



Press officers find a new audience

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Lining up to be spoonfed

Martin Moore and Colm Murphy

*They were once proud of their independence, so why are so many
Northern Ireland journalists taking news from PRs?*

New research has highlighted how the transition from conflict reporting to political journalism in Northern Ireland over the last two decades has seen journalists increasingly rely on official government sources. The research by Ulster University showed that before government was devolved from Westminster to Stormont, journalists got only one in five of their politics-related stories from an official government source. But 25 years on, despite the “stop-start” nature of Northern Ireland’s ruling Executive and Assembly, they now source most of their political stories from official government releases. An analysis in May 2022 showed that of 1,283 news items over a seven-day period, some 81 per cent were sourced from Northern Ireland Executive press releases.

The change seems to have happened because devolution opened a whole new source of political news, with an accountable, proactive government and ministers and members of the Assembly (MLAs) seeking publicity. This was rare under direct rule from Westminster, for government ministers, usually flown in from other parts of the UK, had little accountability to local electorates and thus did not need to seek publicity. For security reasons too, they kept a low profile.

Devolution also coincided with a big decline in the print circulations and advertising revenues of indigenous publications such as the *Belfast Telegraph*, *The Irish News* and *The News Letter*, which greatly depleted the resources of these publications to conduct independent research. While a strong regional press continues to sell more than 900,000 newspaper copies

a week, it too has been hit by a huge advertising reduction that limited its ability to fully resource political reporting. The newspaper industry also faced new competition from digital media start-ups and social media that reduced circulation revenue and thus news-gathering resources.

The research showed that the volume of Northern Ireland government-related stories generated by indigenous journalists increased two-and-a-half-fold after devolution. Initially, coverage was overwhelmingly positive. There was a rush to champion the new Executive and Assembly by Northern Ireland journalists that contrasted with the more critical approach to devolution in Scotland and Wales, the other two countries within the UK that got new devolved governments at the same time. The Scottish media had been quite critical of the early devolved governments in Edinburgh. The success, however, of the Scottish National Party (SNP) and the aftermath of the independence referendum in 2014 saw a significant change. The Scottish media changed opinion in line with the Scottish public to be much more proactive in terms of its coverage of its devolved government. In Wales, too, the experience was that the media initially was quite anti-devolution and had a very pro-London/UK coverage before becoming a little more supportive.

But in Northern Ireland, after 30 years of conflict that claimed more than 3,500 lives and injured more than 50,000, the indigenous media had more reason to be more enthusiastic. The level of overall coverage of its devolved administration was significantly more than in Scotland and Wales. There appeared to be an almost moral obligation to support peace and promote the then-new devolved institutions. The most telling evidence of this was the more than doubling in the volume of politics-related stories published or broadcast between 2003 and 2022. The number of articles in the sample period chosen for this study, a week in May, rose from 166 articles/broadcasts in 2003 to 1,040 in 2022. Print witnessed the largest increase in overall political coverage.

But by 2022 the dominance of government communications was pushing out other independent sources that journalists had used extensively previously. External sources, such as non-governmental organisations, fell from 30 per cent of stories to 15 per cent by 2013. Security matters were replaced with “bread-and-butter” issues, assembly-led debate, announcements and a political discourse. Health stories maintained a strong presence, but transport was the most consistent topic. Security issues still lurked uneasily in the background, reflecting the fact that almost 160 people have been killed in politics-related violence in Northern Ireland since the Good Friday

Agreement. Despite the ceasefire more than 30 years ago, at least six armed and well-organised paramilitary groups remain active in Northern Ireland.

But, in general, a new political world of news sources and a nascent political class became available to the Northern Irish media on government issues. Journalist sources were enhanced overnight with daily ministerial visits, engagements, assembly debates, oral question sessions, announcements and cross-border trips. Our analysis showed that political reporting increasingly became based on official sources, particularly in newspapers outside Belfast, one of the most important and influential parts of the Northern Ireland media. Devolution offered more material for newspapers to use, without changing traditional outlooks, which remained largely split on unionist versus nationalist lines. They generally covered government issues related to their political allegiance. This was different from broadcasters, such as UTV, BBC Northern Ireland, Downtown, Q Network and Cool FM, which had to remain impartial under their Ofcom licences.

The research is based on a study of media output over the same week in May across the three main Belfast-produced newspapers, and a sample of provincial newspapers from 2003 to 2022. It follows a sample of UTV, BBC Northern Ireland and other indigenous radio output from 2003 to 2011. It excludes social media as that was not an omnipresent in the original data in 2003, but today it plays an increasingly important role in Northern Ireland political coverage.

Subhead

The three topics that dominated coverage in May 2022 were the Northern Ireland Protocol, abortion and the proposed language and culture legislation also led by the Northern Ireland Office. Interestingly, despite the use of official sources, the vast majority of news items are increasingly negative in overall tone. This increasingly negative tone was evidenced in the research. It showed that positive news coverage changed from 2003 when it was at 38.6 per cent and peaked at 44 per cent by 2013. But by 2022, more than two decades into devolution, positive coverage had almost halved to 23 per cent. On the flip side, the negative coverage has gone from 45.8 per cent in 2003 to peak at 55 per cent in 2022. Finally, neutral news items stood at 15.7 per cent during direct rule from Westminster in 2003, rising under an Executive government to 26.1 per cent by 2013. This too had fallen away during the second “stop-start” decade of devolution, 2013-23, falling to

just under 20 per cent in 2022.

Given that there was effectively no large official opposition in the Northern Ireland Assembly for much of its existence, media commentators effectively had to fill the gap. This has contributed to the continuing uphill drift towards negative coverage of anything Executive-related. This growth in negativity contrasts to the Scottish media's experience, which started negatively but became more positive. This was until recently, with the scandals that beset the two past leaders of the SNP.

But the most worrying finding of the Ulster University analysis was the over-reliance on public relations practitioners by often-underresourced journalists. This was no doubt aided by the fact that government communications in Northern Ireland has evolved into a very sophisticated, social media-savvy operation over the past 25 years. The traditional press release with photo is often supplemented by social media-ready videos of ministers making announcements, with interviews with key stakeholders. These are often neatly packaged and presented with the same quality as a traditional broadcast media report by the digitally skilled government communications staff. This content is distributed both directly to the public via social media and to existing and new digital media outlets. The growing amount of digital materials government press officers produce reduces the need for journalists to be on-site at ministerial events where they could pose questions. Digital communication tools such as WhatsApp are also regularly used by government press officers to distribute audio clips of ministers and officials. The research found that more than 50 per cent of broadcast pieces on Northern Ireland government affairs are package-based. So the fact that government communications is able to produce similar packages is giving the public the political information in the format they are used to.

Another important factor was the huge growth in output from the Northern Ireland government after devolution. It rose from 166 press communications in 2003 to 1,040 in 2022. This can largely be attributed to local ministers or departments making new announcements and, of course, being more readily available to do interviews, given they need to be re-elected. This is not unique to Northern Ireland and a similar increase in output of government communications was experienced in the other UK devolved regions.

This six-fold rise in output of government communications combined with the increasingly high demands placed on over-stretched media organisations in the 24/7 digital news environment contributed towards

the dominance of government sources. The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the change towards more use of social media and online news sources. It also made the broadcast media more accepting of interviews over the internet, which made ministers and officials much more available, particularly to the broadcast media.

With an increasingly diverse and growing 1.9million Northern Ireland population, journalists have to cover most political items from the perspective of both unionists and nationalists if they are to demonstrate impartiality. This effectively means more space has to be devoted to political coverage than in other devolved regions. But an increasing proportion of the population, particularly the younger population, do not class themselves as either unionist or nationalist. Many will know more about American politics than politics in their own country, for they are turned off by the sectarian and “stop-start” treadmill. But the media, in search of balance, finds it hard to reflect this growing demographic in its coverage.

The recent visits to Northern Ireland of US president Joe Biden and past-president Bill Clinton to mark the Good Friday Agreement’s 25th anniversary fleetingly brought more international journalistic attention to Northern Ireland. But at a local level, journalists’ excitement has waned and become more cynical. Yet they and the public are still hugely supportive of ensuring there is a functioning Executive and Assembly. Perhaps the effective government communication of the past two decades has convinced an increasingly weary population of devolution’s benefits, while sporadic terrorism shows what happens without them.

Dr Martin Moore holds a PhD in journalism studies from Ulster University and works in communications in the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

Dr Colm Murphy is subject leader in media, film and journalism at Ulster University. He previously worked with the The Sunday Tribune and The Sunday Times.