THE PSYCHO-CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE OF THE MALTESE MEDIASCAPE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF MCLUHAN, ONG AND INNIS

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1. INTRODUCTION

The theories put forward by McLuhan particularly when discussed in the context of Ong and Innis provide valid tools for the analyses of culture and society. McLuhan's reflection starts from the physical characteristics of a particular medium showing how these characteristic are translated into perceptual changes which later take on a cultural dimension. For example he argues that the characteristics of the electronic media bring about a new electronic interdependence and convergence which would seem to render individualism obsolete and the corporate interdependence mandatory (McLuhan, 1962). The spirit of interdependence and convergence of these theories inspires the basis of this paper. A particular mediascape, Malta, is analysed by bringing together the insights of three thinkers in the area of communication studies: Marshal H. McLuhan, Harold A. Innis and Walter Ong. This triadic synergy contributes to a better understanding of this mediascape by bringing together the visions of these three great scholars.

Malta, a Mediterranean island state, is the smallest member of the European Union. The 400,000 inhabitants of this media rich country can access to 9 national TV stations, 20 different radio stations broadcasting nationally either on an FM frequency or from the digital platform, 24 community radio stations, 4 daily newspapers, 10 weekly papers and scores of magazines. In the 1930s broadcasting was introduced in Malta heralding, in McLuhan's terms (1962), the era of electronic interdependence. Ong (1967a) describes it as the stage of secondary orality solidifying

the cultural infrastructure which Innis (1950) believed was the result of the dominance of space-biased media

McLuhan, Innis and Ong analyse society from the perspective of the media as technologies, proposing a psycho-cultural model as the tool for analysis. All of them believe that the media through which messages are communicated are more important than the messages themselves. Each medium's technological characteristics are translated into a particular epistemology which then strongly influences the message that can be communicated as well as the way in which it is communicated. Innis studied the effect of the media mainly on societal structures and cultural change. McLuhan' aesthetic approach, on the other hand, emphasizes the effects on human senses and perception. Innis explained that time-biased media (e.g. spoken language, clay, parchment and stone) favour religion and hierarchy while space-biased media (e.g. papyrus, paper) favour the secular (Innis, 1950). McLuhan (1964; 1969; McLuhan & Fiore, 1967) considers all media as extensions of some human faculty. He uses a particular metaphor comparing the substitution of a dominant medium with another to an amputation of the senses. Ong (1967a; 2002) considers the word as sound as a most basic dimension of our humanity. When its nature is changed, for example from sound to sight, as in writing, the way we perceive the world and organise it are changed. All three authors emphasize the psycho-cultural effects that media technologies have on society.

2. APPLICATION TO THE MALTESE MEDIASCAPE

Both McLuhan (1962) and Ong (1977), in his later writings, divided the relationship between media, culture and society into four epochs described in Table1.

McLuhan	*Ong*
1. Oral-aural tribal culture 2. Manuscript culture 3. Gutenberg galaxy 4. Electronic age	1. Primary oral culture 2. Manuscript or chirographic culture 3. Print or typographic culture 4. Secondary oral culture

Table 1: Four Epochs as Described by McLuhan and Ong

The first epoch is characterised by the word as sound (Ong, 1967a; 2002) and consequently its main social structure is the tribal village (McLuhan, 1962). The primary oral culture ended with the invention of the phonetic alphabet around 1300 BC though its characteristics continued to be present and active for a very long time. In fact the manuscript culture in the second epoch still was intensely audible-tactile compared to print culture (McLuhan, 1962). The invention of

printing by moveable type in the fifteenth century ushered in the Gutenberg Galaxy consolidating all the perceptual and psychological effects brought about by the invention of writing. It made the Modern period possible in the West. Both Ong and McLuhan, albeit in different ways and emphasis, associated individualism, democracy, capitalism, nationalism and Protestantism with the invention and spreading of the print culture. In the fourth epoch, that of the electronic or secondary oral culture introduced by the electric and then electronic media, humanity moved from the tribal to the global village. Communication became once more immediate and multi-sensory as it was in the oral culture but then it transcended the restrictions of space.

2.1 MALTA'S DIFFERENT PATTERN OF DEVELOPMENT

While many European countries passed from one era to another in line with the long intervening periods of time indicated in the theories outlined above, the hypothesis of this paper is that Malta followed a different pattern of development from that proposed by Ong and McLuhan. Malta passed from the stage of primary orality to concurrently that of print culture and secondary oral culture. As a result of this contemporaneous paradigmatic change this mediascape still has characteristics of a strong aural-oral culture along the characteristics of the culture of secondary orality and space-biasness. In this paper the manuscript and the print culture are considered as one phase in line with the earlier writings of Ong (1967a; 1967b).

In Malta of the 1930s, the reading public was limited only to a small elite class who generally preferred writing and reading in Italian or English as opposed to Maltese. As the level of illiteracy was high, especially in rural areas, newspapers and books could not be considered as a mass medium. This situation changed when, within a period of just thirty years, the innovations necessary for the popularization of the print culture and the introduction of the secondary oral culture were introduced in a very short period of time. These were the standardization of the Maltese alphabet, the introduction of compulsory education and the commencement of radio and TV broadcasting.

The Maltese language existed for centuries as a spoken language. In the 18th, 19thand the beginning of the 20th century a number of different Maltese alphabets were compiled. In 1934 two important milestones were registered. Maltese and English became the official languages and the orthography developed by the *Ghaqda Kittieba tal-Malti* (Association of Maltese Writers) which was the main authoritative lobby for the emancipation of the Maltese language was officially approved by the State thus giving birth to the first officially standardised Maltese alphabet. In 1946, education became compulsory and Maltese was made one of the obligatory subjects. Thus it became possible for the written language to became a mass medium providing the basic infrastructure needed for the print culture to become a mass culture. This notwithstanding, Maltese culture still has many elements of the oral culture as Maltese started to become a literary language only in the first half of the 20th century and it is still considered by many as primarily an oral language.

The print infrastructure was counterbalanced by the "concurrent" introduction of the media that characterise the culture of secondary orality. Radio and TV broadcasting were introduced within less than thirty years. Radio broadcasting was introduced in 1935 when Rediffusion Ltd, were licenced to provide the service while Malta Television, also run by Rediffusion Ltd was inaugurated in September 1962; five years after the Maltese started receiving television signals from Italy.

2.1.1 EFFECTS OF THIS PARTICULAR KIND OF DEVELOPMENT

Malta's particular development from primary orality to the cultures of print and secondary orality during the same period, marks its mediascape with particular characteristics. Some of these are the low usage of newspapers, the importance of oral-oriented media and the polemic nature of its media.

The low usage of newspapers and the high usage of the electronic media is one characteristic of the aural-oral culture which Malta shares with other Mediterranean countries - a feature distinguishing them from the countries of Western Europe (Papathanassopoulos, 2007). In Malta, just over 18% per cent read newspapers five to six times a week, while radio is listened to by 47% and television is watched by 80.6% (Media Warehouse, 2011). Papathanassopoulos (2007), basing himself on figures similar to these, states that the only true mass media of southern Europe are the broadcasting media.

A second characteristic of Maltese mediascape is the importance given to the oral element within the broadcasting media. There is today a radio station broadcasting nationally for every 20,000 people! Phone-in programmes are popular on radio as well as on television. While during the primary oral era people could air their views in the village square, today they can air them nationally through these programmes. The manifest reason for their introduction is systemic, that is, they are financially cheap and technically easy to produce. The latent reason is the cultural infrastructure of an aural-oral culture that creates a need for them (Borg, 1997). The phone-in genre also permits listeners to become intermittent broadcasters who influence the programme text in a way that programmes develop into "listener-centred" and several times "listener-controlled" programmes.

Broadcasting pluralism which can be described as a natural evolution and as a new dimension of Maltese orality, metaphorically extended the village square into the national arena. Cyberspace is now extending this arena into a potentially international forum. The orality of our culture enables the Maltese to adapt quite easily to this culture of secondary orality and thus become rapid - even if late - adopters of this technology (Borg, 2009b). This greater access to cyberspace is creating new journalistic opportunities, the internationalisation of rumour and more space for audience participation. The large number of callers on phone-in programmes is today rivalled by the larger number of people blogging or populating the social networks (Borg, 2009b).

A third characteristic of the basic orality of Maltese culture lies in the polemic nature of our

media. Ong (1967a) associates the sound-based oral-aural culture with a polemical spirit. He argues that while print creates distances allowing people to fight with words and over words, orality does no such thing as it puts people in conflict situations. McLuhan (1962), points to similar conclusions to those of Ong. This combative characteristic definitively applies to the Maltese mediascape which is the only one in Europe allowing political parties' ownership of television and radio stations as well as newspapers and news websites. Besides the political parties other opinion-oriented organisations, for example the Catholic Church and trade unions, also own newspapers and radio stations. These media organisations not only do their best to push their organisation's point of view but also do their utmost to strongly attack the position of their opponents.

2.2 SPACE BIASED MEDIA AND SECULARISATION

According to Innis, the cultural development of a civilization depends on the bias of the dominant medium. Thus there can be either an emphasis on space or an emphasis on time. The former favours political organizations while the latter favours religious organisation (Innis, 1950).

For Innis, the greater use of paper in the 12th and 13th century together with the invention of printing in the 15th century brought with them the shift form the time-biased Middle Ages to the space-biasness of the print era. Under the increased availability of paper and the rise of printing, the monopoly of knowledge achieved by the Church was undermined (Innis, 1950) and the monopolistic position of the Church was destroyed (Innis, 1951); Lutheranism grew (Innis, 1951) while vast quantities of new material were produced in direct competition with the material produced by the Church (Innis, 1951). The rise of individualism hastened the fragmentation of the sense of community (Innis, 1950) and the development of markets and of industry was accelerated (Innis, 1951). This shift towards space-biasness thus brought with it the rise of Protestantism, a loss of importance for the Catholic Church, tension between Church and State and the rise of the political class – all of which are essential elements in the spread of the process of secularisation. Paper and print brought the shift from the dominance of the ear to the dominance of the eye and also hastened the growth of commerce, the development of science and the challenge of the traditional authority of the Church. Knowledge was sought in scientific books rather than in sacred books. Works by McLuhan (1962; 1964; 1969), Ong (1958, 2002) and especially Eisenstein (1983) studies on the effects of the introduction of printing reach similar conclusions to those of Innis. McLuhan (1962) pointed to another secularising tendency of the typographic person, that is, the loss of the feeling for the sacred in their experiences with the world. For Ong (1967a), secularisation encompasses more than the increase in knowledge about secular things and the decrease in attention to the transcendent. He associates secularisation with the shift from an oral-oral culture characterised by "a life-world polarized in sound and person" (p. 289) to the print culture "polarized around sight and object" (p. 289). McLuhan and Ong point to two characteristics of the print culture, one being individualism and the other is the supremacy of print over the spoken word. These are perhaps two of the main

secularising elements which contributed substantially to the undermining of the position of the Catholic Church which emphasizes both the value of community and the importance of the oral tradition. In these writings the process of secularisation was primarily seen as the loss of relevance of religion but it could also be seen as the loss of relevance of political parties as a result of shift towards a space-biased culture.

2.2.1 SECULARISING INSTITUTIONS IN MALTA

Malta was a late adapter of the technology of the print. The first stable printing press was inaugurated by Grand Master Pinto in 1756; a full three centuries after Gutenberg introduced it in Germany (Zammit, 2006; 2008). The granting of press freedom in 1839 was followed by the publication of a spate of newspapers and leaflets (Frendo, 1994) most feasting on polemics (Cassola, 2011). The main indicator of print oriented culture is the size of the reading public which, in Malta, was restricted to very small literate elite. Consequently, the impact of the print media as the heralds of the space-biased culture and its secularising tendencies was for a very long time very limited. It is being argued that due to the particular development of Malta's mediascape explained above, the secularising features of the space-biased media noted by Innis, Ong and McLuhan, became fully effective with the introduction of broadcasting pluralism, the commercialisation of the print media in the 1990s and then the rapid expansion of the new media. These three innovations gave rise to the creation of a vast amount of new material in newspapers, broadcasting stations and the Internet. The supply of this material within a commercialised mediascape resulted in the adoption of a market oriented ethos that privileged programmes that maximize audiences. Moreover, technology enabling phone-in programmes and blogging made it possible for everyone to have almost uncontrolled access to most media and as a result views of self-opinionated dilettantes found a welcome space similar to that given to experts. Thus the relevance of the institutions was being undermined. Evidence of this is the decrease in the audiences following their radio stations which declined from 78% of the audience share in 2002 (Vassallo, 2002) to 48% in 2011 (Broadcasting Authority, 2011). The institutions, that is the State and the political parties - still dominate the television sector garnering 55% of the audience share (Broadcasting Authority, 2011).

The commercialisation of the newspaper sector is another sign of the creeping secularisation affecting the institutions. To-day the commercial sector is publishing more newspapers and has a dominant position in the sale of newspapers and magazines (Borg, 2009a). Up to the 1990s, most newspapers were published by the institutions. The newspapers of Standard Publications and Media Today, run by a group of businessmen, are the most secularised. Their official pro-divorce stand during the recent referendum on the subject is just one indication. The newspapers of The Times group have the dominant position in the market and are by far the papers which are most read. Their origin hails from a now defunct political party and for years had the ethos of an opinion-oriented organisation more than that of a commercial organisation (Borg, 2007). However, during the last few years the ethos of this newspaper group has become progressively more commercial and more secularised.

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The new media are undoubtedly the most space-biased and secularised of all the media. They provide an unregulated space for the promotion of vastly different values, lifestyles and beliefs. The presence of the commercial sector in cyberspace is much stronger than the presence of the institutions (Borg, 2009b).

The commercialisation of the mediascape is a sign that it is moving towards the liberal model of media organisation, a development which could be interpreted both as a sign of modernisation and secularisation (Hallin & Mancini, 2004a). Maltese media are moving from a commentary-oriented or advocacy-type of journalism towards the professionalization of the industry with its concomitant market driven ethos instead of a normative one (Borg, 2007; 2009c).

2.2.2 SECULARISATION, THE CHURCH AND THE PARTIES

 The above mentioned three innovations, that is broadcasting pluralism, the commercialisation of the print media and the popularisation of cyberspace, continued to erode the monopoly of social structures and the monopoly of values, which was enjoyed by the Church for centuries. The dominant presence that the Church traditionally occupied in the physical landscape and in the symbolic universe of the Maltese people is not similarly pronounced in the symbolical and structural dimensions of the mediascape (Arcidjocesi ta' Malta, 2009). The Church's presence in the latter is a minority presence and has to comptete for the attention of audiences. The Church, in spite of its power, cannot effectively influence, let alone control, the vast quantities of print, broadcast and cyberspace material which criticise it or project an opposing value system. In one of its editorials *The Times* points out that while in the past the media gave the Church preferential treatment, today's secularised communications feel no such obligation to do so (The Times Monday, September 19, 2011 p. 9).

Even the relevance of political parties is, to a certain extent, on the decline, a development happening in several countries (e.g. Hallin & Mancini, 2004b). After noting that the Church is no longer able to control the socialization of populations, these authors argue that even political parties are not able to hegemonise the course of a citizen's community life. This may seem strange to assert in Malta given that media ownership by the political establishment could be seen as a *prima facie* re-enforcement of its hegemony over this society. However, this ownership would end up being a Trojan horse, in that the audiences are becoming empowered and becoming able to challenge this hegemony.

Audiences who use the media run by political parties vary from those who do so to satisfy their needs as party followers to those who use the media for other reasons such as entertainment. These for example, prefer watching the non-political programmes over the political programmes on the political stations, a clear sign of audience autonomy and resistance to the hegemony of the political parties. Another similar sign the audience's resistance to party hegemony through the media is the audience's choice of the main news bulletin of the public service broadcaster (PBS) in preference to the news bulletins on the stations of the political parties. In fact PBS's news bulletin audience is larger than the audience registered by the main news bulletin on the two

political stations taken together (Broadcasting Authority, 2009). Moreover, audiences can also contest the institutions by their use of alternative or parallel networks of communication, such as rumour including its modern vehicle, the Internet.

3. CONCLUSION

The analysis of Malta's mediascape through the theories of McLuhan together with those of Ong and Innis contributed to a better understanding of this mediascape and its possible future developments. This analysis outlined how the Maltese mediascape progressed in a different way from the classic McLuhan and Ong models and listed the ensuing characteristics that marked it. The theories of Innis showed how the space-biased media are agents of secularization and how in the case of Malta's mediascape this process of secularization became more pronounced after the introduction of broadcasting pluralism, the commercialization of the print sector and the popularization of cyberspace. The role of the institutions, particularly the political parties and the Catholic Church, were discussed. It is argued that there are signs that the media are potentially diminishing the relevance of these institutions. Finally the importance of the commercialization of the media is discussed in the light of how it can radically change Malta's mediascape by eclipsing the ownership by the institutions.

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