

Paradigm Shifts in the Teachings of the Catholic Church about Media Education

Joseph Borg, Faculty of Media and Knowledge Sciences, University of Malta,
Mary Anne Lauri, Department of Psychology, University of Malta

Abstract

This paper analyses the development in the teaching of the Catholic Church on media education as expressed in its official documents. These will be analysed in the light of the paradigmatic shifts in the literature on the teaching of media education.

In this paper we will explore the extent to which the development registered in Church documents about media education reflects these paradigm shifts. Church documents especially in the pre-Vatican II era reflected a protectionist approach emphasising censorship because it was believed that the media had a predominantly negative influence. Vatican II, as well as references in the writings of Pius XII, reflects a more positive attitude towards the media Paradigm . The Church's position on media education in more recent Church documents widen their discourse to include societal and media structures in addition to media texts and thus proposes a more comprehensive model of media education. We argue that due to the Church's emphasis on a particular moral system, Church teaching on the subject will never fully reflect a paradigm which is value free.

Key words: models of media education, Catholic Church, paradigm shifts.

Introduction

The Catholic Church is one of the largest multinational organisations whose role in education is great. It has been active in the area of media education for many decades. Church schools, in many countries have been actively involved with the teaching of the subject even in the 1960s (UNESCO, 1977; Canavan, 1979; Pungente, 1985). Such involvement is strong even today (<http://jcp.proscenia.net/index.htm>; www.signis.org). Several authors, for example Buckingham (2003), acknowledge the role of church organizations in media education outside the formal education system. This paper does not discuss such practical projects but it analysis the teaching of the Church on the subject in the context of the developments in academia. The paper concentrates on the media encyclical letters, the decree of Vatican II, and the main post-Vatican II media documents and messages for World Social Communication Sunday.

Paradigm shifts and the Church documents

Since the publication of the Grunwald Declaration (UNESCO, 1982), the academic reflections on the subject have been numerous (Rosenbaum, [Beentjes and Konig, 2008](#)). For example Fedorov (2008) gives a history of media education since its inception in France and then in both Great Britain and Russia in the 1920s. We mention here just a few random references to illustrate the varied approaches. [Minkkinen \(1978\)](#), in a book commissioned by UNESCO just prior to the Grunwald declaration, outlines three distinct approaches to media education: the moral approach, the aesthetic approach and the communicative approach. Bryant and Anderson (1983), writing mainly about the developments in the Anglo Saxon world, noted the paradigm shift between: “those [approaches] whose major emphasis is on the classification and analysis of content, and those that emphasise the character of the cognitive processes used by the viewer.” (p316). The 1980s saw the rise in Germany of a paradigm called AOMP - the action-oriented media pedagogy (Günnel, 2006; Schorb, 1995; and Schell, 1999). [Potter \(2004\)](#), using his cognitive theory of media literacy argues for a paradigm shift that moves “beyond the tradition of critical or cultural studies” and rather than doing away with the power elite it educates “the populace to encounter the media critically” (p. 56). The

development of the subject was not without its controversies. One such example is the controversy between Masterman and Bazalgette who disagreed strongly in the late 1990s about the content and method of media education (Masterman, 2001).

The analysis proposed in this paper follows the paradigm shift discussed by Masterman & Mariet (1994) with adaptations based mainly on [Buckingham \(2003; 2009\)](#). Therefore, our discussion will be structured on three paradigms: (i) Inoculation; (ii) Appreciation and (iii) Representation/ Preparation.

Inoculation Paradigm

Leavis' and Thompson's 1933 book *Culture and Environment: The training of Critical Awareness*, is credited with the development of the Inoculation Model in the Anglo-Saxon world. The book encourages the protection of children and young people from media influence in the same way one would protect people from a disease (Masterman, 1985). On the Continent, particularly in Germany, the development of "normative approaches" of media education also called a "protective pedagogy", concentrated on establishing standards and on developing preventive measures to protect recipients from ethically or morally objectionable media content (Glogauer, 1991). The media education strategy was one of censorship, avoidance and control reflecting the Hypodermic Needle Theory (De Fleur & Ball Rockeach, 1989) and the theories of the Frankfurt school ([Holmes, 2005](#)) both of which attributed to the mass media a very strong and generally a negative influence on audiences who were considered to be totally passive and vulnerable.

The documents of the Catholic Church reflected this protective and inoculation mentality predominant in academia. This mentality was also fuelled by the influence of anticlericalism and free masonry on the media, mainly in the print media in Europe during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. In 1906, Pius X prohibited seminarians in a most absolute way to read newspapers or magazine even if they are of a good quality (Baragli, 1973). In 1921, the Vatican condemned the showing of films in Churches and in 1927 condemned the radio transmission of the celebration of mass (Baragli, 1973).

Pius XI used the language of the Inoculation Paradigm in *Vigilanti Cura* (1936), the only encyclical totally dedicated to the cinema. Its very title - "In following with vigilant eye ..." (p.3) - gives an indication of this approach. The word "vigilance" is used eight times in the document, i.e. almost on alternative pages. The cinema is described as the most potent "means of influencing the masses" (p. 10). It is described as "an incentive to evil passion" (p.4); "pernicious and deadly ... to morality and to religion and even to the very decencies of human society" (p. 6) and portrays "sinister themes which pander to base desires" (p. 9) though it potentially can "arouse noble ideals of life" (p. 12). In *Divini Illius Magistri* (1929), Pius XI, had already given a similarly negative appraisal to all media. The Pope had written of the "moral and religious shipwreck" threatening youth arising from "blasphemous and obscene books - many of them published at an iniquitously low price (and) from the cinema and now also from wireless broadcasting" (Para. 113).

The media education strategy of the Pius XI's did not include teaching programmes in Church schools. Instead, he instructed bishops everywhere to copy the methodology of the Legion of Decency in the USA, - which, several times, he described as a crusade or holy crusade - and to obtain a pledge from Catholics that they would boycott bad films. He wrote that this and other initiatives e.g. national reviewing offices, classification of films and the use of parish halls to promote good films, should lessen "the plague of evil and pernicious motion pictures" (p. 21) and turn the cinema into "a bearer of light and a positive guide to what is good" (p. 18).

There were shifts in the academic and pedagogical milieu from the publication of *Vigilanti Cura* (1936) to the publication of Pope Pius XII's encyclical letter *Miranda Prorsus* (1957). The Two-step Flow Theory had taken over from the Hypodermic Needle Theory, though the effects of the mentality of the latter still existed. Cinema studies were now taught in many Universities on both sides of the Atlantic. During the 1950s and 1960s, the aesthetic dimension of the media dominated the media education scenario (Fedorov, 2008). This period was associated mainly with the study of the press and film. Television was still struggling to assert itself as a new art form and discussions as to whether one could speak of a distinctive television language were still rife up till the 1960s (Tarroni, 1962).

Pius XII's encyclical letter and his two discourses on the Ideal Film in 1955 reflect this trend that looks at films as art forms but does not reflect the shift in academia away from the hypodermic mentality. The Inoculation Paradigm is evident in the language used. *Miranda Prorsus* (1957) used the terms "infectious germ" and "disease" when it refers to the "special problems of TV" (p. 36). In twenty different instances, it refers to the words "danger" or "warn" or "protect". However, the language of the Appreciation Paradigm, discussed below, is also present. While Pius XI emphasised "vigilance" in the title of his encyclical letter, Pius XII refers to the "very remarkable technical inventions which are the boast of men." The Pope many times refers to the cinema, sound broadcasting and television as arts (e.g. p. 8; 12; 13; 19; 36; 39).

Pius XII does not use the term media education but instead, the official English translation, uses the term "mass education" (*Miranda Prorsus*, 1957 p. 17) and only in reference to education for film and television. The paradigm put forward by Pius XII reflects that described by [Minkkinen \(1978\)](#). This model had an aesthetic dimension as Pius XII referred to the media as art forms and to the need to "understand the form proper to each of the arts," (p.17). It also had a moral dimension. The Pope wrote that spectators "enlightened by Christian teaching" should be enabled to practice "judgment on the various items which the film or television screen puts before them" (p. 17). This education, the encyclical claimed, should help those who receive it choose only those films and TV programmes "which are in accord with the Church's commandments on the grounds of religion and of the moral law, and which follow the instructions issued by the Ecclesiastical Offices in this matter." (p.17). The Pope praises the existent programmes of media education and moreover directed that these programmes should not be only part of the formal schooling system but that he desired "them to be introduced into every type of school, Catholic Action groups, and parish societies" (p. 17) thus antedating the idea that media education is a life long process. Pius XII repeated also some of the initiatives mentioned by his predecessor e.g. film classification. *Miranda Prorsus* can perhaps be considered as being on the threshold between the Inoculation Paradigm and the Appreciation Paradigm.

Appreciation Paradigm

The 1960s brought with them a shift from the Inoculation to the Appreciation Paradigm. Developments on both sides of the Atlantic led to this distancing from the Leavisite/Frankfurt heritage. The Popular Arts Movement was given a boost by the seminal work of Hall and Whannel (1964) in the UK, the writings in the journal *Cahiers du Cinema* in France and the Auteur Theory of Sarris originally popularised in 1962 in the USA (Sarris, 1998). This new movement sought to encourage discrimination within the media and not discrimination against the media (Masterman, 1988). Teachers no longer tried to convince students that the media were destructive or that society needed to be protected from the media but stressed the importance of the need to be able to talk critically about, rather than against, the media. As a result, media education began to focus more on the aesthetic elements of different types of media and on helping people to choose the best media products. Students began to experiment with media production as a means of understanding the media. However, adherents of this paradigm were accused of being elitist (e.g. 'art' films were considered to be more worthy of study than 'popular' films) and of privileging film over TV (Masterman & Mariet, 1994).

During this period, the Church moved further away from the Inoculation Paradigm towards the Appreciation Paradigm thus reflecting the developments in academia and the electronic optimism fostered by the theories of, for example, McLuhan (1967). The controversial Conciliar debates about *Inter Mirifica* (1963) and the conflicting appraisals of the document (Baragli, 1969, Tanner, 2005) are beyond the scope of this paper. However, we believe that overall, this decree is a move towards the Appreciation Paradigm. The title itself of the decree, *Among the wonderful technological discoveries*, is an indication of this shift. The decree transfers the basic insight of the Appreciation Model regarding individuals onto the ecclesiastical structure itself thus urging it to use the media as much as possible as it "has a natural right to use and to possess any of the media" (Para. 3). Consequently, bishops were asked to consider the use of the media as part of "their ordinary preaching responsibility" (Para. 13). On the other hand, the laity were given the duty "to maintain and assist Catholic newspapers, periodicals and film

projects, radio and television programs and stations” (Para. 17) and “contribute funds” (Para. 18).

The term media education is neither mentioned nor defined in *Inter Mirifica* (1963), however the need of media training is. The media education strategy of the decree includes the high level training for laymen, e.g. “newsmen, writers for screen, radio and television and all other interested parties” (Para. 15) in faculties and institutes of educational organizations. The training, according to this document, should be of a “technical, doctrinal and moral” nature and should be “imbued with the Christian spirit, especially with respect to the social teaching of the Church” (Para. 15). There should also be training “in Catholic schools at every level, in seminaries and in lay apostolate groups. To speed this along, it proposed catechetical manuals to explain Catholic teaching and regulations on this matter” (Para. 17).

Neither the pledge asked for by Pius XI nor the use of parish halls for the screening of good films is mentioned in *Inter Mirifica* (1963), undoubtedly in recognition of the changing times. A new initiative was the instruction to hold every year “a day on which the faithful are instructed in their responsibilities in this regard” (Para. 18). Such language use seems to indicate that a paternalistic attitude towards the laity is at the basis of the media education strategy of *Inter Mirifica* as it was at the basis of *Miranda Prorsus*(1957). While there is no doubt that the role of the hierarchy is emphasised in both documents there is an opening to more audience autonomy in *Inter Mirifica*. It states that the laity “ought not to neglect to inform themselves” about the judgements of the authorities” but adds that they are to follow them “according to the norms of an upright conscience” which they have “to guide and instruct ... with suitable aids” (Para. 9). *Miranda Prorsus*, on the other hand, repeatedly used the word obligation (several times qualified by ‘grave’) in the same context and only once the word ‘guide’.

Vatican II’s move away from the inoculation paradigm was consolidated by Paul VI’s decision in 1966 to abolish the *Index of Prohibited Books* which had been instituted by Pope Paul IV in 1557. This instrument of censorship was now replaced by the recognition of a more responsible and autonomous role for the laity. The shift was completed by the Pastoral Instruction *Communio et Progressio* (1971) which stated that “censorship therefore should only be used in the very last extremity” (Para. 86). This

pastoral instruction, which was published at the expressed request of Vatican II, brought to maturation the change in mentality introduced by Vatican II. One major example is the emphasis on freedom of expression within society and the Church as evidenced in Para 25, 33, 47, 116 and 141. Paragraph 47 was quoted in a footnote of the McBride Report (1980). A more important contribution of *Communio et Progressio* lies in sowing the seeds that would fruition into a new paradigm shift with *Aetatis Novae* (1992) and subsequent documents. It developed, more than any other document before it a theology of communication (e.g. Para 8 – 11) and projected a vision of media whose role in the history of salvation is the furthering of communion and progress, thus implying their autonomy from Church structures (e.g. Para 1, 6, 7, 15).

The word “training” and not media education is used in *Communio et Progressio*. Paragraphs 64 – 72 are dedicated to training of “recipients” and communicators. In nine other paragraphs *Communio et Progressio* refers to such training of Church representatives (Para. 106), seminarians (Para. 111) and training on the international level (Para. 93). The language of the Appreciation Model is very clear. Children should be helped to “use discrimination in choosing ... publications, films and broadcasts” (Para. 67), “develop ... critical powers” (Para. 68) and “develop a new perception in their interpretation of what is offered” (Para. 69). Moreover it was suggested that children should be urged “to make their own choices” (Para. 67) and parents should “trust (the choices of) the young” (Para. 70) though educators “should reserve at times the final decision to themselves” (Para. 67). Other suggestions made included that parents and teachers should also be trained (Para. 70). Training should start early (Para. 67), “be given a regular place in school curricula” (Para. 69) and be life-long (Para. 66). This training should have an “artistic taste” (Para. 67), ground those who receive it “in the basic principles governing the working of the media in human society” (Para. 64) while giving importance to the human element (Para. 63, 72), “sound morality” (Para. 67) and “Christian principles” (Para. 107).

In its chapter on the contribution of Catholics to social communications, *Communio et Progressio* approvingly mentions “the total language” method (Para. 107) that originated in the Continent and not from the Anglo Saxon world. Bro. Antoine Vallet of the Institut du Language Total in Lyons developed this method in the mid-1960s and used it to teach media in French schools (Silverblatt & Enright Eliceiri, 1997). By the time of the writing of

Communio et Progressio, the method had been adopted in other European countries, the Near East, Latin America and French-speaking Africa. This method used semiotic and linguistic analysis (Brown, 1991) which when combined with the role of ideology and the context of media production led to a new paradigm.

Paul VI was the first to use the term “media education” in the Church documents under review. In his message for World Social Communications Day of 1978 he wrote that “the first steps in media education ought to be taken within the family” (1978, para. 11).

Representation and Preparation Paradigm

Both in England and on the Continent, there were theoretical and technological developments during the 1970s and the 1980s which led to a new paradigm of media education. The importance of semiology came to the fore with the works of, among other, Barthes (1973) in France and Gautier (1976) in England. A resurgence of the works of Gramsci (1971) and the commentaries of Williams (1976) highlighted the role of ideology. Murdock and Golding (1977) were among those scholars emphasising the role of media structures and the social contexts of media production and consumption. The media were now seen as representational or symbolic systems. The 1980s and the 1990s saw the rise of private TV stations, particularly in Italy, France and Spain; a development which put a new focus on TV studies as part of media education (Oxstrand, 2009).

Masterman and Mariet (1994) saw a new paradigm in these developments as now media education had come of age. It “turned away from narrowly aesthetic questions towards more broadly-based ‘culturalist’ concerns, and ... turned its full, though not exclusive, attention towards television” (p. 31). According to Masterman (1988) another characteristic of this model is that it “pushed the whole question of aesthetic and moral values away from the centrally dominant position it has always had” (p. 8) as it was now not possible to base the discussion on a “transcendental, transcultural, transhistoric notion of value” (p.9). The paradigm developed further due to the rise of the new media from the middle of the 1990s. They radically changed the mediascape and people’s, especially young people’s, relationship with them. The new media,

particularly the Internet, brought with them the resurfacing of protectionist arguments (Buckingham, 2001). They also brought with them a changed relationship between children and the media and as a consequence, Buckingham (2003) developing on the work of [Tapscott \(1998\)](#) believes that we moved from the notion of the media as the destroyers of childhood to media as the liberators of childhood. Media education, he claimed, should now be seen as a form of preparation of children particularly for democratic citizenship ([Buckingham 2003](#)). The tradition of protecting children from potential harms created by the media moved on to one recognising children's rights (Livingston, 2002).

It is within this developing scenario that one should look at the evolving shift in the teachings of the Church about the media that reached a watershed in the Pastoral Instruction *Aetatis Novae* (1992) and the concomitant development of its teaching on media education.

The paradigm of this Pastoral Instruction is two-pronged: (i) the media are much more than content and (ii) are at the service of the human person more than at the service of the institution. *Aetatis Novae* did not treat the media mainly from the perspective of content (Para. 5, 15) but from a structural/societal (Para. 4, 8, 14, 15), economical (Para. 5, 15, 33), political (Para. 1, 5, 14) and technological (Para. 1, 2, 4, 12, 18) perspective. The document also has a semiological dimension describing the media as languages (Para. 2, 11) echoing John Paul II *Redemptoris Missio's* (1991) reference to the media as "new languages, new techniques and a new psychology" (Para. 37). The document looks at the media more from the perspective of the needs of human persons and service rendered to them rather than from the needs of the Church as an institution. The first kind of service that the media should give is the service to persons and cultures (Para. 7) while the service to the ecclesial community is fourth on the list (Para. 10). Moreover, the first pastoral priority mentioned by *Aetatis Novae* is the defence of human cultures (Para. 16). It is significant that this issue was mentioned before discussing the development of the Church's own media (Para. 17).

The two dimensions of the paradigm of *Aetatis Novae* were repeated in the subsequent documents. John Paul II in his Apostolic Letter *The Rapid Development* (2005) writes that "We are dealing with a complex problem, because the culture itself, prescinding

from its content, arises from the very existence of new ways to communicate with hitherto unknown techniques and vocabulary” (Para. 3). References to the economic, political, social, ideological, structural/societal and technological dimensions of the phenomenon can be found in several documents (e.g. *Ethics in Advertising*, 1997, Para. 5, 6, 7; *Ethics in Communication*, 2000, Para. 4, 7, 8, 9; *Ethics in Internet*, 2002, Para. 16; *Caritas in Veritate*, 2009, Para. 69, 73; *Pornography and Violence*, 1989, Para. 20). There are also many statements about the centrality of human persons and the service that should be rendered to them by the media more than the service that should be rendered to the Church as institution (Benedict XVI, 2008, Para 3; Benedict XVI, 2009; *Ethics in Communication*, 2000, Para. 5 – 8).

Aetatis Novae (1992), and almost all the subsequent media documents, refer to the importance of media education (e.g. *Aetatis Novae* , Para. 28b; *The Rapid Development*, 2005, Para. 11), its role in formal and non-formal life long education (*Ethics in Communication*, Para. 25) and to the role of parents, teachers and media producers (*Aetatis Novae*, 1992, 28d; Paul VI, 1978). However, these documents do not develop a model of media education fully in line with the Representation/Preparation Paradigm, at least as presented by Masterman (1988) and Masterman and Mariet (1994). Our hypothesis is that it is not possible for the Church to fully develop such a model since the Church has a value system which, in contrast with Masterman (1988), it believes to be “transcendental, transcultural, [and] transhistoric” (p.9). While Masterman (1988) says that “the value question had become, unquestionably, a *transitive* one” (p.9), *Aetatis Novae* holds that media education should give a “special emphasis on media and values” (Para. 24d) while *Ethics in Communication* (2000) looks at media education as an aspect of conscience formation. It “helps people form standards of good taste and truthful moral judgment” (Para. 25). The role of parents in media education is seen as a role of “training the conscience of their children to express sound and objective judgments which will then guide them in choosing or rejecting programmes available” (Benedict XVI, 2007, Para. 2). For John Paul II “the goal must always be to make people aware of the ethical and moral dimension of the information” (*The Rapid Development*, 2005, Para. 9) and that the contents of programmes “will be respectful of the moral law and rich in human and Christian values” (Para. 8). Moreover, discernment and selection, two of the keywords of the Appreciation Model are used repeatedly in the documents (*Ethics of Communication*, 2000 Para. 25; *Ethics in Internet*, 2002, Para. 14; *Pornography*

and Violence, 1989, Para. 25). Benedict XVI (2007) clearly says, “children exposed to what is aesthetically and morally excellent are helped to develop appreciation, prudence and the skills of discernment” (Para. 2).

There are however some direct references to the structural and technological dimension of media education. *Aetatis Novae* says that the Church should “offer courses, workshops and seminars in technology, management and communications ethics and policy issues for Church communicators, seminarians, religious and clergy” (Para. 28c). Besides, *Ethics in Communication* says that media users should “inform themselves about media – their structures, mode of operation, [and] contents” (Para. 25). *Ethics in Internet*, in the context of media education refers to those whose “decisions and actions contribute to shaping the structure and contents of the Internet” (Para. 15). Church documents take a position against the trend of some researchers that media literacy is mainly involved in teaching about techniques (*Ethics in Communication* – 2000 – Para, 25; *The Church and Internet* – 2002 – Para. 7). This unfortunate characteristic of some digital literacy programmes is also criticised by Buckingham (2009). Moreover, the media vision proposed in *Aetatis Novae* and the subsequent documents can help educators develop a model encompassing the student-centred perspective mentioned by Buckingham (2003) “to enable them to make informed decision on their own behalf” (p. 13) and “understand the broader social and economic factors that are in play” (p. 14). In fact the development of a critical attitude in media users is considered to be “of particular value” (*Pornography and Violence*, 1989 Para. 25) in media education programmes (see also *Aetatis Novae*, 1992, Para. 12, 13; Benedict XVI, 2007, Para. 2).

Conclusion

The development in the teaching of the Catholic Church on media education is clearly influenced by the developments registered in the pedagogical and academic milieu. The Inoculation Paradigm is evident in the pre-Vatican II documents. The influence of the moral and aesthetic aspects which characterised the Appreciation Paradigm is evident in *Inter Mirifica* and to a good extent in the writing of Pius XII. *Communio et Progressio* is on the threshold of the mentality that led to the Representation/Preparation Paradigm, a model which, to a great extent, comes of age in *Aetatis Novae* and the subsequent

documents of the Pontifical Council of Social Communications. However, this model was not fully adopted by Church documents. This paradigm, to a certain degree, reflects a mentality of value neutrality, and the Catholic Church can never subscribe to such a mentality. Our analysis showed the progression from one paradigm to another but this does not mean that a new paradigm totally uprooted and eradicated the characteristics and mentality of the previous paradigm. More than radical changes, we notice a gradual evolution which abandoned some aspects while encompassing others.

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Authors

Fr Joseph Borg

Joseph Borg read for his Masters in Theology at the University of Malta and for a post-graduate diploma in Communication Studies at Concordia University, Montreal. Canada. Borg was the Archbishop's Delegate for Social Communication, Head of the Press Office of the Archdiocese, founder of RTK radio, the Media Centre and the newspaper IL-GENS. Borg was the first chair of the Editorial Board of Public Broadcasting Services Ltd. He presented and produced several TV and radio programmes some of which are award winners. He was one of the drafters of the *National Broadcasting Policy*. Borg is the editor of Campus FM and the Audiovisual policy consultant of the Minister for Education and Culture.

He is one of the promoters of the study of media education in Church schools. Together with Dr Lauri he is the co-author of the media education books used in secondary schools and a number of papers in different academic publications.

Email address: joseph.borg@um.edu.mt

Prof. Mary Anne Lauri

Prof. Mary Anne Lauri is Pro- rector at the University of Malta responsible for Student and Institutional Affairs. Studied at undergraduate level at the University of Malta and read for her Masters and PhD at The London School of Economics. Lectures Media Psychology at the Department of Psychology. Has co-authored several publications, and published in international journals. Is a chartered member of the British Psychological Society. Is a member of the Editorial Board of the Public Broadcasting Services. Was involved in media education since 1985 as a teacher, trainer, researcher and co-author of text books.

Email address: mary-anne.lauri@um.edu.mt