

Educating Maltese Journalists

Evarist Bartolo

The media institutions of a country can be studied as a system in which a set of input-output relationships bind its constituent elements in a network of mutual dependences¹. Significant variation in the activity of one component will be associated with significant variation of all other components.

A system's approach to the Maltese media would show that they are

"essentially secondary bodies; entirely dependent on others for the news and opinions they pass on; and highly constrained in their operation by a number of political, economic, cultural and technological factors"².

The smallness of the Maltese economy permits only one television station, a daily and a weekly newspaper to operate profitably. The rest of the media survive on subsidies from the Church, the Nationalist Party and the General Workers' Union. Small and economically weak media are known to enjoy few degrees of autonomy in their work³.

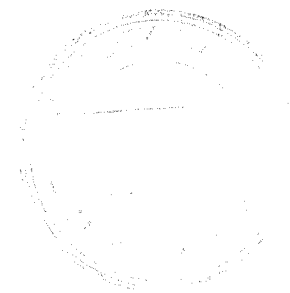
The various laws regulating the media in Malta do not provide for editorial confidentiality. No freedom of information act exists in Malta to enable local journalists to have access to Government files. There are no management arrangements to ensure editors' authority and independence from

proprietary influences. Most of the recruitment and career advancement of Maltese journalists is through nepotism. This reinforces the journalists' dependence on their employers.

Maltese journalists have no common organisation, code of ethics or press council. Journalists belong to antagonistic trade unions and political parties and most of them have a great deal of animosity towards each other.

The media are an integral part of the local political culture. No consensus politics exists on the island. Both major political parties stress their disagreement with one another. They expect their supporters to show military loyalty. This highly polarised political culture denies the Maltese a common ground, a common history and a common future. This is at its most obvious in the "national" broadcasting system. Since it started operating fifty years ago it has failed to satisfy the sectionalised, fragmented and contradictory demands of the Maltese audience.

In the Maltese media system local journalists play a very subordinate role. The routine jobs they carry out demand low skills. Their employers see them mostly as human tape-recorders bringing the news and views of their sources to their readers and audience. The employers seem happy with this state of affairs as they do almost nothing to encourage their journalists to upgrade their skills and improve their output.



No Bright Future?

Are Maltese journalists condemned to remain in their plight for a long time to come? Lucian W. Pye writes that a society with a weak economy finds it impossible to support a full community of professional communicators. Journalists can only hope to become professional when they work in a country which has a modern communications process. In such a process the media system

“not only is comparatively independent of other social and political processes but also constitutes a distinctive industry in both an economic and social sense”⁴.

Pye argues that only through the rise of the commercial media can journalists become professional because now, free from party or government control, they can have “an objective, analytical and non-partisan view of politics”⁵.

There is nothing inherently “objective” and “disinterested” in the editorial policies of commercial media. These media too have a stake in political, social and economic issues. They are very partisan when it comes to defending the interests of the private business sector of which they form part.

There is also nothing intrinsically libertarian about free market forces. In fact if only advertisers and commercial considerations were to decide the structure of the media in Malta there would be fewer newspapers and magazines. Freedom of expression would be even more restricted. Rather than becoming more professional most Maltese journalists would simply lose their job.

The smallness of the Maltese Islands and the constraints of their economy cannot be conjured away. The islands’ media will most probably have to continue to depend on subsidies from political, religious and trade union organisations for their survival. Can Maltese journalists become better despite these constraints?

Unqualified Recommendations

The Maltese media recruit their employees like many other media around the world. As a British colony Malta inherited the peculiarities Jeremy Tunstall writes about:

“Journalism in any country poses special problems of recruitment and training; and in Britain these problems appear in an extreme form because of a combination of peculiarities:

- (1) The English amateur tradition
- (2) The low status of vocational education and training in British universities and society generally”⁶.

Very seldom are Maltese journalists recruited through competitive examinations. Even for the only commercial newspaper publishers

“recruitment is done by application, although recommendations count a lot”⁷.

Malta is certainly not unique. Analysing Latin American media Raymond B. Nixon observes:

“Family and friendship ties appear to be far more important in gaining employment than professional qualifications alone”⁸.

Lars Engwall found that in Sweden news organisations practise selective recruitment; they

“recruit persons who fit the norms and values prevailing within the organisation”⁹.

Even in Malta loyalty and kinship seem to be the highest qualifications looked for in prospective journalists. As journalism is not considered a high-skill job by most employers they are ready to recruit internally, even from technical departments where no writing abilities are required. Those recruited, either internally or externally, are seldom fired even if they turn out to be very incompetent at their new job. Only disloyalty might mean a transfer to another job or department. Maltese journalists, like those of most other countries, can hardly bite the hand which has provided them with their job and is feeding them and their families. As alternative employment is very scarce both inside and outside the media, journalists have to obey all orders from above. Maltese journalism is not an occupation which values individuality, personality and creativity.

Lifeless Reporting

The effect all this has on the finished product is obvious. Journalists are not encouraged to go out of their newsrooms and look for stories. When they do so it is to bring back reports of routine official activities and public speeches. Most of these news reports read like lifeless minutes taken by anonymous and cautious civil servants. Very few news items are written completely by the journalists themselves. Most of the time the media look and sound like notice boards displaying official statements. The media hardly ever follow a story through. Journalists write reports on the basis of a briefing given by the minister, the party official, the company manager, the union secretary

Press conferences tend to be very boring and ritualistic in Malta. No probing, uncomfortable questions are asked... unless a conference deals with a subject that could be used to blacken the other side. Even in such cases, journalists rarely put forward any personal questions: they are prepared beforehand by somebody high up.

Human interest stories are written in this officialese style as well. They too are subject to selective reporting:

"Partisanship has diminished the genuine news story The murderer and his victim have to be probed about their political beliefs before any slant is given to the story Both camps in the political arena are guilty of having destroyed serious news gathering. Genuine stories are rejected because they may not suit actual political exigencies"¹⁰.

Apart from suppressing unfavourable news items, those who control the partisan media are prepared to invent stories to be used as weapons against the other side. These owners see the mass media as their loudspeaker. The journalists' main job is to hold the microphone well and fiddle with the volume to try and drown the sounds coming from rival loudspeakers.

When reporters cover events that really happen they very rarely capture the colour and atmosphere. Political speeches are covered almost verbatim with no attempt to highlight the newpoints, if there are any. Even when interviews are carried out, only the questions and answers are given, in rigid catechism fashion. Nothing is said about the personality, the motives and lifestyle of the interviewee.

The passive role journalists are expected to play explains why most of the local newsrooms do not have a good reference library with cuttings files, background information and statistics ready at hand to be consulted in writing a story. Where some kind of library exists it is hardly ever used. Journalists are there just to report, not to explain, interpret and investigate.

Untrained and Unskilled

None of the Maltese media organise formal training for their reporters. These are expected to learn on the job. The effectiveness of this method can be seen from anecdotes like this:

"In my first days as a reporter, just after leaving secondary school, I was sent to cover a parliamentary sitting. I did not even know where the House of Parliament was, let alone had an inkling of its jargon and procedures. Asking the way I eventually found the place. I was saved by another reporter who worked for another paper. He took pity on me and wrote my report"¹¹.

In the Sixties the Union Press tried an apprentice scheme where a junior reporter would be assigned stories

"with somebody who was called a journalist, who himself had 'learnt' whatever he knew the hard way, through mistakes with nobody around to correct those mistakes. As a junior reporter you would be sent to cover a court case. The senior reporter would accompany you to the courtroom, tell you to pay attention to what was going on. He would go off to the cinema coming back just after midday. If you got confused writing your story he would ask another reporter of another paper for his report, copy it and give it to you to type"¹²

Even when learning on the job is carried out more seriously it cannot lead to much. As Wilbur Schramm writes:

"The difficulty with this traditional way of training is that the more experienced workers usually have little time for teaching the younger ones. Furthermore, in this kind of training the standard is set by the present operation - there is no very good way to raise the standards of newspapering or broadcasting above the level of the present supervisors, who themselves probably came up through the same kind of school of experience and therefore were restricted by the level of their supervisors"¹³.

Having had no formal training before getting their first job, only a handful of Maltese journalists have had the opportunity to do inservice training, all of it abroad as there is none available at home. Those who do go abroad find that if this training experience has changed them it cannot change the organisation they work for and the overall reality in which they have to operate. As the Commonwealth Committee on Communications and the Media rightly points out:

"Communicators will forever remain relatively untrained or unskilled, and therefore regarded as incapable of fulfilling their proper function, until their role in society is firmly established and resources for enhancing their skills are provided. In the same spirit, communicators require a certain latitude within which to function. Skilled professionals deprived of 'elbow room' remain in place as malcontents or opt out"¹⁴.

Employers do not care

Maltese journalists are denied 'latitude' and 'elbow room'. Their employers think there is no need to spend any money on training them. In February 1985 the University of Malta started a diploma course in journalism which very few working journalists attended. Those who did had to pay the course fee themselves and could attend only when they were off-duty:

"Few working journalists are attending the Journalism Course because they are not directly encouraged to do so by their employers. They are not allowed day release to study due to chronic staff shortages ... Those who are attending the course

are doing so very much on their own initiative. There are also no financial incentives, or any other for that matter, for those who qualify. Maltese journalists are not encouraged to upgrade their skills. They are not treated with the respect they deserve either by their employers or by the authorities. They are looked upon as propagandists ... All the rest is a direct result of this"¹⁵.

Telemalta Corporation which runs the national radio and television station has a training committee but journalism education is not one of its priorities. In one of its recent annual reports (1984/85) it has two full pages¹⁶ on what is being done to train the technical staff of the telecommunications division. There is not even a single word about the need of training the editorial and technical staff of the broadcasting division.

Journalists cannot be expected to attend training courses which their employers think are a waste of time. Journalists know that such personal effort will not advance their career. The smallness of the media job market with its low turnover means that top vacancies are few and rare. When they occur promotion is frequently like recruitment: a question of patronage. Personal loyalty to a powerful politician and a spurt of political activism are more useful for career advancement than any other qualification.

Despite all this there are a number of media employees who are self-motivated enough to want to educate themselves further and improve their skills. It will be impossible for them to attend day time full university degree courses. They will also find it very difficult to attend evening courses that take years and years to complete. The most realistic way to educate media employees in Malta is through short, intensive and specialised courses, seminars and workshops.

Problems Ahead

Undoubtedly journalism education in Malta will face problems very similar to those experienced by journalism schools of several small Latin American countries:

"One weakness of journalism education from the very first has been that it has depended almost entirely upon part-time instructors who taught two or three times a week in the late afternoon or evening, after putting in a full day's work elsewhere ... Most students, too, work for a living while attending classes only part-time. This renders more difficult the kind of personal supervision that is so essential in education for journalism. It also adds to the problem of using the library, and leaves little time for research. Another weakness is the lack of specialists ... they were either self-taught or were dependent ... upon using text-books ... written by specialists in the more developed countries"¹⁷.

Peter Golding suggests that such courses can easily become "part of the general stream of cultural dependence"¹⁸. It is obvious that in such courses:

"... imported assumptions and conventions become the standards by which achievement or professional competence are measured"¹⁹.

Raymond B. Nixon writing of journalism schools in Latin America claims that before 1960 most of them were merely imitations of the early schools in the United States. It took them at least ten years "to begin a development that is distinctively their own"²⁰.

Local academics still have a long way to go towards grounding themselves in the Maltese reality. Instead of trying to come to grips with the reality in which they live, and develop a relevant analytical framework to understand it and explain it, most of the local academics still seem only capable of producing "mimicked knowledge"²¹. Like their colleagues in other ex-colonies

"... they constantly have to look over their shoulders to the centre to have knowledge created at the periphery stamped as legitimate"²².

Most of the books on the media and on journalism have been written in and about the United States²³. To a large extent they condition how the media are perceived all over the world.

Cultural Alienation

Dudley Seers warns of the consequences of cultural alienation:

"... an elite whose minds are stuffed with foreign values and theories may be unable to understand even the need for national interest, however defined ... the roots of an independent strategy may lie not so much in the country's particular productive structure or military capability, important though these are, as in a culture strong and homogeneous enough to avoid alienation especially dependence on an imported way of perceiving the nation's own needs"²⁴.

Media education in Malta should not be prefabricated outside Malta or formulated without a detailed knowledge of the Maltese reality. This does not mean that those planning media education in Malta should turn their back on what other countries are doing. The Maltese are not inventing media education in the world. They certainly have to invent it in Malta. A useful way of learning from others is indicated by Amílcar Cabral:

“... we must see who has already done the same, who has done something similar, and who has done something opposite, so that we learn something from this experience. It is not to copy completely because every reality has its own questions and its own answers for these questions”²⁵.

A process of learning from others must not displace a serious search for home-grown alternatives. Foreign assistance is to be sought with caution. It is in the interest of several foreign embassies to finance and facilitate the visits of lecturers from their countries. Such ‘help’ should not be turned down provided that the visiting lecturers are from countries with a variety of political, social and economic systems. The visiting lecturers should speak about the realities of the media in their countries. This kind of input will help to show the plurality and diversity of media systems in the world.

Other international collaboration can be sought with many existing organisations around the world. It is always of the utmost importance not to let one foreign country or organisation dominate media education in Malta. Soedjatmoko gives some very useful advice:

“We are therefore dealing with problems of self-reliance, not through decoupling or through development in isolation, or in any autarchic sense, but through the proper management of interdependence”²⁶.

Insufficient Resources

Once the daunting problem of cultural alienation is solved, planners in small countries like Malta face other difficulties in trying to implement appropriate media education policies. The smaller developing countries lack the necessary human, technical and financial resources to conduct research and develop indigenous educational materials. These constraints reinforce dependency and mimicry. Harald von Gottberg warns that

“Unless a society is prepared to commit sufficient resources to train its communicators in its own way, to provide the kind of information and media content which is befitting and relevant to the social environment in which it exists, communication within that social body will be inefficient, insufficient and in many cases excessively dependent on outside sources”²⁷.

A society might be very willing to spend more on its communicators but it simply cannot afford to. Several African, Latin American and Asian universities and other educational institutions do not have adequate personnel to teach and develop their own communication studies²⁸. Maltese

educational set-ups will likewise have to borrow lecturers from other areas. As these lecturers’ main responsibilities lie elsewhere it is not realistic to expect them to devote time and energy to produce communication research and educational materials relevant to Malta.

There is no easy way out. Media education organisations will probably have to identify areas of common interest with different university faculties and other local and international organisations. Carrying out common research projects will hopefully produce enough material on which to build communication studies courses to answer local need.

Effective media courses cannot consist solely of chalk and talk. If media educational institutions lack their own equipment, or do not have access to the equipment of local broadcasting stations and newspapers, their courses will most probably remain cut off from the real world and be impractical. To be really relevant and forward looking media education all over the world has to keep in touch with the vast technological changes going on today in the field of communications.

New Directions

These technological changes are forcing even the developed countries to look for new directions in education for the media:

“Media personnel have to learn their craft at a time when the nature of the craft itself is changing rapidly. New technologies have made many established training manuals obsolete. The process of training has therefore to be continuously reassessed and, when necessary, revamped. In this context, ‘training for trainers’ becomes as important as ‘training for trainees’”²⁹.

Elliot Parker adds:

“It will be impossible for Asian mass communication training institutions to look upward to more developed countries to see what is adaptable or adoptable, even if they wanted to. Those institutions that might have served as a model or at least a point of departure, are also attempting to find answers”³⁰.

Breda Pavlic and Cees J. Hamelink also argue the need for a new approach:

“... which goes beyond the hitherto prevalent, rather limited understanding of the mass media and their function in modern societies. Developments in technology - the information - communication technology specifically and modern technologies generally - make the treatment of the mass media (or, public media) and the more sophisticated forms such as computer communications, telecommunications, etc. as separate issues obsolete and misleading”³¹.

Pavlic and Hamelink also stress that while training for mass media personnel is going on in developing countries, progress is still very slow in the area of computer training and other new information - communication forms³².

Even small developing countries like Malta have no way of escaping these new technological developments. Education for the media in Malta should now include computer literacy and communications technology. The Development Plan for 1986 to 1988 launched by the Maltese Government in mid-July 1986 calls for a national strategy aimed at introducing information technology capabilities³³. The national telecommunications infrastructure will be strengthened and new appropriate technology will be introduced so that a national database and information network can be set up. The University of Malta will initiate research and teaching in new subject areas such as technology, informatics, electronics and telecommunications.

Vincent Lowe asks:

"If information and communication are to be strategic resources especially relevant for developing countries, should not universities undertake policy and planning studies? Should not universities offer courses and supervise research in this new frontier, to guide policy makers to decide how their countries can plan and benefit positively from the newly emerging international frameworks and structures?"³⁴.

The new technologies should make media educators adopt a broad vision:

"In view of the convergence of modes in communication media, should there not be a convergence of disciplines into a broadened new field of communications, which includes both hardware and software knowledge?"³⁵.

Elliot Parker suggests one of the possible answers:

"Educators may not be able to consider training people for media specific jobs. The requirements will be more generic institutions will be forced more and more to present their students the basics of communication rather than training for specific forms. Training will more and more emphasise the skills of information gathering and editing that are common to all fields, rather than training for specific industries or media. Students will not only be cross-trained, but better able to take their place in the developing media world"³⁶.

An American university has already brought together the three separate disciplines of communication, library and information studies, and journalism into a single school³⁷.

Not only the new technologies demand a broad approach to communication studies. In a small society like Malta personal and informal communication systems are very important. Education for Maltese journalists should not neglect these aspects.

The Limits of Education

Journalism education must not be idealised and given a power it does not in itself possess. It can help Maltese journalists improve their output.... but only within the constraints of the organisation where they work. Journalism courses should at the same time set out to enable Maltese journalists to think critically about the constraints they and their fellow journalists face all over the world. This is crucial as journalists from developing countries tend to idealise their colleagues from developed countries. Douglas Birkhead proposes that:

"News gathering and writing, for example, should be taught openly and frankly as skills that are primarily accommodations to media organisations and their daily routines That most journalists eventually must conform to media institutional settings in order to earn a living does not bind journalism education to perpetuating ideologies and myths of the workplace"³⁸.

Maltese journalists should be given the opportunity to learn the history of journalism of their own country and of other ex-colonies. They should be exposed to the attempt of other developing countries to decolonise their media and develop them according to their own distinct cultural and regional characteristics.

Courses should also analyse the international news agencies and the various foreign sources Maltese journalists have to rely on as their organisations cannot afford to send their own correspondents abroad. Seminars and workshops should try to help Maltese journalists equip themselves to treat and process from a Maltese perspective all the news items and features of the international news agencies, foreign embassy hand outs and foreign press articles. Although the Maltese media are owned and run by local organisations most of their content still originates abroad. As the Prime Minister of Guyana observes:

"A nation whose mass media are dominated from the outside is not a nation"³⁹.

Seminars should also analyse the activities organised for the Maltese media by the foreign embassies that have a vested interest in cultivating Maltese journalists and turning them into their own errand boys.

Maltese journalists should also be helped to acquire the necessary skills to process the information flowing from local sources. Al Hester points out:

“Journalists, especially those working most of the time with government officials, will be flooded with abstract information, frequently told in complicated ways. Sometimes economists, educators, doctors and politicians use phrases which they understand but which ordinary people don't. It is your (i.e. the reporter's) job to interpret this 'inside language' so that ordinary people know what it means”⁴⁰.

When Maltese journalists themselves do not understand this 'inside language' they do not know how to make it intelligible to their audience and readers. Many stories carried by the media are full of jargon left untouched. As a result the Maltese media often tend to be just noticeboards displaying court reports, financial statements, medical

information and so on. Maltese journalists need to be educated in all these areas as their on-the-job training has not prepared them to come to grips with the serious and complex issues facing Malta's development.

Competence needs to be raised not only in basic journalistic skills. Other areas must not be neglected and workshops can be held on media management and economics, layout, and reader/audience research.

The quality of the media does not depend entirely on the quality of the journalists working within them. It is definitely important to educate the Maltese journalists but it is not enough. Other changes are necessary in the local political culture, press laws, working conditions, management policies, national flow of information if the Maltese media are to develop beyond their present stage.

References:

- 1 Gurevitch, Michael and Blumberg, Jay G. "Mass media and Political Institutions: The Systems Approach" in *Mass Media Policies in Changing Cultures*. Gerbner, George (Ed) A Wiley-InterScience Publication. New York, 1977. pp. 251-268.
- 2 Ibid. p. 254.
- 3 Engwall, Lars. *Newspapers as Organisations*. Ilfadrove Ltd. Wales, 1978. p. 95.
- 4 Pye, Lucian W. *Communications and Political Development*. Princeton University Press, 1963. p. 78.
- 5 Ibid. p. 79.
- 6 Tunstall, Jeremy. *Journalists at Work*. Constable. London 1971. p. 56.
- 7 Letter to author, Maltese journalist. November 30, 1985.
- 8 Nixon, Raymond B. *Education for Journalism in Latin America*. Minnesota Journalism Center, 1981, p. 33.
- 9 Engwall, Lars. Op. cit. p. 225.
- 10 "The Maltese Press" in *Tomorrow*. Maltese monthly magazine, October 1983. p. 4.
- 11 Letter to author, Maltese editor. November 12, 1985.
- 12 Letter to Author, Maltese media executive. November 10, 1985.
- 13 Schramm, Wilbur. *Mass Media and National Development*. Stanford, California, 1964. p. 218.
- 14 Report of a Commonwealth Committee on Communication and the Media. *Communication, Society and Development*. Commonwealth Secretariat. London, 1980. p. 3.
- 15 Letter to author, Maltese journalist. November 30, 1985.
- 16 Telemalta Annual Report 1984-85. Malta. p. 14, 15.
- 17 Nixon, Raymond B. Op. cit. pp. 16-17.
- 18 Golding, Peter. 'Media professionalism in the Third World: the transfer of an ideology' in *Mass Communication and Society* (Ed. James Curran et al). Edward Arnold in association with Open U.P. 1977. p. 292.
- 19 Ibid. p. 292.
- 20 Nixon. Op. cit. p. 19.
- 21 Goonatilake, Susantha. *Aborted Discovery*. Zed Books Ltd., London, 1984. p. 111.
- 22 Ibid. p. 113.
- 23 Tunstall, Jeremy. *The Media are American*. Constable. London, 1981. p. 203. See also *The Democratic Journalist*. Vol. XXXII No. 4, April 1985. Prague. p. 24.
- 24 Seers, Dudley. *The Political Economy of Nationalism*. Oxford University Press. 1983. p. 72.
- 25 Cabral, Amilcar. *Unity and Struggle*. Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., London, 1980. p. 49.
- 26 Anisuzzaman, Abdel - Malek, Anouar (Eds). *The Transformation of the World: Culture and Thought*. London. Macmillan Press Ltd., 1983. p. xxii.
- 27 Gottberg, Harald von. *Course Designing for Mass Communication*. Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre. (AMIC) Singapore. Undated. p. 5.
- 28 *Media Training Needs in Zimbabwe*. Report by Friedrich Nauman Foundation and Zimbabwe Mass Media Trust. Harare, 1982. p. 59. Acedo, Celia. *Communication Training in ASEAN*. AMIC. Singapore, 1984. pp. 42-43.
- 29 *Communication, Society and Development*. Op. cit. p. 15.
- 30 Parker, Elliot. *Communication Training in ASEAN*. Op. cit. p. 99.
- 31 Pavlic, Breda and Hamelink, Cees J. *The New International Economic Order: Links between Economics and Communications*. UNESCO. Paris, 1985. p. 34.
- 32 Ibid. p. 32.
- 33 Development Plan for Malta: 1986-88. Government Press. Malta, 1986, pp. 69-71.
- 34 Lowe, Vincent. *Communication Training in ASEAN*. Op. cit. p. 85.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Parker, Elliot. Op. cit. p. 99.
- 37 Budd, Richard W. "It's time to set new directions in Communication Education" in *Journalism Educator*. Autumn 1985. Vol. 40, No. 3. University of South Carolina. USA. p. 27.
- 38 Birkhead, Douglas. "Changing the relationship between journalism and time" in *Journalism Educator*. Op. cit. pp. 35-36.
- 39 Quoted in *Mass Media Policies in Changing Cultures*. Op. cit. p. 112.
- 40 Hester, Al (et al) *Handbook for 3rd World Journalists*. The University of Georgia, USA, 1985. p. 46.