

# Editorial

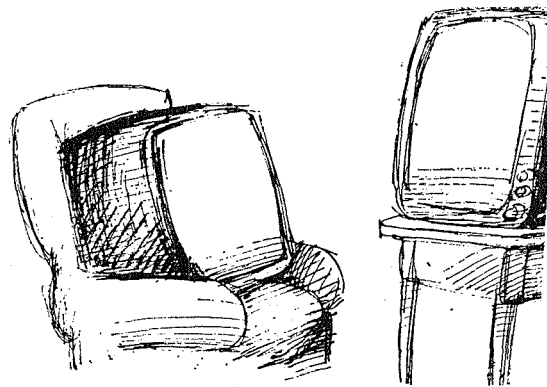
## Mass Media Education

### Anniversaries

**T**his double issue of *Education* focuses on the mass media - their characteristics, educational uses, and the methods which can be employed to educate both those who work through and in them, as well as those who depend on them for their information, contact and entertainment. There are historical as well as practical considerations underlying this choice of topic. For one thing, this issue celebrates a number of recent and imminent anniversaries of events which have had wide-ranging cognitive, cultural and educational implications.

On an international scale, the 2nd of November of 1986 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the first ever regular network television transmissions (by the BBC in London in 1936). It was a fairly modest opening, limited to two hours a day, six days per week, with a target audience of a few hundred viewers who could afford to buy or build the cumbersome and expensive early receivers (which cost about the same as an automobile at the time). Since then the television industry has grown at a phenomenal pace, and our ways of thinking, seeing and acting have also been profoundly modified by these advances. It has been estimated (by Granada Television) that by 1984 television could be seen by about 2,500 million people in 162 countries throughout the world, and that the average number of television sets manufactured throughout the world every day is the same as the average number of births - 250,000. We are now also on the brink of new developments (some would say revolutions) in this sphere with the widespread accessibility of satellite transmissions - developments which in theory would make redundant and ineffective all national broadcasting boundaries and local controls of what is transmitted and viewed on television. There is an anniversary behind this development as well, in that the first earth satellite ever launched went into orbit 30 years ago (the Russian Sputnik in 1957). Ten years before that saw the invention of the transistor (by the Bell laboratories) - an invention which has made possible many of the more sophisticated advances in mass media technology.

On a local scale, 1987 will also mark the 25th anniversary of the first regular transmissions by the Maltese television station - which had its first broadcast on the 29th of September 1962. Television had in fact already been introduced into



Maltese homes in 1957, when transmissions by the Italian RAI television network (at the time just one channel) started being received in Malta from Sicilian transmitters. This mixture of local and foreign transmissions has now been staple viewing fare in Malta for 25 years - with the number of Italian stations increasing over the years to the present average of 14 in many areas. The complex repercussions and potential uses of this state of affairs have on various occasions been the basis of heated political debate, but (to date) little systematic analysis has been conducted of its cultural and socio-linguistic implications.

### Consequences

**T**he potentials of technological media for educational purposes have long been recognised, and the possibilities provided by print, audio-recording, radio, film, television, video and computers have been developed and exploited (with varying degrees of competence) in a wide range of educational contexts. The potential uses of the mass media for purposes of persuasion and propaganda have also long been recognised, exploited and (in many cases) over- or underestimated by autocrats, politicians and commercial advertisers.

The mass media have broken down many traditional barriers to information and have given rise to new power relations in the control and sharing of information, in the setting of the agendas of public debate, action and concern, in the definition of social and political realities. Indeed, the very shape and orientations of politics themselves have been modified as a result of these definitions and power relations. In many industrialised nations, the 'public image' (or presentability as a 'media personality') of politicians has assumed more importance in popular terms than policies, beliefs and intellectual/governing competence. Election campaigns have thus in a number of cases become elaborate and expensive exercises in the manufacture and sale of consumable images - not very different from those involved in the selling of commodity products. It is not just the mainstream politicians who have learned to tailor their methods according to the constraints and potentials of the

mass media. Terrorists plant their bombs to explode in time for the evening television news, proclaiming their responsibility and the creed and demands of their cause to and through the news media. From all sides, propagandists and advertisers bombard us with messages employing various degrees of subtlety to persuade us to adopt a particular stance, endorse a specific set of beliefs, or buy a particular product. The types of television programmes, films and other technologically transmitted messages (images, sound, music) which we have grown used to over the years have also modified many of our perspectives and expectations as regards what we consider entertaining, interesting, well-presented or boring. And because such products (like all social products) come loaded with a variety of proclaimed, assumed as well as unacknowledged values and attitudes, our methods of identifying and evaluating information, ascribing meanings and attributing motives have also been affected.

## Literacy

**Y**our ability to grasp the meanings encoded in this journal (or any written or printed text, for that matter) involves the deployment of a complex series of learned and socially transmitted skills and aptitudes. It is these learned (as distinct from inherently spontaneous) aptitudes which make it possible for you to extend your biologically based abilities (seeing, hearing, etc.) to the recognition and interpretation of the shapes and arrangement of letters, words and sentences. It is also on the basis of these learned aptitudes and skills that you should be able to consider and critically measure the ideas and information transmitted in this particular code against the background of your accumulated knowledge and expectations.

Our educational institutions make a lot of allowance for the development of these aptitudes. We teach children how to read, write and manipulate numbers, letters and words; we exercise them in the composition and comprehension of messages encoded in different languages (Maltese, English, Italian); and we introduce them to complex variations of these codes (as in algebra) or to the nuances of literary expression with the aim of sharpening their powers of manipulating and analysing the written word and responding to it critically. We have also continued to judge academic competence and achievement virtually exclusively in terms of levels of aptitude in the deployment of one medium of communication: the written/printed word. Paradoxically, the channels of communication which dominate a substantial portion of our contemporary waking

lives (television, radio, film) are rarely considered worthy of this type of attention -- even though, like the written word, they are made up of many arbitrary and culture-based conventions, nuances and connotations. In the majority of cases, the standard school assumption is that these newer media constitute little more than time-wasting distractions from the traditionally more serious business of studying and becoming competent users of the older media.

On a fairly modest scale, work in the area of mass media education has been taking place at the Faculty of Education of the University of Malta for some time now, both on an individual basis and also along more formally structured lines. A number of students at the Faculty, for instance, have over the years worked on a series of dissertations exploring mass media issues under the supervision of various lecturers and professional broadcasters. There are currently optional modules offered within the Educational Theory component of the B.Ed. (Hons.) course which encourage students to explore some of the relations between the mass media, child development, learning and social behaviour.

The University has also been running Diploma courses in Journalism Studies and in Communication Studies, both of which include substantial components of mass media studies geared to the needs and interests of professional communicators (practising and prospective journalists, teachers, public relations officers, secretaries) as well as other adults who have a non-vocational interest in the critical study of a subject which forms an essential component of their daily lives.

The environment we inhabit today is structurally and functionally very different from the one which existed before the technological advances whose anniversaries are celebrated by this issue. Being a competent and educated adult in such an environment presupposes the ability to understand, develop and deploy a set of skills (cognitive, emotional, social) which are necessarily different from (and possibly more complex than) those which were required in antecedent cultural and physical environments. In this sense, our conceptions of what it means to be 'literate' and 'educated', as well as the curricula we develop to nurture these qualities, urgently need to be updated in the face of the radically changed and changing realities of our times. As we approach the 21st century, we cannot afford to continue neglecting the educational implications of the more recent media -- particularly since such neglect allows free reign to those who are more than ready and competent to use such media for personal gain and for a host of other variously loaded purposes.