The “most compact 5,196 square miles of back-lot in the world”: Northern Ireland, propaganda, rebranding and the media

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Introduction

1 This paper considers the various interpretative frameworks that the media, broadly defined, have applied in the coverage of Northern Ireland since the outbreak of what is euphemistically referred to as “the troubles” – that is, the conflict involving the British Army, other security forces, republicans and loyalists, that began in the late 1960s and ended with the loyalist and republican ceasefires in 1990s. The term interpretative framework is used here to refer to a general and ideologically systemic way in which the media, under the influence of the state, understand and represent the conflict in Northern Ireland and its aftermath. The paper will periodise these interpretative frameworks. The first is the propaganda war during the conflict. The second is the propaganda of peace that attended the political negotiations that led to the signing of Belfast Agreement in April 1998; and the third is the current rebranding of Northern Ireland as a region that is “open for business” in the global free market.

2 I want to suggest that Northern Ireland has been subject to various political and commercial imperatives that have gone some considerable way to determining its cultural and media representation, and that the British state has played a key role in all of these. Other parties and organisations have engaged in a political and ideological struggle over the meaning of Northern Ireland - most obviously Irish nationalists and Ulster unionists - but the British state’s contribution has been crucial, as has been highlighted by a number of studies.1 It is not my intention to offer a review of this material or attempt to theorise the relationship between the state and media. However, I
do want to start from a position that insists on the importance of that relationship. In order to illustrate how the state has “set the tone” in coverage and representations of Northern Ireland, I will refer to a series of “advertisements” commissioned by the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) between 1988 and 1995, which were broadcast to the region on television. In the beginning these advertisements, which took the form of short films, carried a clear security message, but by 1995 the message they conveyed was one of hope and commercial possibilities. They offer an intriguing insight into “official” thinking with regards Northern Ireland, and when seen in the context of the broader media and cultural environment, they reveal something of the agenda-setting role of government.

This is necessarily a selective and truncated discussion, given the limits of a short essay. There are, in any case, much more detailed investigations of the media and Northern Ireland referenced above. What I have been concerned to do here is offer a position paper, based upon my previous research and reading in this field, and the experience of living and working in Northern Ireland. I offer this schematic history of the media representation of region to highlight the way in which propaganda and the prioritisation of economic imperatives have contributed to Northern Ireland’s lack of cultural integrity, a problem compounded by the historic dispute over its political legitimacy. In essence, Northern Ireland is arguably left lacking, what Benedict Anderson refers to a “profound emotional legitimacy” that one associates with the imagined community of the contemporary nation.

History & context

Northern Ireland owes its existence to the Government of Ireland Act passed by the UK parliament in 1920, which provided for the partition of Ireland. Ever since, the region’s politics have been largely defined by the historic dispute between Ulster unionism and Irish nationalism. Unionists, who are predominantly Protestant, insist that Northern Ireland’s six counties are an integral part of the UK. Nationalists, who are overwhelmingly Catholic, argue for an end to British jurisdiction in the six counties and the reunification of Ireland. From Northern Ireland’s inception in 1921, unionists enacted one-party government until the prorogation of the parliament at Stormont in 1972 amid scenes of violent confrontation on the streets of the region. What ignited the conflict was a lack of democratic consensus for the unionist regime, which depended heavily on forms of coercion, discrimination and exclusion directed against a Catholic, nationalist minority too significant in number to be ignored. All political initiatives failed in their efforts to achieve peace and political accord until the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) called a ceasefire in 1994, followed by a loyalist cessation of violence. The subsequent negotiations between unionists, nationalists, British and Irish governments, and an international intervention lead by US Senator George Mitchell, eventually led to the Belfast Agreement on 10 April 1998. The terms of the Agreement devolved limited powers from Westminster to a Northern Ireland Assembly, establishing a power-sharing executive that included unionists and nationalists. Despite this progress, the intervening years have been marked by unstable government in the region because of unionism and nationalism’s enduring mutual antagonism. The UK’s exiting the EU has added to region’s maladies, re-opened questions that the political accord in the North hoped to have settled. These questions centre on the nature of the Irish border, sovereignty and the relationship between Britain and Ireland. In addition, there is a sense that Northern
Ireland has become utterly marginal to UK politics in the face of a rising English nationalism, the ideological foundations of which lie in opposition to European integration.6

In many respects, for Northern Ireland, the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 and the EU Referendum of 2016 bookend an era; one that began with a consociational accord that strove to accommodate mutually antagonistic national allegiances, and ended with a poll that reasserted national sovereignty and the control of borders. It started with the promise of a ‘peace dividend’ and Northern Ireland’s entry proper into the global free market after years of subvention, and finished with the re-emergence of protectionist economics in the US and the rise of the same across Europe. It opened with a popular perception of democratic agency - that is, Northern Ireland seizing control of its future from the hands of miserable fate - and it closed with the region expelled against its will from one union, the European Union, and rendered peripheral within another, the United Kingdom. It is an extraordinary reversal of fortune when we recall Tony Blair’s often quoted statement about feeling the “hand of history upon our shoulders” during the negotiations that led to the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. By contrast, today, as Northern Ireland prepares to leave the EU against the expressed wish of its electorate, and with all the uncertain consequences that entails, it is hard not to conclude that the hand of history is gone elsewhere.

The propaganda war

It is not the first time that Northern Ireland has been a marginal concern. The region was relatively unknown by international audiences, and ignored by national policymakers until the emergence of the civil rights movement in the late 1960s that campaigned for democratic reform of Stormont’s sectarian regime. Indeed English journalists who arrived in the region at that time to cover the civil rights movement recall knowing very little about the place. They viewed the civil rights campaign in the region as an extension of a broader international phenomenon that included the black civil rights movement in the United States, the student revolts in Paris ’68 and the Prague Spring. However, as hostile unionist counter-demonstrators attacked civil rights activists on the streets, journalists began to revise their coverage. The veteran BBC correspondent, Martin Bell, then a young journalist, recalls how his initial view of the civil rights protests as being part of an international movement, eventually gave way to the feeling that there was “something very deep and something very historical going on”, and, we might add, something specific to Northern Ireland. In a sense, faced with a seemingly incomprehensible conflict, journalists resorted to historic stereotypes about the Irish as pathologically predisposed to violence. Since the animosity between Protestants and Catholics was something that the rest of the UK had resolved centuries before, the tendency was to view Northern Ireland as politically backward and socially archaic. This is what Tom Nairn referred to as the ‘myth of atavism’. It is a myth that predated the 1960s and resonated with cultural representations beyond news and journalism. As John Hill has demonstrated in relation to cinema, when not depicted as a rural idyll, Ireland tended to be represented as a “dark and strife-torn maelstrom” of primordial forces. This emptied the conflict of its historical and political content, viewing it instead as a consequence of inherent belligerence or a tragic flaw in the Irish character that inclined them to violence. For
British policy makers and audiences, such images had the advantage of absolving Britain of any responsibility for the emerging conflict on their doorstep.

7 As the situation grew more tense and violent in Northern Ireland, the British government sent the Army to the region on 14 August 1968. In many respects, the introduction of troops to Northern Ireland and the emergence of militant republicanism in the shape of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) simplified the situation in the minds of many journalists. This was now framed as a manichean struggle: “our boys” against mindless terrorists and/or the incorrigible Irish. Even the initial shock that some journalists showed at the murder of 13 unarmed demonstrators by British Paratroopers in Derry in 1972 – known as Bloody Sunday – did little to shake this conviction, aided as it was by Lord Widgery’s report into the shootings. Widgery was appointed to lead the inquiry into the events of Bloody Sunday, and he was briefed by the UK’s Prime Minister at the time, Edward Heath, who reminded him (as if he needed to be told) that the British government and military were engaged in a propaganda war in Ireland. Widgery delivered his now infamous report that whitewashed the events and exonerated the Army. At the time, many journalists and commentators in the British media settled for his “official” version and laid the blame for the deaths at the feet of the IRA and the march organisers. Others concluded that the killings were the inevitable result of Northern Ireland’s tragic circumstances, falling back upon the idea that the Irish were somehow doomed, or fated, to such violent catastrophes.7

8 As Bloody Sunday and the Widgery report illustrate, the British state has played a decisive role in the coverage of Northern Ireland during the troubles. David Miller argues that the “official” propaganda view of Northern Ireland was that it was an “intimate part of the British state, and therefore the appearance of liberal democracy and the freedom of the press had to be preserved”.8 Nevertheless, public information was tightly controlled in a variety of ways. For instance, the government employed routine official public relations to present the conflict in Northern Ireland as having nothing to do with British imperialism. Instead, it was presented as a consequence of irreconcilable differences between unionists and nationalists or simply terrorism. As such, the British government and military were depicted as neutral arbiters, forced to intervene between two antagonistic communities.9 The law, but also intimidation supported the work of government public relations in this instance. Miller highlights the role of legislation such as the Prevention of Terrorism Act, the Emergency Provisions Act, the Official Secrets Act and the Police and Criminal Evidence Act, in tightening controls on public debate. He argues that the law, in tandem with direct pressure brought to bear on broadcasters, enabled government interference in reporting of events. In such a charged atmosphere, Miller suggests, it is little wonder that the media implemented internal procedures of self-censorship. Nevertheless, in 1988 the British government introduced a broadcasting ban that prohibited the broadcasting of direct statements from proscribed organisations, including the IRA, Sinn Féin and the loyalist paramilitaries. It was an attempt to deny paramilitaries and their supporters, in the words of then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, “the oxygen of publicity.” However, some journalists and producers worked around the ban in terms that made it appear ridiculously ill conceived. Republican and loyalist representatives could be interviewed and appear on-screen, but their words were spoken by actors in voice-over. Despite this, Miller argues, the effect of the broadcasting ban was to push Sinn Féin to the margins of political life and exempt the actions of the state from serious scrutiny.10
Even when the broadcasting ban was still in place (it was revoked in September 1994), the “official” image of republican and loyalist combatants, and their political representatives, was changing, and the best illustration of this transition is a series of government sponsored television “advertisements” to promote the confidential telephone number. This was a telephone service set up by the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) in the 1970s that encouraged citizens to anonymously report paramilitary or suspicions activity to the security forces. The earliest advertisement for the service was entitled *A Future* (1988), and it depicted paramilitaries as pariahs who preyed upon the community and violently undermined the social and economic fabric of Northern Ireland. However, by 1993 the image of the combatants in the advertisements had softened. They were no longer anonymous, hooded-figures handing out brutal summary justice in back-alleys. They were presented instead as fathers, husbands, sons (they were invariably men), and as much victims of the violence as its perpetrators. This change in the representation of the paramilitary figure worked towards two ends. First, it signalled to combatants that the British government could now conceive of them as participants in political negations; and secondly, it prepared the wider public for the inclusion of paramilitary spokespeople in the peace talks.  

Just as the image of the paramilitary was being revised, so was the image of Northern Ireland more broadly, and advertisements for the confidential telephone number illustrated this new determination to present the region in a better light. If *A Future* depicted Belfast as a derelict, bombed-out city, a dismal, urban dystopia patrolled by paramilitaries, then *A New Era* (1994), first broadcast six years later, anticipated peace and social renewal. The invitation to inform on paramilitaries was still included, but only at the end of a montage clearly designed to inspire a biblical sense of hope in the future. Accompanied by songwriter Pete Seeger’s “Turn! Turn! Turn! (To Everything There Is a Season)” – a musical adaptation of the Book of Ecclesiastes – *A New Era*, transforms images of the “strife-torn maelstrom” into emblems of a more peaceful future. In it, imposing concrete security bollards morph into attractive flowerpots; a paramilitary gun turns into a starting pistol at the beginning of a marathon race; a dreary derelict street comes to life with children playing in the sunshine. These revised images of Northern Ireland and its combatants were an early sign of what my colleague Greg McLaughlin and I refer to as “the propaganda of peace”.  

The propaganda of peace  

Just as citizens may need to be persuaded to go to war, so the citizens of Northern Ireland needed to be persuaded that peace was possible and that erstwhile enemies could be potential political partners. However, the propaganda of peace was more than a concerted effort to achieve political accord and reconciliation. It was also an attempt to interpolate Northern Ireland into the global free market, after decades of violent civil conflict had effectively excluded it. This was framed as a “peace dividend”, enabling money spent on security to be redirected to infrastructure projects and wealth-creating activities, as well as allowing the region to become an attractive location for foreign inward investment. As a form of propaganda, it was broader in its conception than that which is usually associated the state and military at a time of war, or in preparation for war. The state played a definitive role, but other civic organisations and actors – the local business community, political elites, but also trade unions, the community and voluntary...
sector, academia and, of course, the media – were key in the formation and dissemination of its message.

12 Take for example a rock concert organised in support of the Good Friday Agreement and staged three days before the referendum that would ratify the accord. The event crystallised a set of ideas about the potential new Northern Ireland, combining entrepreneurship, regeneration, hope, international celebrity endorsement and, crucially, a powerful and widely disseminated image of peace and reconciliation. A local entertainments promoter hastily arranged the concert, featuring international rock stars U2. It was hosted in the Waterfront Hall, a recently built emblem of the Belfast’s regeneration in peacetime, and staged in front of an invited audience of schoolchildren, none of whom were old enough to vote, but whose presence offered a poignant symbol of hope for the future. The enduring image of the event is of Bono, U2’s lead singer, standing between David Trimble and John Hume, then leaders of constitutional unionism and nationalism respectively, holding their arms aloft as if they were two prizefighters. It was an action that reprised the One Love Peace Concert in Jamaica, 1978, when in front of a Kingston audience, Bob Marley raised and joined the hands of political rivals Michael Manley and Edward Seaga.

13 The potent symbolism of the Waterfront Hall concert was crucial in securing the vote that endorsed the Good Friday Agreement. However, nine years later, Trimble and Hume were gone and the apparently moderate parties they led, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), had lost power to those once considered the extremes of Northern Irish politics, the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin. Nevertheless, the propaganda of peace prevailed. In December 2007, another image of peace, reconciliation and economic regeneration emerged; this time it included once bitter political rivals Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness at the opening in Belfast of the multinational retailer IKEA. Images circulated in the media of the two men seated beside one another on a sofa in the entrance to the store, smiling and apparently relaxed in each other’s company. If the “heroic” image of Bono, Hume and Trimble presumed its own mythic importance, then the one of Paisley and McGuinness endorsing a global brand, may have been more domesticated, banal and unassuming, but it was no less significant.

14 Once again, the British government through the Northern Ireland Office played its part in promoting the transformation of Northern Ireland’s global image and reputation, from “strife torn, maelstrom” to a contemporary site of conspicuous consumption. It commissioned a further series of advertisements like those for the confidential telephone number, but this time without the security message. Broadcast in 1995, two of the advertisements advanced an anti-sectarian theme of peace and reconciliation, but two others seemed more concerned to present Northern Ireland in a commercially affirmative light. *Northern Irish Quality* celebrated the region’s sporting and cultural achievements with a montage that included personalities such as footballer George Best, athlete Mary Peters and film star Liam Neeson. The fourth advertisement, *Northern Irish Spirit*, had the look of a film promoting tourism, with images of the region’s stunning coastal and rural scenery, accompanied by the strains of Belfast-born Van Morrison’s song, “Have I Told You Lately That I love You”. It was a remarkable transformation from the pictures of urban decay, dereliction and barbarity employed to encourage people to use the confidential telephone number. Instead, the Northern Irish public were being encouraged
to see the region as a potentially lucrative commodity in the global free market, attractive to foreign investors and tourists alike.

Rebranding Northern Ireland

This was an early attempt to rebrand Northern Ireland as a region “open for business”. There is a long liberal tradition that considers economic incentives as underscoring political accord. In the context of contemporary Northern Ireland, as Daniel Jewesbury and Robert Porter argue, the region is subject to a “moralising politics of social and economic development”.

By this we mean that there is a strong connection between the twin narratives of political progress and social-economic development in contemporary Belfast; that post-Agreement Belfast has, to a significant degree, become a story in which the twin moral goods of political progress and privatised, neo-liberal economic development are folded into one another.

The association of peace and the free-market was made recently by the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, in October 2013 when he spoke of “a new Northern Ireland open for business, ready for investment, strengthening the foundations for peace, stability and prosperity and determined to be defined not by a divided past but by shared future.”

Among the strategic aims of government has been the ambition to project Northern Ireland’s new image to audiences beyond the region itself. Part of this strategy is the hosting of global media events, such as the MTV Europe Music Awards in 2011, the G8 summit in 2013 and the Giro d’Italia in 2014. Such occasions are designed to give the new Northern Ireland greater international visibility. Large sums of public money have been spent on attracting and hosting these events - a report £1 million for the MTV awards; £4.2 million for the Giro d’Italia; £92 million on the G8 summit. It is claimed that there is a considerable return on these investments – £22 million from the MTV awards; £10 million worth of publicity from the Giro d’Italia; an estimated £40 million return from the G8 and international exposure that Northern Ireland could not otherwise afford. The flagship of these global media projections is surely Home Box Office’s (HBO) television series *Game of Thrones*, which is partially filmed in Northern Ireland, and makes use of the rural and shoreline scenery promoted in the NIO’s *Northern Irish Spirit*, as well as filming on the site that was home to Belfast’s once thriving shipbuilding industry. To date, Northern Ireland Screen, the region’s publicly funded film and television development agency, has given £14.85 million to HBO as an incentive to use Northern Ireland as a location. Again, the claims made for the return on this investment, in terms of expenditure on goods and services into the regional economy, are considerable – estimated £166 million. However, quite where or to whom this money goes is not clear. Certainly, there is nothing to suggest that it is reaching the urban poor in Belfast and Derry, or the areas of rural deprivation, all of which have been hit by punishing austerity imposed by government. However, what is clear is the importance that Northern Ireland’s policy makers are placing on such media exposure.

The region’s First and Deputy First Ministers, Peter Robinson and Martin McGuinness, visited California in 2010 on a mission to attract further film and television production to...
Northern Ireland. In March 2014, Northern Ireland’s Enterprise, Trade and Investment Minister, Arlene Foster, announced a planned investment of £42 million in the region’s film, television and digital industries. In addition, there are advanced plans for the extension of film studio space in Belfast at a cost of £20 million pounds. Such investment has little to do with fostering an indigenous film and television industry. Rather its objective is to attract global media corporations to the region, who in turn will use it as a location, bringing the place to the attention of potential tourists. As Arlene Foster put it:

Capturing the attention of prospective holidaymakers is essential to ensure Northern Ireland stands out from other destinations. In order to attract new and repeat visitors, Tourism Ireland will be seeking opportunities to capitalise on the huge worldwide popularity of HBO’s Game of Thrones [...].

19 To this end, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board has designed a complimentary advertising campaign inviting international tourists to “discover the real world” of Game of Thrones. If there is a hint of Baudrillardian hyperrealism about this, it is not the only example of it. The Northern Ireland executive has spent a reported £8 million pounds on fake-shop fronts in the region. These painted facades cover the front of disused retail premises in an effort to disguise the dereliction of some of the region’s town centres, often in preparation for events such as the G8 summit and the Giro d’Italia.

20 However, perhaps more worrying is the way in which sometimes Northern Ireland is presented as a tabula rasa; “a mere location for economic activity far removed from the cultural lives and experiences of the people who live there”. For example, in 2012, in an effort to attract foreign film and television producers, Northern Ireland Screen distributed an impressive show-reel of clips drawn from various films that showed off the region’s many cinematic locations. The show-reel opens with Hollywood actor, Bill Murray, announcing that Belfast is the biggest movie set in the world, while the accompanying text described Northern Ireland as “the most compact 5,196 square miles of back-lot in the world”. Startlingly this language and its “casual evacuations of the region’s historical and social experience” echo that of Harcourt Developments, the property developers behind Belfast’s Titanic Quarter, another key symbol of post-conflict regeneration. Harcourt said crassly: “Belfast is unique among Western European cities in that more than half of its city centre is yet to be redeveloped, creating a pleasing blank canvas for regeneration”. As Phil Ramsey argues, Northern Ireland’s violent past, is someone else’s opportunity for development and capital accumulation. However, without a progressive distribution of the potential profits, this will serve primarily to deepen inequality in the region.

Conclusion

21 For decades, Northern Ireland has been subject to propaganda and now its media representation is dominated by economic imperatives that render it a mere “back-lot” and “a pleasingly blank canvas” upon which foreign investors are invited to make their mark, and often incentivised to do so with public money. This is happening at the same time as cuts to the local arts budget. There are also declining local newspapers sales, cuts to regional newsroom staff and a retreat from the standards of public service broadcasting in the face of encroaching commercialisation right across the UK including Northern Ireland. If the media is integral to the modern political process and the
imagining of contemporary community, then we might ask whether we should be alarmed that a fledgling democracy with a history of civil conflict has such a laissez-faire attitude to the media and its representation through it? One could argue that the rebranding of Northern Ireland as a blank social canvas – one that is always ready for inward investment and media-motivated tourism – is preferable to propaganda and sectarian discourses that precede it. On the other hand, a hopeless denial of the political and cultural divisions in the region will surely allow them to fester beneath the computer-generated imagery and behind the fake-shop fronts, so to speak.

For the historic antagonism between Ulster unionism and Irish nationalism has proved durable. This is despite the best propaganda efforts of the British government and the attempts to rebrand Northern Ireland as a commercially vibrant region. As David Miller notes, the success of propaganda can be limited by a number of factors, among them access to alternative channels of communication as well as values, beliefs and/or a lived experience that does not fit with the “official” view. That is why throughout the conflict and despite the peace process, unionism and nationalism have managed to maintain the “integrity of their quarrel”. There is no reason to be optimistic that the rebranding of Northern Ireland as a region “open to business” will change that, particularly when the spoils of economic regeneration, such as they are, are so unevenly distributed.

Northern Ireland from its inception has been hampered by the “bowler-hatted inarticulacy” of its lumpen-unionist bourgeoisie. Unionism has struggled to find a cultural imaginary, with sufficient consensus, that links it to the territory to which it lays claim. In this respect, Terence Brown has argued that northern Protestants and unionists suffer from an “imaginative exclusiveness that many find repellent”. Brian Graham argues that Ulster Protestants in general, and unionists in particular, suffer from ‘the lack of an agreed representation – or imaginary – of a place to legitimate and validate their domicile in the island of Ireland. Northern Ireland, or Ulster, as Graham refers to it, is ‘a place yet to be imagined’ in a way that would culturally link people to territory. He argues that this is because of unionism’s reliance on sectarian discourses, which have resulted in it being unable to confer upon Northern Ireland an agreed and inclusive representation of place. Similarly, John Hill highlighted the challenges faced by the old unionist regime in imagining and representing Northern Ireland on-screen – challenges that resonate with contemporary Northern Ireland’s present cultural malaise.

Partition and the setting up of the Northern Ireland state coincided with the rise of cinema as a mass form of entertainment. However, the unionist government at Stormont was largely disinterested film. When it thought of filmmaking at all, it considered it a form of propaganda or as a means of attracting tourists and advertising Northern Irish produce. Hill suggests that unionism’s general disinterest in film was on account of it not being able to find an on-screen version of Northern Ireland that would engage international audiences, and which at the same time, made the North look distinct from the South. The problem being that what where conceived of as North Irish films, were received by audiences abroad as simply ‘Irish’ films, This was because the films – whether their origins where in the North or South of Ireland – drew upon a the same rural, romantic visual repertoire. Although such imagery might serve the commercial imperatives of the region, it did not meet the ideological needs of unionism’s partitionist mind-set.

As Irish nationalism has asserted itself in the North, certainly from the inception of the civil rights movement in the late 60s, what has emerged is a “constant communicative stand-off between orange and green orthodoxes [meaning unionism and nationalism
respectively]. As David Butler argues, this standoff has characterised Northern Irish politics and culture, “leaving no neutral language, verbal or visual, no uncontested images, and certainly no unifying imagery. Every signifier appears to be spoken for”. Therefore, public discourse can be “characterized by a courteous but firmly platitudinous atmosphere” that leaves bigotry and prejudice unchallenged. Meanwhile, political parties and elected representatives make predictable public announcements that play to the ossified beliefs of their respective communal blocs, rather than facilitate a robust democratic exchange of ideas. Propaganda, at war and peace, failed to dislodge this sectarian culture. It merely facilitated its own form of democratic deficit and basis against understanding the dispute over Northern Ireland. It remains to be seen whether the region’s citizens will invest in the commercially rebranded version of Northern Ireland projected out and into the global free market. If not, and if there are no forthcoming alternatives to the representational strategies and interpretative frameworks considered here, then maybe Northern Ireland is simply culturally unimaginable, bereft of the “emotional legitimacy” that would make it politically and democratically sustainable.

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ABSTRACTS

From its creation under the Government of Ireland Act in 1920, Northern Ireland has struggled to achieve the sort of cultural integrity that would underscore an imagined community and functioning democracy. Initially beset by the imaginative exclusiveness of Ulster unionists, at whose insistence Northern Ireland exists, it is also subject to the competing discourse of Irish nationalism that seeks its dissolution and reunification with the rest of the island. On top of this, the British state, engaged in a determined propaganda war during the conflict that broke out in the late 1960s. The subsequent peace process brought strenuous efforts to persuade for peace, reconciliation and an incorporation proper into the global free market. Now with the achievement of political accord, Northern Ireland’s devolved government is concerned to promote the region around the global as an attractive site for capital accumulation. The article seeks to periodise this history into three main interpretive frameworks employed in the media – the propaganda of war, the propaganda of peace and the commercial rebranding of Northern Ireland. It argues that these dominant ways of thinking about and seeing Northern Ireland have rendered the region culturally unimaginable, lacking what Benedict Anderson refers to as “emotional legitimacy”.

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Subjects: Media, conflict, peace process
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