & Baker, 2010). Additionally, there are several recent and high profile instances where local journalists have provided thorough, nuanced and impartial investigation that clearly constitute cross-community public service (Paul, 2018). But nonetheless, our findings reveal that communities are yearning for journalism which sparks new debate, a finding supported elsewhere (Kunelius, 2006). Rather than journalists conveying the same 'two sides' of political issues in Northern Ireland, in the new post-conflict context, individuals want the media to raise new issues, or at least to highlight different dimensions of longstanding issues in the public sphere – this would reflect the new norms of the community, while acknowledging difference as real and legitimate. From the perspective of communitarianism: "The public sphere is conceived as a mosaic of particular communities, a pluralism of ethnic identities and world views intersecting to form a social bond but each seriously held and competitive as well" (Christians, 1997, p. 199). This is becoming a pressing need according to NPLs, especially to encourage the youth of Northern Ireland to engage in politics, many of

whom have not directly experienced conflict and whose priorities are future focused and grounded much more in the 'traditional' social issues of economic health, jobs, and education.

NPLs want the media to be more proactive in starting a new conversation that is 'good' for any kind of society, but which represents the particular – and 'new' - needs and interests of Northern Ireland's post-conflict society (Borden, 2014). In this respect, community representatives on the whole appear to desire a form of reflexive agenda setting from the media which they feel would better represent the diverse and collegial attitudes and interests of post-conflict Northern Ireland society. For example, the 'middle ground' of politics in Northern Ireland is considered much more interesting territory to probe than current media coverage suggests. Media influence in its current state is therefore a concern for the public according to our interviewees. NPLs envisage a much more positive potential of the media for facilitating the public sphere ideals of deliberation and consensual public opinion (Habermas, 1989) as well as the 'higher ethics' mediation role of CSJ (Howard, 2004) and the community-service based ethics of communitarianism (Christians et al., 1993). The lessons from our study are potentially relevant to other post-conflict or divided societies. Put simply, media roles need to evolve as communities evolve away from conflict, in order to adequately reflect the interests of a 'new' society. Our data shows that in Northern Ireland, this evolution is stunted by commercial pressures, a lament heard across many Western societies, and by journalists' socialization in conflict throughout past decades.

Conclusion and Further Research

The media is clearly still an important institution in the public sphere in Northern Ireland. NPLs as key publics consider media to be influential in setting the parameters of public debate and in shaping public opinion. There is nonetheless, a paradox between perceptions of media power and media competency, perhaps reconciled by the 'elite' nature

of our community respondents who represented themselves, at least in part, as separate from 'the general public'.

Accordingly, our study is, of course, not without its limitations. The sample of cross-community organisations is, overall, a group of people dedicated in various forms to peace and reconciliation. Their views are not representative of all citizens in Northern Ireland, nor all (cross-) community organisation representatives. Their criticisms of the media may be harsher than others who are not so active or integration orientated (Bish & Becker, 2016; McLaughlin, McLeod, Davis, Perryman & Mun, 2017). Yet, our research may speak more widely to democracies experiencing public scepticism and distrust towards the media. Indeed several of our sample's concerns about the media are reflected in other, stable contexts (e.g. see Kunelius, 2006; Van Wessel, 2014). At a time when 'fake news' is an increasingly topical and concerning issue, citizen perceptions of the role of the media in any democracy should be considered paramount to explaining societal and political processes. Further research might explore the generalizability of our findings, with particular attention to whether partisan as opposed to cross-community individuals would provide similar responses in a post-conflict society.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Q1. Please can you tell me a bit about your role and organisation?

Q2. Where do you usually access information on Northern Ireland government and public affairs?

2a. What news media sources do you use regularly, if any (i.e. at least one a week)?

Q3. Thinking about the information you receive from the media sources you mention:

3a. Tell me about your perceptions of the reliability of the information. Why?

3b. Tell me about your perceptions of the accuracy of the information. Why?

3c. Tell me about your perceptions of the fairness of the information. Why?

Q4. To what extent do you feel the news media represents and protects your/your community's interests?

Q5. To what extent do you think the news media influences your view of government and politics in Northern Ireland? What makes you say this?

Q6. How much influence do you think the news media has over your life/your community? What makes you say this?

Q7. What do you think should be the role of journalism in Northern Ireland? Is it different in Northern Ireland to other democracies?

Q8. What role, if any, do you think journalism plays in reconciliation in Northern Ireland?

Q9. How would you define the ideal role of a news journalist?

Q10. Thinking about the journalists you interact with; how would you characterise your relations with them?