On 14 August 1969, ferocious rioting broke out in Derry, Northern Ireland, and quickly spread to Belfast, marking the beginning of ‘the Troubles’: a thirty-year period of political and sectarian strife that resulted in over 3,600 deaths, countless injuries, and deep emotional scarring for many citizens of Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain. During the nights of 14 and 15 August Belfast witnessed frightening levels of violence. Seven people were killed and scores of homes burned as angry gangs terrorised inner-city neighbourhoods. During two nights of mayhem, 745 people were injured, 154 with gunshot wounds, and close to 1,800 people were forced from their homes. Approximately 1,500 of those that abandoned their homes were Catholic, many fleeing Belfast and heading south to the Irish Republic. BBC Television was in Belfast on those fateful nights, transmitting throughout the United Kingdom material that was carefully ‘sanitised’, censoring coverage of seminal events in contemporary Irish and British history. No comprehensive description of the unrest was allowed and interviews that might contain emotional outbursts or inflammatory accusations were banned. In the aftermath of the carnage the BBC Controller for Northern Ireland, Waldo Maguire, defended the BBC’s handling of events. ‘In the present atmosphere of hatred and fear, we have to recognise that the broadcasting of violently opposed views, passionately and offensively expressed, could have direct and immediate consequences on the streets of Belfast and Londonderry.’

McGuire argued that when the violence broke out the BBC had two options. It could treat Northern Ireland as a foreign country and produce ‘the same kind of uninhibited programme which would be made if the shooting, rioting, looting and arson were taking place in a foreign country; and then ensure it is not carried on Northern Ireland transmitters’, or it could ‘modify to some extent the presentation … in a way designed to avoid extreme provocation’. The BBC chose the latter option, refusing to inform viewers fully of what was taking place.
in Northern Ireland. The veteran BBC correspondent Martin Bell, who spent many years covering the conflict, later reflected:

We made a mistake ... in 1969, in August of that year when Catholics were burned out of their homes in the Falls by Protestants who attacked them from the Shankill. The BBC reports then gave no indication of who these refugees were. They just spoke of refugees. The public was not to know whether they were Catholic or Protestant or who was attacking whom. That has been seen as a grave mistake.  

This early episode of censorship at the very start of ‘the Troubles’ illustrates the dilemma that grew more pronounced as broadcasters and the State struggled to come to terms with how the conflict in Northern Ireland should be presented to regional, national and international audiences. During a conflict that stretched over three decades, Government-imposed censorship, together with self-censorship practised by anxious broadcasters, complicated the BBC’s efforts fully to inform viewers of events taking place in Northern Ireland.

This book seeks to address how news and information about the conflict in Northern Ireland were disseminated through the most accessible, powerful and popular form of media: television. It will focus on the BBC and consider how its broadcasts complicated ‘the Troubles’ by challenging decisions, policies and tactics developed by Governments trying to defeat a stubborn insurgency that threatened national security. I will consider the development of the BBC in Northern Ireland from its origins as a modest regional broadcasting service through some of the darkest days of ‘the Troubles’. What began as a timid radio service determined not to upset the status quo evolved to become a determined force that challenged the foundations of the British State. Both the regional service and the national network emerged to provide a critical voice that chronicled thirty years of turmoil, thereby becoming an integral part of the long and harrowing conflict. Programming critical of the Stormont Government helped destabilise and ultimately undermine a regional Parliament that had long governed without consensus. Broadcasts that questioned British policy in Northern Ireland enraged Labour and Conservative Governments alike throughout the 1970s and 1980s and eventually provoked Margaret Thatcher to intervene directly by imposing a crude form of censorship in an effort to deny subversives the ‘oxygen of publicity’.

Throughout the conflict British Governments tried to shape the way in which television depicted the struggle against paramilitaries, especially the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA). However, its relentless presence undermined Government efforts to present a simple picture of the forces of law and order trying to defeat savage terrorists hell-bent on a campaign of murder and mayhem.
All those involved in the conflict hoped to produce a narrative for both domestic and international audiences to justify their role in an increasingly bitter and violent struggle. The propaganda war that ensued created much consternation for officials in London, Belfast and Dublin who understood that the conflict presented a real and immediate threat to social order. Rules, regulations and policies that tried to suppress, shape or ‘spin’ coverage of the conflict were intended to marginalise extremists. Governments were acutely aware of the power of television to encourage sympathy or support for the very organisations they sought to destroy.

This study will explore the incessant wrangling that took place among political elites, civil servants, military officials, broadcasting authorities and journalists concerning what should and should not be featured on the BBC’s regional and national networks. In many cases the anxiety and controversy created by these political skirmishes ultimately challenged the ability of the medium accurately to inform citizens of important events taking place within the United Kingdom, thereby undermining the BBC’s role as a public service provider. This project seeks to address how the crisis in Northern Ireland tested the integrity and independence of the BBC, one of the most trusted and respected media outlets in the world. As violence continued, the BBC was attacked, threatened and bullied by a variety of actors, but did its best to stand its ground and maintain editorial independence and journalistic credibility. This was true of senior managers, editors and journalists who worked for the London-based network and those who worked for BBC Northern Ireland. In spite of the infamous broadcasting restrictions put in place in 1988, professional staff were determined to provide audiences with informed news and information about the conflict. Senior broadcasting officials pushed back against clumsy Government efforts to silence voices that, although unpalatable, were critical to comprehending and eventually resolving a long and bloody conflict.

In writing this book I have been fortunate to have access to valuable primary sources in Britain and Northern Ireland. As a historian I’ve tried to use a variety of archival sources to develop this narrative but because of restrictions on access to this material I’ve ended this study in 1988, almost a decade after Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister. Historians will soon have access to material that extends well into the 1990s enabling a comprehensive exploration of broadcasting and Northern Ireland in the years leading up to the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. In writing this book I have used a wide range of secondary sources and I am indebted to those who have already explored the role of the media in addressing the Northern Ireland conflict. A number of impressive volumes have been published over the years including Rex Cathcart’s pioneering *The Most Contrary Region: The BBC in Northern Ireland 1924–1984*; Liz Curtis’s

In writing about the role of the BBC in covering ‘the Troubles’ I am aware that this book only scratches the surface and there is much work to be done. For instance, a study addressing the impact of radio, especially the role of innovative regional services, including Radio Ulster and Radio Foyle, could help explain how important space was opened up that enabled dialogue to develop within a deeply divided community. An exploration of broadcasting in Derry and in rural areas of the province during the conflict would enable a more comprehensive understanding of the role of the broadcast media outside Northern Ireland’s largest city. Other areas that should be explored include the relationship between broadcasters and the political parties and paramilitary forces that were part of the conflict. Republicans, loyalists and moderates of all political persuasions understood the value of television and tried, with mixed results, to use it to further their cause. Although a handful of scholars have addressed the work of the independent television companies, including Ulster Television, much more should be done to explore how these companies developed news and current affairs programming that addressed the conflict. There is also an opportunity to consider how broadcasting developed to address issues that are not directly linked to the unrest in the province, such as education, religion, sport and drama. Programming that addressed the role of women in the political, cultural and social life of Northern Ireland also deserves scholarly attention.

The broadcast media not only reported on events in the province but found that their coverage sometimes created news and controversy. As archives in the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland continue to release new material, light will be shed on how the BBC and other media outlets grappled with the challenges inherent in covering a conflict that lasted well into the 1990s. Although this study addresses the intrinsic tension in reporting on ‘the Troubles’ it does so from the perspective of a historian writing about the BBC. A project that would look at the BBC from other perspectives could make an important contribution to the history of a conflict that, one might argue, is still ending. I hope this book will contribute to a literature that helps us understand the tragedy that was ‘the Troubles’.

Notes

1 BBC Written Archives, Caversham (hereafter BBC WAC), N12/23/1, Controller’s report, ‘BBC and the Northern Ireland crisis’, 3 October 1969. See also Rex Cathcart,

Although some material has made its way into the public domain via the Freedom of Information Act, the thirty-year rule limits access to Government documents, including most of those from the BBC. However, archivists at the BBC Written Archive have helped provide material beyond that date and there is additional, though limited, archival material available from a variety of sources, including BBC websites, which I’ve used. There is still critical archival material from 1983 through 1988 that, as of this writing, is not yet available to researchers.