THE DIFFUSION OF INFORMATION IN MALTA

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All that I can offer on the subject are some personal observations which may, perhaps, serve either just as an occasion for comparison with the personal observations of others or, at most, as a hypothesis which it might be possible to test by more objective methods of checking its validity.

1. Let me begin with a concrete example.

A few days ago, I arrived home in the early evening; my sister, who works at the hospital, told me that a fire had taken place at a local factory; she knew this because some people had been brought to the hospital with slight burns.

I then heard the event told in the news on the radio and also read the accounts of it in the papers the next day: essentially these mass-media reports merely said that some workers saw a flaming bale of cotton falling; they then described the efforts to control the fire.

The following evening, I was at a meeting with a group belonging to the Young Christian Workers organisation, among whom was a girl who worked at the factory; there was a lot of discussion about the incident: hypotheses about how the fire had started (including the observation that workers often smoked near the bales although they weren't supposed to), about its implications for the future of the factory, and other significant aspects hardly touched upon by the mass-media.

I want to suggest that this three-step pattern is the typical way in which information circulates in Malta; I will, therefore, try now to state three general propositions.

(a) The first proposition is that local news in Malta still spreads by word of mouth faster than through the media. If any event of any importance takes place, news of it is likely to reach one

through the grapevine certainly before the newspapers and very probably before the bullettin on the radio. In this sense, in the local context, oral communication is still the primary mode of the diffusion of information. This is a function of the combination of small size and of a dense population, which tends to move about a lot both for work and for leisure purposes. Moreover, people talk to each other a lot; they talk in the shops, on buses, in the streets; some even telephone their friends immediately if they have seen or heard something unusual happening which they or their friends might know something about. Thus, information by word of mouth circulates fast and intensely — with the usual phenomena which go with this mode of transmission: the adjunction of embellishment, distortion and speculation.

(b) The second proposition is that, although the mass-media in Malta have not got much of a newsgiving function, they have another quite specific function with regard to the news. On the one hand, very little information is added to what will already have been immediately passed on by word of mouth about any event in the subsequent reports given by the media. The media in Malta hardly carry out any "investigative journalism" at all. They reproduce for the most part what the official sources provide; if occasionally they publish something obtained from elsewhere, it is usually well after it had made its rounds several times in the oral circuits. Even eyewitness accounts by reporters tend to be singularly unevocative of the particular atmosphere which prevailed at the event. For instance, reports of political meetings give the reader nothing except dry summaries of what the speakers said (oddly enough, all politicians seem to speak in the same depersonalised style in these reports). If incidents occur such as when bottles are thrown or a police-charge takes place, they are related as brute facts, as if parallel to "it rained" . . . Similarly, television reporting is couched in the same officialese style. (Lately, moreover, the Maltese language papers have taken the habit

of not even reporting at all what is done by the other political side; but to this point, I will return later). Clearly the total result is extremely boring.

Why then do we, Maltese, still read the papers, listen to the radio and watch Television, for the News? I will anticipate the answer I should logically give later by suggesting that the public information media in Malta in their entirety, carry out for us not a newsgiving, but another function. They supply us with "anchorages" amid the flux of private exchanges of information. They provide a number of fixed points of reference in the ebb and flow of face-to-face communication. They help us to pick out and pin down those talking-points which are "safe" gambits to play or use as ploys in any conversational context. Their use for us is their quotability.

(c) The third proposition is that the interpretation of the news takes place once again in another phase of oral exchanges.

On the one hand, the Maltese as a rule do not believe that anything should be taken at its face value. We appear to have learnt this attitude not from the classic modern "masters of suspicion" (as Paul Ricoeur has called them) Freud and Marx, but from a millennial history in which ruling power was in the hands of an alien class. Hence, official information is always suspect. Correlatively, for every reported event, a multitude of interpretations are proferred. Every action is supposed to have a latent as well as a patent purpose. It is assumed that real history takes place under cover, behind the scenes.

On the other hand, it is taken for granted that the media are always and inevitably associated with some kind of officialdom, whether State, or Church, Britain or Italy, Party or Union; and hence that they do not peer behind closed doors. For any real knowledge of what is actually happening in the hidden recesses where things actually happen, you do not go to the newspapers or television, but to friends, or firends of friends, who have access to the inner rooms or kitchens where

the cooking is done; the dish will later be served officially as a "surprise"; but its various odours will always have been smelling outside for a long time.

2. Let me now attempt to give an interpretation of this pattern which seems to be readily explicable in terms of a number of fairly obvious social factors.

(a) A very large percentage of the working population of Malta is made up of Government employees or of Government dependents because of their employment with the para-statal bodies.

None of these are supposed to give out information; yet as long as Government continues to be as "closed" as it always has been in Malta, officially, or even becomes "closer" as has been happening over the years, it is only through having a sieve-like leakage system that information is diffused at all. For instance, reports by foreign experts are kept "secret"; but for them to be acted upon, a lot of people have to be told this and that — gradually the whole content seeps out.

But no one is willing to be quoted by a newspaperman as a "source", and if a newspaperman quotes even what is known by all to be the case, he can behad up in Court and will be unable to prove the fact, because of the "privileged" nature of Government records. The Government side can quote anything it chooses, but the journalist cannot get even the Chief Justice to look into a file to check the truth of what was reported.

The results of such a situation are those described above. To give a concrete instance.

> Proceedings at the Council or Senate at the University are supposed to be secret. Yet usually anyone who has any interest in what took place finds out very easily what did take place and even who said what. This does not generally worry anyone. Yet no member of these bodies, even if he does not mind everyone knowing what his views

were, is willing to be quoted in the media; he might then easily find himself in hot water. If he happens to mind having his opinions known outside, he will seek to ensure that the real discussions do not even take place where they are supposed to occur. The whole system is such as to ensure intense private and little public exchange.

(b) The second social factor is the status of the journalist in Malta. Here a distinction has to be made between the print and the sound and vision media.

As far as the newspapers go, they have had, until now, as a rule two groups of regular contributors.

The first were a few, overworked and underpaid, full-time staff, usually self-taught in their trade, and rarely with a university background at all; these were the people who had to do all the daily and weekly chores involved in getting a newspaper out.

The second group were a few, overworked and totally unpaid persons who, for some reason or another, wrote articles in whatever time they could spare from their other pressing occupations. Characteristically, the bulk of these remained pseudonymous on the printed page, although their identity was very often generally known. Officially, they were not supposed to write at all; so they had to wear a disguise. This also meant that they could be a little less responsible for what they wrote, and that the Editor had to be a little more careful about what to let through.

The end-result is that neither the regular staff nor the regular contributors did any regular research in order to produce their articles. Most of the interpretation of the news in the papers was on a par with the interpretation given at the lunchbreak in offices or workshops or cafes — with the notable difference that the papers omitted the large amount of well-founded or purely speculative information which had not been given in the news section and which had become avail-

able to the face-to-face talkers through friends, friends of friends, or other sources, or which they did had built up into a coherent web by meshing correctly drawn out implications and fancy-free reverie. Evidently, everybody prefers to get his interpretations of the news from the commentators at the next desk or at the grocer's or at the bar than from the printed and severely restricted sources.

The sound and vision media are a little bit different.

In a first phase, they started off by creaming the best of the newspapermen by offering them better pay; but because of such factors as the neutrality required in matters of political and trade disputes, the even more impellent need not to offend any commercial advertiser and the limitations of time and money of a very small station, the small news-staff as such continued to experience the frustration of their talents.

As far as outside contributors went, they faced the same problems as the press. I often took part myself in discussions of current events then; what was broadcast was always far less interesting than what the contributors said in private both before and after, — or, to be more accurate, the latter was interesting, the former was boring.

In a second phase, i.e. after the take-over of broadcasting by a para-statal company, the old staff were gradually weeded out and the remaining few were practically muted. In their places, there stepped the stalwarths of one political party. The legal provisions about impartiality are the subject of another paper. Here I only want to observe that any selection of personnel in a newsroom on the basis not of competence even within those with a particular political bias but of the degree of fidelity to a party is bound to produce far less interesting presentations than those available in non-public quarters.

(c) The third factor that contributes to the generation of the model set out above is the barrier of noise which has been

building up between those with different political views. Different languages are being developed on either side and practically no one reads the other side's paper. The dialogic element has also been diminishing in broadcasting; even when the discussion form is kept, the content is increasingly that of juxta-posed monologues. The unilaterality of the cases presented leads the opposite sides to the attitude of reciprocal deafness in public contexts. On the contrary, the willingness to listen is much less dead in the day-to-day contexts of work and leisure, until now at least.

3. What are the implications of such a situation for a political activist who wants to diffuse information?

(a) First, clearly, the most important control points are those which constitute the gates of entry into the oral circuits. Hence, in a way, the circulation of a newspaper or the audience of a broadcast (or of a public meeting) is less important than how many of those readers or listeners are conversation-leaders at the loci and foci of face-to-face exchange. This is the first way in which the Labour Party appears to be quite superior to the Nationalist Party. Its militants are much more often to be found at the hubs of the oral transmission wheels, where adherents of either side are to be found and are open to influence.

(b) Secondly it is of great help to party members to have an official evaluation of events and an interpretation of them. This is where the public media are of specific help. Again from this point of view, the Labour Party media almost invariably both put into high focus the events they want attention to be concentrated on and also take up a clear hermeneutic line. This is much less the case with the Nationalist Party media. It is often very unclear both which events they regard as significant and worthy of being highlighted and even more which is their correct interpretation. There is therefore a lack of clarity reflected at the grassroots both as to what is held to be objectionable and as to what alternatives are really

being projected. Diversity of views and emphasis within a party may be considered healthy if they are clearly articulated and upheld as such; but often the impression is given that the evaluations and the interpretations of events are merely confused. This concerns such important matters as the desired relation (if any) with Nato and the kind of workers self-management that is desired. As a result the topics and themes of talk tend to be those picked by and favourable to the other side.

(c) Finally, the more tight-fisted official sources are with information, the greater the importance of the grape-vine. Hence, one expects that the less the facts are favourable to the power-holders, the more they will seek to plug up the leaks. Fewer and fewer people get access to the sources, and they tend to be increasingly handpicked, despite the fact that it reduces efficiency.

On the other hand, such a development calls for a greater use of skilled interpretation of whatever comes to be known, and the ability to focus attention upon it.

First, the lack of adequate access to some of the media makes the use of what time is available on them of much greater importance as well as of much greater difficulty.

Secondly, the use of those media which are at one's disposal, even if they only reach and preach to the converted, has to be oriented towards helping them develop both an awareness of the relative importance of what is happening; and it has also to present the kind of interpretation which is not only valid, but is also likely to ring plausibly in adversely-tuned but not quite cotton-woolled ears, by being couched in the sort of language which might penetrate the noise-barrier erected against it. The difficulty of achieveing such a complex result is obviously compounded by the conditions of non-provability of much information that is quite certainly known. However, really skilful writing could wind its way even round this redoubtable stumbling-block.

Thirdly, even granted that the use of the media has been as perfected as possible under the circumstances, there still remains the most crucial problem of all: breaking into those nerve-centres of the oral communication system where real dialogue goes on. Perhaps the most important condition for democracy in Malta is to ensure that the people who are the leaders of the talking-game at all the places where it most flourishes do not belong only to one side. People need training in the techniques required for effective communication in such networks. Moreover, other ways of briefing can be used than the papers — such as film-tape packages, videotape. The use of these small media is of great value in a small society.