

"MILESTONES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF MASS COMMUNICATIONS IN MALTA"

by Dr. HENRY FRENDU

Among the new States, Malta has one of the longest, almost uninterrupted traditions of press freedom and, for her size, is lucky to have had a variety of newspaper opinion. It was two well-known British liberals, John Austin and George Cornwall Lewis, who responding to appeals by the Maltese leader Giorgio Mitrovich, strongly recommended the grant of press freedom to the colony. That was in 1838, when the first papers and periodicals began to be published. Before that time we can hardly say that there was a journalistic tradition at all. The Order of St. John had a printing press in the eighteenth century, but this was mainly for official works. Besides, censorship always hung over Malta's head: in the mid-seventeenth century the Grand Master had opted to close a printing press instead of having to put up with interference from the Pope and Inquisitor who insisted on *nihil obstat* rights in any printed matter associated with religion or the church. During the brief period of French rule over Malta, from 1798 to 1800, a vaguely Bonapartist paper, **Le Journal de Malte**, was published; but again this was an official gazette rather than a newspaper. It was all 'liberty, equality and fraternity'; and woe to anybody who disagreed. The same style of paper, a government gazette, continued to be published in the first decades of British rule, first in Italian only, and subsequently in Italian and English until in the early twentieth century Maltese too made an appearance in it. Apart from this, in the period before 1838, very few people managed to get anything controversial printed. One was an Italian refugee; the others were Protestant missionaries.

Otherwise the only way to get printed matter distributed in Malta was to have it printed in Italy or elsewhere outside the Island.

The 1839 law changed all this. Newspapers began to flourish. A look at the newspaper index in the Valletta library or in Anthony

F. Sapienza's recently published "**Checklist of Maltese Periodicals**" (M.U.P., 1977) will reveal an amazing variety of these. However, few lasted long.

In mid-century there were two or three relatively stable papers: **Il Portafoglio Maltese**, **The Malta Observer** and the **Malta Times**: the last of these carried good reports of Council of Government proceedings of which apparently no other record exists before 1876.

It was only in the 1880s — at a time when journalism was established as a becoming profession in Britain and Europe — that Malta began to have a national daily press. In 1883 Dr. Fortunato Mizzi founded a newspaper in the Italian Language called **Malta**. **Malta** was run by the Mizzi and German families until about 1950. Fortunato Mizzi, who was the leader of the **Partito Nazionale** and may be regarded as the founding father of Maltese Nationalism, edited the paper until his death in 1905, whereupon two of his sons were in charge of it at different periods. In 1887 Antonio Bartolo, a Maltese anglophile, began the daily **Malta Chronicle and Garrison Gazette**, which was later taken over by his equally anglophile son Augusto until the Second World War. The former paper was modelled on the Italian style — with foreign news on the front page; the latter in the British style — with its front page full of adverts largely of British-made products or British companies or subsidiaries. In between these two established rival papers, one had other publications including some in the vernacular. The Catholic Church usually had (as it still has) a newspaper organ in Maltese, besides various periodicals.

The post-war period has seen considerable changes in the field of journalism. Italian finally ceased to feature as a language or public life: there have not been any noteworthy publications in Italian, apart from some scholarly works, since the 1950s. More importantly perhaps, the workers' movement organized itself well by means of the General Workers' Union, which came to own a well-equipped printing press. Their first paper was **The Torch**, 'It-

Torca' in Maltese, which began to be published in 1944. Very full use has been made of this press by the G.W.U. and indirectly by the M.L.P. especially since the 1960s when '**I-Orizzont'** (1962 —) and **Malta News** (1964 —) started publication in tabloid form and with a 'sensational' approach.

The Union Press dealt a blow to **Il-Berqa** (1930-1968), the Maltese language daily published by the Progress Press, but could never match in any way the hold on the reading public which the English Language papers **Times of Malta** (founded in 1935) and **Sunday Times of Malta** (founded in 1929) published by that same press, had. Before '**Il-Berqa**', the Progress Press had another much more partizan paper, **Progress** (1921-1932), which supported the social imperialist Constitutional Party led by Count Sir Gerald Strickland, who had imported all the Progress Press machinery just after the first World War. This Press, now owned by Strickland's daughter Mabel, is arguably still the best equipped press and the only one to use the offset method for its newspapers.

The newspaper situation in Malta today is as follows:

DAILIES

3 in Maltese	Editor	Estimated Circulation
L-Orizzont (1962-)	C. Micallef (GWU-MLP — Union Press; very staunchly pro-Mintoff and anti-opposition)	10,000
In-Nazzjon (1970-)	M. Schiavone (P.N. Christian Democrat — National Press, anti-Socialist)	7,000
Il-Hajja (1970-)	C. Buttigieg (Catholic Church — Il-Hajja Press, formerly Empire Press; moderately anti-Socialist)	3,000

2 in English

Times of Malta (1935-)	C. Grech Orr (Progress Press, moderately anti- Socialist, pro-British)	10,000
Malta News (1964-)	J. Vella (GWU-MLP, Union Press, pro- Mintoff)	2,500

WEEKLIES

3 in Maltese

It-Torca (1944-)	A. Farrugia (GWU-MLP — Union Press, pro- MLP)	14,000
Il-Mument (1972-)	Dr. M. Refalo, M.P. (P.N. — Christian Democrat, Na- tional Press; radical)	12,000
Lehen Is-Sewwa (1928-)	P. Saliba (Church — Il-Hajja Press; ultra-con- servative)	10,000

This paper still relies considerably on subscriptions and is partly distributed by post, as used to be the custom earlier.

3 in English

Sunday Times of Malta (1929-)	A. Montanaro (same as Times of Malta)	16,000
The Democrat (1974-)	M. Falzon, M.P. (P.N. — National Press, vigorously anti-Socialist)	4,000
The Bulletin (1944-)	* L. Micallef (Lux Press, independent, liberal)	1,000

* This is the only editor-proprietor that's left whose Printing Press belongs to the Micallef family.

The acute polarisation that exists in Maltese politics — and which seriously affects social relations — can be gauged from these estimates of circulation. An interesting experiment — the 'intellectual' monthly paper 'ILLUM', started over two years ago — sold around 5,000 copies or less and is on the point of closing down.

One may suppose that the rigid and largely induced polarisation that exists in Malta today is a recent phenomenon. Alas, this is not so. In 1927 Gladys Peto visited Malta and later wrote a book on Malta and Cyprus. She was staggered by the strength of feeling that existed over politics in Malta then, in the year when Strickland became Prime Minister. Perhaps because, as she observed, Malta was a sort of waiting-room for emergencies. The other version of Malta was that of a paradise on earth! Blissful enough for the nonchalant tourist or for the visitor who does not stay long enough.

As I have already indicated, the national daily press began in the 1880s as a direct effect of pro-British and anti-British currents. From the very start, that is, we had journalism whose main aim was propagandistic and partizan. We have never grown out of this: quite the contrary. We cannot be any worse than we are now: parochial, internecine, lost.

In 1975 a journalism course was started at the local University (which is now hanging by a thread — not the course, I mean the entire University).

However the whole field of mass communications has now become so polluted that the attempt to be fair and objective will immediately be interpreted as a sign of weakness. The setting up of a Press Council, for example, in such conditions, is unthinkable — because it just could not function. The local branch of the Institute of Journalists, whose ethical codes are laid down in their 'Grey Book', is quite impotent.

Maltese journalism grew in an unnatural political climate and was more seriously conditioned by colonialism than is generally understood. Conditions were not so bad in the post war/'decolo-

nisation' period; but for over a century the British governors were often prepared to tolerate (if not on occasion to encourage) and certainly to provoke, by their methods, a licentious scurrility and personalised recriminations in the local press — for a long time the chief carrier of public opinion. Classic as a case of organised deception was the paper called **Malta Maltija** (Maltese Malta) which for a time was secretly financed out of police funds to counter nationalist agitation!

Some governors were worse than others. But, mainly through indirect means, and with the support of locals, they tended to further, in Malta as elsewhere, a '**divide et impera**' policy. In the consequent polarisation between 'government' and 'opposition', collaborators came to be seen as traitors, patriots as agitators. Such attitudes led to a confused state of being from which the journalistic profession may not have at all recovered.

Nor is the Maltese journalistic tradition as solid as it may seem. This is the inevitable consequence of the havoc caused by successive waves and patterns of assimilation. In the last two centuries this little Island changed drastically from being exclusively Italianate in education to being predominantly anglicised in outlook: it is now becoming more and more Maltese. As people are not made of clay, such transfusions of different life-styles resulted in an uneasy metamorphosis; there could be no plastic adjustments.

In journalism, the goodwill, expertise, readerships and indeed philosophy of the Italian language Maltese newspapers, such as the Mizzian **Malta**, were lost rather abruptly. For example, by the time the **Malta** had (since its foundation in 1883) recruited a defined following and established itself as a leading paper, the audience that had once clamoured for it and for several decades sustained it was absorbed into a changing culture and gradually evaporated. In time, such papers were succeeded mainly — and ironically — by the Progress Press. But these 'new' publications

were, inevitably, the different product of a contrasting breed. The continuity had to some extent been lost. Today one can see that the leading English language newspapers in Malta may well persist partly because English is a world language, partly because few would want to see Malta isolated any more than she is already, and partly due to their intrinsic merits. But at the same time it is increasingly clear that in future it will be the Maltese language papers that will command the local readership market, and they probably already do so between them, (as Maltese newspapers still do not have their circulations audited it is impossible to be sure on this point).

The role of the Maltese language paper is increasingly important. Unfortunately, the daily paper in the vernacular is a comparatively recent development. In the post-war period, the Union Press, which has made a great impact in this field, had to start from scratch. The Empire Press was always religiously oriented and ecclesiastically supervised: in so far as using Maltese (to reach the faithful) was concerned, it was the heir of an old practice. The National Press is only a very recent creation; it began functioning in 1970. Thus the daily 'Maltese' newspaper, although it responds to a strong and probably growing demand, does not yet have that standing which may be required of it by the more 'educated' sections of the population. While on one side we have the established papers, we do not yet have 'Maltese' counterparts on the other side that are, in certain respects, comparable. Moreover, it appears that 'English' papers (old and new) use noticeably different criteria from 'Maltese' papers (possibly with the exception of **Il-Mument** since the beginning of this year). A careful reading of even **L-Orizzont** and her sister paper in English, for instance, should reveal this dichotomy well enough. This was true of, say, the now defunct **Maltese Observer** and **Lehen is-Sewwa**. I suppose that the same 'two weights and two measures' mentality would influence a Nationalist Party publication in English (although **The Democrat** is not conspicuous for this). Why should this be so? All these newspapers were or are primarily intended for Maltese consumption.

Are there two nations in Malta, one the "Maltese-reading" and the other the "English Reading" public? Are the English readers the more sophisticated or discerning category? Are they **babus**? Or do they genuinely resent what they find written in Maltese? Is it simply a newspaper preference, or habit? So far no field research has been conducted to try and answer such questions.

There once used to be a 'Maltese only' public contemporaneously with an 'Italian' readership of more refined tastes, and there was subsequently an 'English' and Italian' market and consequently a bi-lingual and trilingual audience. In this chaotic triangle it seems that the Maltese language users were often worst off in calibre, perhaps because they were the last to flourish and the synthesis is yet to come. Even today the 'Maltese' paper, in different ways will use a language (**lingwacc** would be a better word) and style which 'English' papers would more or less seek to avoid or altogether refrain from as a matter of course.

It would be sad, if the native idiom were associated in some minds with the street tout and guttersnipe simply because it is still often grossly abused in certain newspapers, or **viceversa**. Many advertisers will scorn a 'Maltese' newspaper because they are prone to see in it a second-class scandal sheet, a cheap sensational instrument. It is precisely because Maltese was a language of the kitchen or, as some said, 'of the slums', that it now needs to be used carefully and with at least as much respect as its users usually reserve for English or other languages.**

If language is closely related to thought mechanisms, journalists are bound to demonstrate a more consciously responsible, less emotional adesperation of the national tongue through a greater precision and respect in the use of it in their widely read press media. I am not by implication eulogising the 'English' press or

** There was no standard ortography of Maltese before 1931. Maltese and English were proclaimed to be the two official languages of Malta in 1934.

exempting it from fault. I am only saying that while newspapers will see things differently, and interpret events according to their own viewpoints, there should be an upgrading in press standards, perhaps especially in the leading Maltese language papers. There should be some agreed code of ethical behaviour among them.

Previously it used to be the vernacular press that tended to be or to be regarded by some as the more scurrilous and of low tastes (excluding most religious publications and some other notable exceptions). The readership for which such media mostly catered has been undergoing a steady change in quality. Newspaper standards must be improved accordingly. This can be done partly through a professional training for journalists.

A trained staff reporter, who can put in a good, properly written story that does not need to be drastically changed or rewritten before it is handed on the linotypist, would greatly ease the editor's responsibility. Time-wasting activities would be reduced and could be supplanted by more policy-making, long-term planning and personal attention to correspondents.

An enthusiastic reporter may easily become discouraged and demoralised in proportion to his intelligence and ability. The structures of decision-making within newspaper establishments are of vital importance. Unless **the attempt** at making journalism balanced, investigative and effective has the **beneplacito** of those at the top in the establishment (whether they be, as of old, editor-proprietors, or managers) the best reports will not be printed. Indeed, a professional touch may well serve only to damn the promising, enterprising journalist in the eyes of recalcitrant superiors and jealous colleagues.

Such professional training is of course no less important for radio and television. Alas, it is as lacking as it is needed. Any impartial observer of the Malta scene will readily come to the conclusion that the whole information network is a shambles. The Department of Information, a highly centralized and bureaucratic office, was quite unable for instance to provide any information on

the number of TV and radio sets in Malta in recent years or at present. In recent months some more top men have left the local TV station. Others had done so before them, especially after the government's arbitrary take-over of MTV and the Rediffusion stations in 1974. Others were arbitrarily sacked — including the well-known TV news editor and interviewer Harold Scorey.

Scorey contested his dismissal in Court, telling his friends that he would 'die fighting'. And so he did, soon afterwards: but very few of his former colleagues dared attend his funeral. Since then there has been a government party slant to almost everything on local affairs and often enough this is so crude as to be unbearable. Many Maltese people now only watch Italian television and only turn on the local set occasionally for a film programme or a political broadcast or debate. The Malta Independence Constitution (1964) had set up a well-guarded Malta Broadcasting Authority to supervise impartiality in broadcasting, but the number of opposition cases in Court in such infringements is enough to show how effective this institution now is.

Most intellectuals are rarely if ever called to participate in TV programmes as they used to do before the government take-over of these all-important mass media.

The indoor Rediffusion set first came to Malta in the 1930s mainly to counter-act Fascist propaganda from Italy on the wireless. Italian television began to reach Malta in the 1950s — by which time although most Maltese could not understand Italian — these had now learned English — Italian shows and spectacles, even songs, became popular. By the time Malta Television was started in the '60s, a middle class Maltese of average could enjoy the service of three TV channels: two Italian ones and the new local MTV station.

Although it proved impossible for me to get the exact figures for television and radio sets in Malta, I understand that from 3/4 to 7/8 of Maltese families today have a TV set. Less and less, it seems, have the pro-government cable radio, but the number of

wireless set is very large. The global figure for imported television sets is about 80 to 94 per cent of all households, whereas that for hired Cable Radio sets is between 60,000 and 70,000. Malta is as far as I know the only country in Europe where colour television is being kept back. On the small screen, everything is still black and white.

Finally a word on the cinemas. The number of cinemas in Malta and Gozo decreased from 40 in 1969 to 37 in 1976, but seating accomodation has remained static at around 30,000. (**Annual Abstract of Statistics** (1976, no. 30, p. 56). The most noteworthy development in this field has been the showing of sex films in great quantity and with unprecedented license. In a traditionally Catholic country where until the early sixties a female tourist would be arrested for swimming in a bikini, the market was suddenly flooded with many of the cheapest and most sordid films available.

Ironically the Italian language has made a comeback: in the cinemas — but unfortunately only in films where nobody listens to the words being spoken. The net effect of such base entertainment, coupled with the inundation of radio and television with Government propaganda is, in my view, a lowering in standards and a tragic reshaping of values, especially among those levels of society who most needed to be uplifted and enlightened; but the effect is also one of frustration on the educated middle classes who could contribute much more than they are allowed or are willing to do under this state of affairs.

Thus mass communications which could have been used wisely to revolutionize society by democratization in the immediate post-independence era have fallen prey to sheer philistian, obscurantist and repressive devices. The future for all those who look for proficiency and standards, and who cherish the cause of truth, who believe in the consensual ethic, is bleak indeed.

Apart from the wireless for news on foreign affairs — now that even the BBC programmes have ceased to be relayed on the local radio — there are only the non-government newspapers left

to indicate what's really going on. However there are many more who passively watch television than there are who read newspapers.

One flicker of hope is that in a tiny island like Malta, 92 square miles in all, an effective, often vicious, form of mass communication is the spoken word. Rumours have a nasty habit of becoming reality in due course too. The relative ease with which face-to-face communications in such a small state can take place may tend to confirm the findings of researchers who concluded that the influence which mass communications are said to exert on people is highly exaggerated. Much depends, however, on the two factors involved, i.e. the ways of transmitting information and the gullibility or scepticism of people.

The time had come to move out of blind faith in religious dogmas, out of the servile colonial disposition in a fortress, where the least criticism of government would be construed as sedition; but the path of progress has evidently been blocked by a sinister local version of the old stratagems, habits and attitudes from which it was ever so necessary for the Maltese to liberate themselves after independence.