

Issues in Information and Media Literacy: Criticism, History and Policy

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Chapter 7

Empowering Children in a Changing Media Environment: Media Education in the Maltese Educational System

Joseph Borg and Mary Anne Lauri

Introduction

Malta is one of the seven European countries where media literacy has for many years been a component of the school curriculum (European Commission, 2007). (Buckingham (2003) differentiates between the concept of media education (i.e. the process of teaching and learning about media) and media literacy (i.e. the knowledge and skills learners acquire). The Maltese model uses the term media education as encompassing media literacy and as a result the term *media education* will be used throughout this paper.). This Mediterranean country, with a population of 400,000, is the smallest member state in the European Union (EU). It gained its independence from British rule in 1964. The two official languages are the indigenous Maltese language as well as English and most people are bilingual. This paper discusses the political, religious and educational context which influenced the development of Media Education in Malta from its introduction in the early eighties, its formal adoption in the National Minimum Curriculum and its development to the present day. It also puts forward suggestions regarding the way Media Education continues to develop as a tool of empowering students in the Maltese educational system.

Media education was formally introduced in schools in Malta in October 1981 at a time when on the international scenario, the inoculation approach was still prominent in several Media Education programmes, in many countries (Alvarado & Boyd-Barrett, 1992; Masterman, 1988). This approach is commonly attributed to Leavis' and Thompson's 1933 book *Culture and Environment: The Training of Critical Awareness*. It encourages the protection of children and young people from media influence

in the same way one would protect people from a disease (Masterman, 1985).

In the past decades there were several models of Media Education and different countries adopted different frameworks depending on the context in which they were introduced. Bryant and Anderson (1983) divided the models into two types: "those whose major emphasis is on the classification and analysis of content, and those that emphasize the character of the cognitive processes used by the viewer" (p.316). Other authors give different classifications. For example Minkkinen (1978), outlined three distinct approaches: the moral approach, the aesthetic approach and the communicative approach. In the moral approach, students were provided with moral criteria to evaluate film and television programmes. Programmes in some countries, for example USA, Sweden and Germany, used social criteria besides moral ones to encourage critical attitudes. On the other hand, the aesthetic model, which generally promoted a hands-on approach, was used in countries such as the USSR, UK and the Netherlands. The aim of this approach was to develop the child's imagination, emotions and creativity. The communicative model, which in many aspects is very similar to the aesthetic approach, aimed to teach students to understand audiovisual messages while simultaneously training them to express themselves audio-visually. France, Spain and Belgium adopted this approach (Minkkinen, 1978; UNESCO, 1977). Minkkinen also noted that very often these different models are combined together in some Media Education programmes.

Of particular interest and influence regarding the approach to Media Education in Malta was the position taken by the Catholic Church. Authoritative Church documents emphasized the moral dimension of Media Education. The Pastoral Instruction *Communio et Progressio* (1971) stated that Media Education must be systematically given a regular place in schools curriculum at every stage of education. It further stated that it is never too early to start encouraging artistic tastes in children together with, a keen critical faculty and a sense of personal responsibility based on sound morality (Communio et Progressio, para. 67). The Decree of Vatican II, *Inter Mirifica* (1963), promoted the teaching of "proper habits of reading, listening and viewing" (para. 25). These habits were considered "proper" if they were "oriented according to Christian moral principles" (Communio et Progressio, para. 25).

Buckingham (2003) documented the role of Churches in Media Education outside the formal education system. Church schools, in many countries including Italy, Australia, India, USA, France, Ireland and Chile were putting into practice the documents issued by the Church (Canavan, 1979; Pungente, 1985; UNESCO, 1977). During this period, that is the Seventies and the Eighties, UNDA - the international Catholic association for radio and TV, was working hand in hand with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) with the aim of promoting both formal and informal teaching of Media Education (UNDA, 1980).

In 1980, Malta was one of the countries which took part in a project launched by the international Catholic association for television and radio and UNESCO to evaluate a ten lesson course in Media Education. This international scenario in the beginning of the Eighties provided the context, and some influence, for the introduction of Media Education in Malta in 1981. There were two other factors which influenced the introduction and development of media education. One was the presence of key persons among the Church's decision makers who believed in the importance of the Media Education and the second factor was the strained political relationship between Church and state prevailing at that time.

Introducing Media Education in Malta

In 1981 broadcasting was monopolized by the State and heavily used by Government to promote its positions in its controversies with the Catholic Church and the Opposition during a period of intense political crisis. The print media were also heavily involved on opposite sides of the political debate. Political polarization was characteristic of Maltese society and consequently of the media. This situation gave impetus to the idea of promoting the teachings of the Church regarding Media Education. This was at that time, considered as a way of resisting the use of the media for political manipulation and for the spread of non-traditional values.

The Catholic Church, to which more than 90% of the Maltese are affiliated, published documents and mandated the teaching of Media Education in its schools as early as 1963 (Inter Mirifica, 1963). However up to 1980, Media Education was not taught in any Church school in Malta. As a result of the enthusiasm of members of the Church commission responsible for the media and their collaboration with the

Catholic international association for broadcasters, the situation changed. In October 1981 Media Education was introduced on an experimental basis in four Church schools. In just over five years the number of schools teaching Media Education increased to twenty seven (Borg & Lauri, 1994).

The Maltese model of Media Education used in these schools was more akin to the aesthetic and communicative model than to the moral model proposed by Minnkkinen (1978). Besides, it used the experiential method of teaching encouraging students to carry out many practical media projects. This model helped students' progress from passive media consumers to empowered media users. The media workbooks used in the primary level as well as the textbooks used in the secondary level reflected this objective.

Workbooks were written to be used in grades four to six (ages 8-10) of primary schools and a textbook was produced for Forms 1 and 2 of the secondary schools. These texts were periodically updated to reflect new media developments in Malta, for example, the 1993 edition reflected the introduction of radio pluralism in Malta and the resurgence of the cinema while the edition of 1998 reflected the introduction of television pluralism and the Internet. Following feedback from teachers, two new books were produced for the first two years of the secondary level. *'Exploring Media Languages. Media Education for Form 1'* (Borg & Lauri, 2003) and *'Exploring the Media landscape. Media Education for Form 2'* (Borg & Lauri, 2004) were published.

The books for the primary schools are basically workbooks. Information is intentionally held to a minimum while practical activities are emphasized. Consequently students learn more by actively involving themselves in projects than by passive instruction. The very basic and elementary elements of the language of television, newspapers, magazines, picture stories, radio and signs are introduced to students but television is given the most importance.

The book for Form 1 used in the secondary level (age 11) builds up on media languages though it introduces new aspects and information. The book used in Form 2 book discusses issues related to media content such as news, advertising and stereotyping within the context of Maltese society. The secondary school books are textbooks more than workbooks. Both sets of books include many media activities.

Empowering the Stake-Holders

The concept of involving different stakeholders in the promotion of Media Education was recognized from the early years. In 1982 UNESCO sponsored the "Grunwald Declaration on Media Education" and advocated an integrated strategy for the introduction of Media Education. This declaration stated that Media Education "will be most effective when parents, teachers, media personnel and decision-makers all acknowledge that they have a role to play" (UNESCO, 1982, para. 7). This holistic strategy was adopted in Malta. School administrators, teachers, parents and students were targeted when introducing the subject in Church schools (Borg, 1987). Through one to one encounters and meetings for stakeholders these important target groups were persuaded that Media Education should be considered as important as any other subject taught in the curriculum.

Parents and teachers were given particular attention because these two target groups were considered pivotal for the success of the programme. The importance of parents was also recognized by Masterman and Mariet (1994) who made a very strong case in favor of the role of parents in media education. They looked at parental support as vital to the successful development of Media Education. Hence short training courses were also organized enabling them to help their children in their studies (Borg cited in Silverblatt & Enright Eliceiri, 1997).

Involving parents is important as they are not always aware of their children's use of the media. A recent survey carried out by Johnson (2007) identified the wrong perceptions parents have regarding the use of the Internet made by their teenage children. Comparing the responses given by students to those given by their parents revealed that parents are not sufficiently aware of how often teenagers came across or visited porn sites, websites with violent pictures or hateful material.

The role of teachers is also very important. The Grunwald Declaration (UNESCO, 1982), the recent "Paris Declaration" (Commission Nationale Francaise Pour l'UNESCO, 2007), and the Audiovisual Media Services Directive of the EU (2007) emphasized the role of teachers and the importance of training them to be prepared to teach the subject. As Buckingham (2001) rightly pointed out, "well-intended documents and frameworks are worthless without trained staff to implement them" (p. 13).

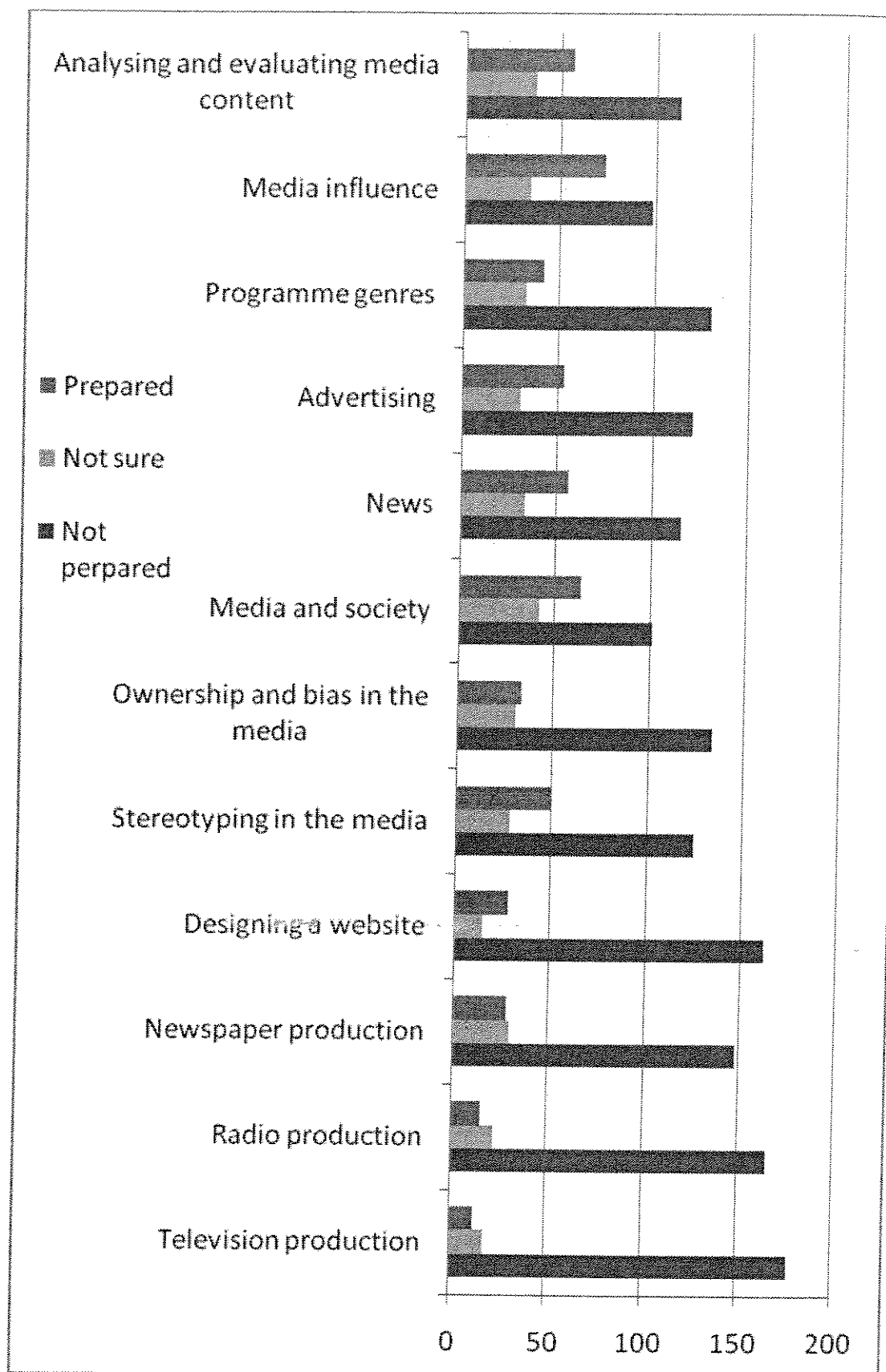


Figure 1: Preparedness of teachers to teach topics in Media Education

A study by Lauri and Borg (2006) investigated how prepared teachers in Malta felt in teaching Media Education. As shown in Figure 1, the results collected from 206 participants from eighteen state schools in Malta show clearly that a high percentage of the teachers interviewed felt unprepared to tackle issues such as television and radio production and ownership and bias in the media.

The feeling of lack of preparation reflects the fact that up to the present day, most of the teachers in the Faculty of Education undergoing training are given very limited training in Media Education. Unless the student teachers are given more training, both theoretical and experiential, the idea of teaching Media Education across the curriculum will not succeed. Teachers cannot teach what they themselves do not know or have not experienced.

The National Minimum Curriculum

Media Education in the school curriculum was formalized by the Ministry of Education when it published the National Minimum Curriculum - "Creating the Future Together" - in December 1999. The curriculum caters for the education of students between the ages of three and sixteen. This was a very important step in the development of Media Education. It listed fourteen educational objectives "that are mainly intended to contribute to the best possible formation of every person so that good Maltese and world citizens can be produced" (p.47). Objective 8 was about the teaching of Media Education. It outlined the knowledge, skills and attitudes that such a programme should help students acquire.

The National Minimum Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1999) - which is binding on all schools - includes Media Education as one of the objectives of a holistic education that should be taught in all schools, State, Independent and Church Schools. Table 1 summarizes the requirements outlined in the curriculum.

Table 1: National Minimum Curriculum

	KNOWLEDGE	ATTITUDE	SKILLS
Media and society	Basic knowledge of different sectors of the media's social function; Relations with political and economic institutions; Symbiotic relations with society; The Press Act and censorship; Media and democracy	Readiness to defend freedom of speech; Critical attitude towards the media	Analysis of media's role in society and in our culture; Render information technology accessible to all, including children with different abilities
Media organization	Ownership structures; Importance of social impact in consumption; Roles of different media workers; Different financing systems	Critical attitude in connections with the organisational need of production	Analysis of product in light of organisational limitations; Familiarisation with process of production including sign language, Braille and sub-titles.
Media content	Media's interpretative aspect (e.g. stereotypes); History of important media sectors; Internet	Critical attitude based on a system of personal values; A selective attitude regarding media consumption	Basic skills in writing letters, reports, investigative stories and simple TV and radio scripts; Expressing oneself through use of computers; Analysing advertising; Balance between educational and entertainment programmes

Media language	Different genres found within different media systems	Critical attitude towards the media; Appreciation of aesthetic and cultural impact	Using equipment, techniques and materials of different media; Production of simple media items; Use of computer and Internet facilities
Other elements	Educational possibilities provided by the media; The media and change in education; Invasion of privacy, distortion of truth, bias; understanding media conventions		

A closer look at the actual situation of Media Education in schools uncovers some problems. The National Minimum Curriculum should have given the necessary push to bring a qualitative leap in the teaching of the subject in all schools. However this did not happen as it was not followed through with the necessary organizational infrastructure. Fifteen focus groups were set up to implement the Curriculum. None specifically targeted Media Education. The position of the Educational Officer responsible for the subject has been vacant for more than eight years.

Role in Curriculum

The place that Media Education should have in the curriculum is one of the most long standing debates on the subjects. Masterman (1988) outlined three possibilities for the inclusion of Media Education:

- a. as a *specialist area of study* in its own right (that is “media studies”);
- b. as an *integrated* part of more traditional disciplines (for example, language, literature, the humanities, social studies. Media

“texts”, might be studied alongside print texts in any of these subjects, for example);

c. as a distinct and separable “theme” within a particular subject area (so, “the media” might be studied in some depth as part of social studies, or language and communication courses).” (p. 21)

Pungente (1985) suggested two other possibilities besides the three mentioned by Masterman. He claimed that Media Education can take the form of an extra-curricular activity outside regular school hours or a combination of methods. As an example of a possible combination in the curriculum, Pungente said that during a four year course in secondary schools, Media Education could be a course on its own in the first year and it could then be integrated into at least two subjects in the second and third year. In the fourth year several optional courses could be offered.

Buckingham (2003) pointed out that the debate is alive today as it was twenty years ago. While reflecting the tripartite distinction made by Masterman (1988), he discussed the possibility of Media Education as part of various subjects particularly highlighting, two subject areas these being Media Education in language and literature as well as in ICTs.

Minkinen's (1978) position that “ideally, mass Media Education should be a subject on its own” (p. 126) is also discussed by Frau-Meigs (2006). She outlined the pros and cons of the use of the different methods in various countries and stated that Media Education is now established as a specialist subject in secondary schools in several countries. This subject tended to be popular with students but the increased centralized control of the curriculum was resulting in a decline of time available for specialist subject. In this scenario Media Education was becoming a minority subject. On the other hand the tendency which advocated Media Education across the curriculum tended to adopt the attitude that an “issue that is every teachers' responsibility can quickly become nobody's responsibility” (p. 13). Frau-Meigs noted that most media educators believe that the existence of a specialist department in Media Studies was a pre-requisite for the implementation of Media Education across the curriculum.

In Malta, while the National Minimum Curriculum explained in detail the aims and objectives of the programme, it did not however specify whether Media Education should be taught as an interdisciplinary sub-

ject or as a subject on its own. As a result State and Church schools could choose different strategies.

The option adopted by state schools was that Media Education should be taught as part of other subjects. As a result of this decision, very limited components of Media Education were introduced in Social Studies and Personal and Social Development at the primary and secondary levels (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, 2005; Department of Curriculum Management, 2006). There were also limited references in the religion text book for Form 5 (Deguara, 2003). Much more importance to aspects of Media Education is given in ICT courses that are an integral part of the curriculum of the primary schools and secondary schools (Department of Curriculum Management, 2006). Such programmes are being enhanced in line with Government policy to bridge the digital divide.

The decision to integrate Media Education with a number of subjects meant that in actual fact, the onus was on the individual teachers who had to integrate Media Education in their own subject. Since the majority of teachers have not been given adequate theoretical and experiential training in Media Education, teachers find this difficult to do and as a result Media Education is not being given the importance it deserves.

Church schools which introduced Media Education decided that the subject was to be taught as a subject on its own so that it would be given enough time for its exposition. At the same time, the programme encouraged the integration of particular topics in Media Education with other subject areas in the curriculum. Experience showed that integration with other studies was easier to carry out in the primary level where children were taught most of the time by one teacher. At the secondary level, where students were taught by different teachers, integrating Media Education with other subjects was possible but more difficult. Most Church schools are teaching the subject in Grades 4-6 of the primary level and some continue teaching the subject in Forms 1 and 2 of the secondary level. A number of schools have reduced the importance that the subject used to receive in past years due to lack of trained teachers in the subject and an overcrowded curriculum.

Books Facilitating Empowerment

The set of books used throughout the primary and secondary schools do not only give most of the knowledge component asked for in the National Minimum Curriculum but also provide students with the practical work needed to acquire the skills and develop the attitudes indicated in the same document. They thus help to empower students in three different aspects: awareness of their media use; acquisition of tools for critical appraisal of content and language and awareness of the importance of what goes beyond the "frame" i.e. the societal and organizational aspects.

Enable students to become aware of the media use they make

Many students are not sufficiently aware of the number of hours which they spend using different media. Media use does have beneficial effects but over use can lead to negative effects. These would typically exhibit negative behaviours such as not doing homework, getting poor school grades, irritability and annoyance when unable to play, sacrificing social activities and even stealing money to buy and play video games. Putnam (2000) explained that computer mediated communication encouraged people to spend more time alone, talk online with strangers, sometimes giving personal details and forming superficial relationships at the expense of deeper face-to-face discussion and companionship with friends and family.

As a result, becoming aware of the importance of managing the use one makes of the media, is an important objective of Media Education (Thoman, 1995). It is only when students are made aware of their heavy use of the media that they realize the importance which media play in their life.

Objective 8 of National Minimum Curriculum, with regard to media use, says, *inter alia*, that a selective attitude should be developed regarding media consumption. One of the aims of the Maltese programme is to raise the students' awareness of the amount of time they dedicate to using the media and therefore their importance in the formation of their attitudes and lifestyle. The media books for the primary and secondary level help students monitor their use of TV, radio, and the Internet/email. Monitoring of newspapers and magazines use is discussed at a later stage when the students are more mature.

Enable students to acquire the knowledge, attitudes and skills they need to assess critically media content and language and produce simple media products

The critical assessment of media content and language is an important feature of media education. The production of simple media products is a practical way of mastering the media and achieving empowerment. The National Minimum Curriculum gives importance to these three aspects.

The media empowered student realizes that media content does not offer us reality but a representation of reality. More than a transparent window on the world, media content give us a more mirrored or mediated version (Buckingham, 2003, McQuail, 2005). A discussion of how different aspects of media content are communicated in Media Education programmes in different countries is given in von Feilitzen and Carlsson (2003).

Out of all aspects of media content, the Maltese programme gives special attention to news, advertising, stereotyping and the portrayal of violence and sexual images. The different aspects of news, its gathering and reporting, is referred to in the primary level; however, it is tackled in depth in the secondary level. Advertising and the language of persuasion is treated in a similar way. Stereotyping and negative content such as violence and pornography are only discussed in the secondary level. The notions of genres, bias and representation are studied in both levels. A more detailed discussion of the books is given in Lauri and Borg (2006).

The second aspect of empowerment is that of understanding media language. There are many researchers who believe that different media have different languages (e.g. Crisell, 1986; Tarroni, 1979). Others have reservations about the possibility of speaking of media languages (eg. Messaris, 1994). Buckingham (2003) highlighted the importance of the study of media languages including syntagmatic combinations and paradigmatic choices as part of Media Education. The most popular position, and the one which this programme embraces, is that each medium has its own language. In this framework, students are helped to become familiar with the language of television, the language of newspapers and magazines, the language of radio and the language of the Internet. The media books, in line with the requirements of the National Minimum Curriculum, help students acquire this skill. The

media workbooks touch upon the language of cinema and television, newspapers and magazines and that of radio. *Understanding Media Languages*, the book used in Form 1 discusses at length the language of TV and cinema, radio and newspapers/magazines as well as the language of the Internet.

The third aspect is helping students acquiring the ability of producing simple media products. Such productions by students are considered to be of particular value to develop both a more in-depth critical understanding of the media as well as an exploration of students' emotional investment in the media. OFCOM (2004) and Kirwan, Learmonth, Sayer, and Williams (2003) agreed to include in their definition of media literacy both the ability to 'read' as well as to 'write' (or produce) media messages. Kirwan et al. consider as part of media literacy "the ability to 'write' media texts, increasingly using Information and Communication Technology (ICT) such as desktop publishing, authoring multimedia packages, video filming, photography and digital editing" (Kirwan et al., 2003, p. 5). In his discussion of the subject Buckingham concluded that "practical, hands-on use of media technology frequently offers the most direct, engaging and effective way of exploring a given topic. It is also the aspect of Media Education that is most likely to generate enthusiasm from students" (Buckingham, 2003, p. 82).

The Media Education programme in Church schools stresses the production or "writing" element by giving importance to the class activities, class projects and exercises meant to stimulate the interest of the children in issues related to the media. The students, even at the primary level, are encouraged to learn that the techniques and technologies used by each medium influence the language of that medium. They are expected to be able to produce their own simple media products. Secondary students are invited to build a web page, produce a radio programme, produce the front and back pages of a newspaper and a magazine, create their own advertising campaign, produce their own advertisements among many other projects. Such production or "writing" skills enhances children's understanding of the media and the pleasure that they get from different media. Moreover, students feel empowered as a result of their "reading" and "writing" abilities.

Enable students to look beyond what is in the frame, the printed page, the web page or radio programme. The societal and organizational aspects help the better understanding of what is produced and why

Media messages are constructs made in a particular organizational framework with a definite ownership structure together with the processes of production in a particular society. This relationship is both important and very complex (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003). Masterman and Mariet (1994), Minkinen (1978) and Buckingham (2003) highlighted the relevance of these aspects to a programme of Media Education. The National Minimum Curriculum gave importance to these aspects. As a result, the books used in the Maltese programme – at the primary but much more at the secondary level – give considerable importance to the relationship between ownership structures and content. They talk about the structure of the advertising industry and that of a print media organization. The roles and functions of the media in society are discussed. They create awareness of different media organizations in Malta and give an account of the history of the media in Malta.

Conclusions and Future Challenges

Media Education is needed today more than it was needed twenty five years ago as the media landscape is now omnipresent. In an island of 316 square kilometers and a population of 400,000 there are today eight television stations; two of which are owned by political parties, thirteen national radio stations and twenty-six community radio stations. Cable TV has a penetration of about 80% of households. In fact almost all homes have at least one TV set and most have two sets. A radio digital platform is being introduced in the second quarter of 2008 while television transmission will be completely digitalized by 2010. This will increase the number of services on both platforms. More than half of Maltese houses are connected to the Internet, and the number is constantly increasing. Students spend hours using the Internet and watching television. IPaqs, Ipods, computer games and mobiles are part of the personal accessories of all but especially of the young. There is also a strong presence of the print media including 15 daily and weekly papers and dozens of locally produced magazines. Such a media landscape makes a pronounced Media Education programme a critical need.

In this context it is being suggested that the following initiatives be taken up:

1. Since lack of teacher training was identified as one of the main shortcomings of the programme, the situation can only be changed if the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta provides both a component of Media Education as part of the training of all future teachers as well as a more advanced unit to those students who wish to deepen their studies in the area. This training should include theoretical dimensions and practical skills. Training in Media Education should also be part of courses offered under the Continuous Professional Development programme regularly organized by government.
 2. A new concerted effort involving policy makers, administrators of state, church and independent schools, teachers, parents and media professionals is essential for the success of the future of the programme. This is also advocated by the Grunwald Declaration (1982) and the "Paris Declaration" (Commission of the European Communities 2007). Such an effort can produce a holistic strategy which addresses existing problems.
 3. Government should appoint an Education Officer responsible for the execution of the Media Education programme on the national level. This will give a clear indication that there is the political will to move forward and help tackle the problems of an overcrowded syllabus and lack of resources.
 4. An attempt can be made to have a Media Education component as part of summer schools organized by Government. The involvement of stakeholders of the social sphere can disseminate Media Education outside of the school environment.
 5. One limitation of the Media education programme was the lack of involvement of media professionals. Their inclusion can promote an informal approach to Media Education through radio and television productions as well as newspapers and magazines. These productions can tackle elements from the curriculum as well other aspects which are of interest to parents as well as children. The Media Education television channel run by the Ministry of Education should play an important role in this proposition. The involvement of parents and NGOs can provide the advocacy needed to pressure policy makers in the educational field as well as media professionals to take the actions being proposed.
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6. The Maltese experience has shown that Media Education is only given its deserved status and importance when it is treated as a separate subject. The "integration" strategy has not really worked in the local environment. Teaching Media Education as a subject on its own should be the norm especially in secondary schools. The "integration" strategy should be carried out over and above the teaching of Media Education as a separate subject especially in those years where this is not catered for.
7. It is also being suggested that media workbooks and textbooks should be written in Maltese. Although English is the language of instruction in many Church and independent schools, yet in government schools, lessons are taught in Maltese. Having media workbooks and textbooks produced in Maltese will enable teachers in state schools to use these books with their students.

If we were to evaluate the success of Media Education in Malta we would describe it as moderate. The experience of Media Education in Church schools is much more positive than that in state and independent schools. The suggestions made should help surmount the difficulties that are being faced today mainly by putting into practice the official documents on the subject including those proposed by the European Union. Recital 37 of the new Audio Visual Media Services Directive (2007) states that "the development of media literacy in all sections of society should be promoted and progress followed closely" (p.L332/21). The Communication from the Commission (2007) provides further pressure in the same direction.

But perhaps the greatest impetus to the further development of Media Education will be the over saturation of the media's presence. In a country totally surrounded by the sea the Maltese have learned that the best strategy for survival is learning how to swim and not building a dyke. Similarly, the ever increasing inundation by the media will be a stimulus for media educators to increase people's ability to swim in this environment. Hopefully Media Education will, more and more, appear to be the solution.

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