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Malta: The roots of a polarised media system

Abstract

Malta is a state with a high level of political parallelism and polarisation, a country which is exceptional in that it has the highest amount of social media engagement, coupled with the highest level of distrust of news organisations within the EU. Yet, this is a country which has the highest general electoral turnout in the World. I investigate the historic roots which lead to this position and postulate its relevance to a broader global audience. I show that an advocacy tradition has been ever present and has value which enhances the country's levels of pluralism and democratic credentials. The political context in which Maltese journalists operate is presented and moves to probe and acquire an insight into the electoral system, how it enhances polarisation and has pushed the main political parties to own and champion their media houses.

1.1 Introduction

The lack of research and understanding of Malta compels us to outline the historical context in which Maltese news has emerged, as well as what the media system looks like today. This is important because it will help us identify historical nuances that may be peculiar to the journalistic field in Malta. By bringing history into the heart of this media analysis, we hope to

further elucidate the construction of news in this country, on the premise that nothing can be understood without knowledge of its genesis (Bourdieu, 2010). The past sheds light on the present, and will help us ground the empirical work that follows.

1.2 The political context

In a strongly worded letter addressed to Frans Timmermans, Vice President of the European Commission, several world editorial leaders expressed grave concerns about events in Malta jointly lamenting that Maltese media had little editorial autonomy and suffered a “lack of political independence”. They called for a “full investigation into the state of media independence in Malta by the Commission” (Gladstone, 2017). The letter was sent in the aftermath of the brutal murder of one of Malta’s leading journalists, Daphne Caruana Galizia, on 16th October, 2017. The despicable act rocked the country and stirred global interest. It is not the intention of this work to address the deep issues raised by this event, but the way the international media engaged with Maltese news organisations and the image global journalists portrayed is relevant, as it nurtures a nuanced understanding of the way news is constructed in this polarised state.

The coverage displayed discrepancies between what was being said in the local media landscape and what the international press understood (Hillman, 2022). The local journalists’ concerns about foreign coverage ranged from how comments and interviews were edited and presented, to the way interviewees were selected (Catherwood, 2017). It appeared that a contradiction existed between what the international press believed was the correct way of processing information and framing news and how professionals in the Maltese media system operated. Unable to translate Maltese, the BBC and the international press chose sources from

Malta's English-speaking news organisations. The editorial leaders mentioned above did not recognise that the use of English could result in a particular political point of view (Sammut, 2007). To create an understanding of the context within which the Maltese journalist operates we need to provide insight into the political climate in which they function.

The challenging position of Maltese journalists is exacerbated and defined by a political climate which could, at best, be labelled 'intense'. Political scrutiny frequently leads to an incivil dynamic, in which a lack of respect for the culture and rules of the political system result in the main political parties attempting to influence and control the media by breaking the norms of engagement between the political and journalistic classes. This environment of tribalism has generated a fragmented political climate where people exclusively identify with their own political grouping and lack interest in cooperation with society as a whole. This is stoked by the political elite as part of a seeming political strategy to 'divide and rule'. Extreme political stances among Malta's citizens heighten their interest in political affairs, resulting in a large public following of politics-related information. Verbal abuse, jostling and limited manhandling is not unknown. There have been instances when journalists' homes have been targeted by unknown persons, as have been the premises of a number of media houses.

Set against this backdrop, the murder of journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia presents a new dimension to the acrimony which has been present in Maltese politics for decades. As an opinion writer at *Times of Malta* and *The Malta Independent* she built a reputation in media circles as dexterous: she was able to balance these roles with her work for groundbreaking lifestyle magazines *Flair* and *Taste*. Yet it was Caruana Galizia's blog, *Running Commentary*, which led her to change the way politics is expressed within this small state. Advocating for her particular belief system, through her understanding of the social and culture systems in

Malta she was able to marshal a significant following. Galizia's murder signals disquiet about the position of journalism on this small Island. It tells us that concern does exist around the watchdog role of Maltese news. Someone was fearful about the reach of her work – fearful enough to silence her. Indeed, the murder had a chilling effect on the media's confidence to operate freely in Malta; the safety of journalists has been brought into doubt.

1.3 Historical roots of Maltese media

The Maltese Islands is one of the smallest but most densely populated countries in the world. There are two political parties represented in Parliament: the Partit Nazzjonalista (PN, member of the European People's Party), the Partit Laburista (PL, currently in government and a member of the European Socialist Party). Although not represented in Parliament, Alternattiva Demokratika (AD) positions itself as a Green Party.

The country has a rich history that belies the fact that it is no greater than a small city by the sea, creating a dynamic which is both restrictive and creative (Frendo, 2004). The use of multiple languages has allowed news organisations to relate to different audiences as, historically, Maltese-language newspapers attract a different readership from that of the English-language publications (Frendo, 1995). But language and its use is only one of the elements that influences media organisations in Malta.

1.3.1 The first press

The Maltese news tradition is not founded on objectivity, but on partisanship and advocacy journalism (Sammut, 2009). Indeed, this is a defining feature of Maltese journalism and its

mainstream press, which has, historically, always been aligned with politicians, political parties and ideologies, both religious and secular (Frendo, 2004). Freedom of press in Malta is generally accepted as the freedom to be politically aligned and partisan. It can be concluded that there is some accuracy in the statement that the press is the mouthpiece for various pressure groups in Malta (Kaul, 2017). Nonetheless, it retains a freedom to advocate and promote political ideals, crucially indicating that partisanship and advocacy are not having a dampening effect on the dissemination of news.

The press in Malta has, historically, always had political undertones. It began with the very first printing press, which was opened during the rule of the Knights of the Order of St. John in the seventeenth century, only to be closed almost immediately; it did not re-emerge until 1740 (Frendo, 1994). During this period, the prime agent of censorship was the Catholic Church (Frendo, 1994). As a result, the first Maltese news publication was the *Journal de Malte*, launched by the French during their occupation of Malta in 1798 (Frendo, 2004). Whether this paper can be considered to be the start of a free press, given that the overriding purpose of this political newspaper was to disseminate government propaganda, is a moot point. It was published in both Italian and French, was owned by the French regime, and only lasted a few months (Frendo, 2010). As short-lived as this paper was, it demonstrates that at its very inception news in Malta was instrumentalised as a political vehicle.

1.3.2 The arrival of the British

The situation did not improve with the arrival of the British because Malta's security and strategy took precedence over everything else. Generally speaking, in this period, the Maltese press fell into four broad categories: the Roman Catholic organs, the Italian papers, the Maltese

lay papers and the Maltese/British colonial press (Frendo, 2004). Changes over time occurred in a limited fashion, with restrictions still being imposed during British colonial rule (Aquilina, 2010). This changed with the Treaty of Paris, Ordinance No. IV, rendering book and press censorship illegal (Kaul, 2017). The result was the rise of the first Maltese newspapers, published, typically, in Italian.

Thus, Malta was granted the right to print newspapers. With censorship removed, the press was created inside cultural parameters, with journalism – interspersed with innovative Maltese publications – emerging to represent colonial interests; Italian interests (Frendo, 1994). Italian, the official language used during the rule of the Order of St John, remained the literary and judicial language spoken by the Maltese elite (Hull, 1993). As a result, the first major national daily in Italian was *Malta*, created by Fortunato Mizzi, the founding father of the Nationalist party, PN (Frendo, 1994).

The resultant launch of English-language publications also reflected the imposition of a British model of advocacy and control. The mirroring of a media model built around Fleet Street is represented by the way Maltese press Barons, such as Lord Gerald Strickland, sought advice from British press Barons, including Lords Iliffe and Beaverbrook, and kept correspondents in London while recruiting staff from Britain (Aquilina, 2010). In this way, we witness newspapers as an imperial device, ultimately fulfilling a political and advocative role.

By 1887, the English-language Maltese-owned paper, the *Malta Chronicle and Garrison Gazette*, was established to target the English-speaking market and was successful in attracting advertising (Frendo, 1994). The paper was owned by the ‘imperialist’ Anton Bartolo, whose son Augustus became a journalist (Aquilina, 2015). Alongside this was the

establishment of Progress Press, created in the wake of the founding of a political party by Lord Strickland. The latter's portfolio of British-leaning newspapers eventually constituted the most powerful press organisations in the country (Aquilina, 2010).

1.3.3 Maltese journalism and language

The first trends in Maltese journalism began to emerge. The contestation here is that, even before the emergence of political parties in the 1880s, the polarisation between pro-Italian and pro-British positions was evident. *"In this incipient polarisation we have Italians and Englishmen resident in Malta as protagonists, with Maltese adherents alongside. In other words there is an external internal dynamic at work"* (Frendo, 2004, p. 15). The second trend is the *"overall camouflage of conformist Catholicism in the Islands"* (ibid.), meaning that the country worked on different layers and what was evident may not necessarily be all that was present. The third trend is that the Maltese language began to make headway in print in the towns and villages. This first use of the Maltese language seems to have been achieved where *"publications [...] tend to be more satirical or religious oriented"* (ibid.). These trends present us with two clear themes. The indication is that polarisation was an historical norm which formed part of the cultural identity and was, indeed, a distinguishing element of what it meant to be Maltese. Equally political parallelism was historically present from the inception of Maltese newspapers.

At this point in time Maltese was not read by the better educated, and the Maltese press moved forward with the language being indicative of the political stance of the paper (Frendo, 1994). Those working in Italian opposed anglicisation while the English titles described themselves as garrison gazettes (Frendo, 2004). The audience were indicative of future trends in that the Italian papers depended on continental support, whereas the English titles were read by the

local communities and were seen to be safer for businessmen to advertise in (Aquilina, 2010).

This division spread to party alliances, which:

“were symbolised by the very language employed for circulating news and ideas in Maltese society. Not only was there a polarisation caused by difference of opinion: there was an acculturation, or an induced acculturation, almost as if choice of paper implied a choice of party, or at least a mark of education, occupation or cultural-political disposition” (Frendo, 1994, p. 18).

In Malta, the choice of newspaper represented a state of mind, where allegiances were consciously or unconsciously perpetrated and became institutionalised. The language used was a way of defining social status which was also reflected in the newspaper that was read. It demonstrated more than political allegiance. It spoke to the education and cultural capital of the individual and was also an indication of where one lived. It spoke to the aspirations of the language user. On the other hand, the Maltese language newspapers were generally less inhibited and were able to show a dimension of Maltese society that had hitherto remained hidden (Frendo, 2004). This Anglo-Italian rivalry remained in the twentieth century and continued to peak in the inter-war years because of the Abyssinian war in the mid-thirties, and it only worsened with the coming of the Second World War (Aquilina, 2015).

By 1940, the disappearance of *Malta* would mark the end of the Italian language newspapers, and all three remaining daily newspapers, and their proprietors, were all intertwined in politics.

“Although not so unfamiliar in the imperialist-nationalist dynamic, the implications and consequences of such an inevitable partisan and patronising journalistic legacy within the small confines of Malta were not inconsiderable, nor easily dispensed with, without much

frustrating effort to this very day” (Frendo, 2004, p.19). Kaul (2017) points out that English was the lingua franca during the inter-war years and received a boost as a result of Italian fascist aggression during the Second World War. The audience for these English language papers were influential and this allowed these papers to “*exercise a disproportionately seminal agenda-setting role*” (p. 2). The role of the press in these years was further enhanced as a result of the political uncertainty associated with the curtailment of self-government in the inter-war years.

The roots of Maltese journalism continued to be deeply entwined in politics, with Strickland remarking that “*to influence politics one must have a share in the control of the press*” (Kaul, 2017, p. 5). It is therefore not surprising to realise that many proprietors of Maltese newspapers and presses were involved in politics, the Catholic church and the labour unions. Maltese politics in the twentieth century were aggressive and acrimonious, and the press served as a vehicle for the political elite. Rather than diminish over time the levels of political parallelism and polarisation seemed to be increasing further reinforcing division in the country. Moreover, the writing quality of the papers were described as “*generally poor, and the tone of most of them, including those published by Strickland, was quite often virulent and scurrilous*” (Aquilina, 2010, p.166). However, this did not make them propaganda sheets because they also opened debates on a range of Maltese and British issues.

The elite stance chosen by the English language papers led to an outlook which strove to make Malta more British, an agenda pushed by Strickland, and less Italian and Nationalist (Aquilina, 2015). The Strickland mantle was passed on to his daughter Mabel, who managed to keep the presses going through the Second World War while acknowledging that the role of the press was that of sectarian partisans immersed in party politics (Kaul, 2017). Mabel Strickland was

convinced that freedom of the press was both an ideal and a practical reality, convinced that as long as it reported faithfully it remained a force for stability. Through her masthead, *Times of Malta*, she acknowledged that political attacks could plumb to new depths especially in election time (Editorial, 1950). “*To have people of the country trust the press, the press must submit to the appraisal by the people.*” In a culturally, politically and socially divided country Ms Strickland brings in a different dimension into the fray, a position which was far more liberal than was expected in a Maltese milieu and underlines the independence that her organisation was able to advocate.

Until the 1930s, literacy was limited to the elite, and as a result books and newspapers could not be considered a mass medium. In the subsequent thirty years, print and secondary oral culture developed simultaneously as a result of two factors: the standardisation of the Maltese alphabet and orthography in the 1930s; and the advent of compulsory education in the 1940s (Borg, 2009). This introduction of print culture was counter-balanced by the introduction of secondary orality in radio in the 1930s, TV from Italy in the 1950s and local TV in the 1960s. Borg (2009) notes that the electronic media is the only real mass media in Malta, a point supported by Papathanassopoulos (2007).

The key element in all this is that the creation of newspapers in Malta was tied to language as a way of targeting audiences and procuring influence within them. On the flip side of this, different social strata would read newspapers in a language which would define their position in society. This holds for newspapers from their very inception and throughout their development with the very possession of a newspaper defined the reader and their political affiliation. This is an element understood by the Maltese, which allowed them to filter the news as it was presented. Historically, the Maltese were able to identify a political slant in the news

by the language as well as the masthead. We therefore see this is the history of a politically divided country with high levels of political parallelism and polarisation. How is this history relevant today? What follows is a representation of how the contemporary Maltese media is structured: its ownership, breadth and use of media. We will look into the use of language as a political instrument and whether it is still prevalent, and we will explore the domination of an advocacy-based press.

1.4 Contextualising journalism in present-day Malta

Sammut (2007) has noted that the Maltese are aware of who owns the various media organisations in the country insinuating an amount of transparency. There are no provisions to enforce competition rules which consider the nuances of each media sector (Nenadic, 2019). Alongside this, print and online media markets are unregulated and, no data about them is available, nor about their concentration. The result is that it is difficult to assess the breadth and influence of the main owners across all media markets.

Maltese journalism must be considered in the context of the murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia and how this has a chilling effect on the country's journalists. Notwithstanding, significant inroads in the quality of investigative journalism have been established through work produced by *Times of Malta*, *Malta Today*, *The Malta Independent*, *Loveinmalta*, and *The Shift News* (Hillman, 2022). Contrastingly, the presence of Strategic Lawsuits against Public Participation (SLAPP) is a new concern in the journalistic landscape (Vassallo, 2020), and although freedom of expression is in the Maltese Constitution, a weakness exists in the implementation of the Freedom of Information Act, in that journalists often encounter resistance while using it, which, on occasion, leads to delays and misdirection. Investigative journalists exploring high-level

corruption, who are critical of the state, can be subject to hate campaigns run by state-sanctioned online hate groups (Vassallo, 2020).

1.4.1 Contextualising advocacy

We recognize that Maltese journalism has an advocacy tradition. In creating an understanding of the context in which Maltese journalists operate, perhaps we should clarify the understanding of advocacy and shed light on the idea – increasingly prevalent in academia – that objectivity is an outdated and unachievable myth (Laws & Chojnika, 2020). Advocacy journalism should be understood as a form of journalism that maintains high standards of factual accuracy, fairness and thoroughness. However, we can simultaneously recognise that journalists come to stories with inherent biases, whether personal, financial or institutional.

Our understanding of advocacy journalism puts a heavy onus on the reporters practicing it to be more assiduous than their mainstream equivalents about accuracy. This has to be the case because it acknowledges that the reporter intentionally and transparently adopts an unobjective viewpoint, usually for some social or political purpose. Advocacy journalism can be credible and quality, inclusive of the journalist's own perspective and without excluding the voice of the opposition – even to the extent that an advocating reporter may include embarrassing facts that would support opposing views. This is fair and rigorous journalism which should also make use of neutral sources to establish facts. Advocacy journalism is actively and openly inclusive of 'biased' reporting.

1.5 Media in present-day Malta

Malta is characterised by a high level of media usage, unusual in a Polarised Pluralist system. Malta's level of political parallelism is apparent in its ownership structures – the two main political parties own their own media outlets. Surveys underscore that this is a society where the general consumption of news is high 72% stating they used the internet for news (Misco, 2018). TV usage was at 73%, while readership of print newspaper was at only 20% (ibid.). This indicates that, rather than driving its people away from the news, this politically divided country seems to hunger for it.

1.5.1 News media

News organisations in Malta are divided by language, with the Maltese language publications experiencing significant involvement from the institutions that own them. This includes the two main political parties, as well as the General Workers Union and the Catholic Church. Only one Maltese-language newspaper, *Illum*, is owned by private business. In this arena, the most widely read English-language news platforms are those owned by Allied Newspapers. *Times of Malta* and *The Sunday Times of Malta* entered the market in August 1935, and have never missed an issue since. *timesofmalta.com* is the country's leading portal (Alexa, 2022)

Standard Publications entered the market in the early nineties, and was created to compete with Allied Newspapers for the then-lucrative advertising market. Today, it is owned by two businessmen: Joe Said, CEO and director of Lombard Bank and chairman of Maltapost plc., and Malcolm Miller, head of Miller Distributions Ltd, the leading logistical hub and the only newspaper printer in Malta with significant printing interests in the UK and Cyprus, too.

Standard Publications owns *The Independent*, *The Independent on Sunday* and *The Malta Business Weekly*.

The third news media house is Media Today, which publishes two editions of *Malta Today* per week. In November 2006, it started publication of *Illum*, the Maltese-language Sunday paper mentioned above. The circulation of the printed papers of these news organisations has decreased significantly over the past four years. Revenue is generated mainly through newspaper and advertising sales, and all of these organisations are now looking at the creation of ancillary events to generate revenue and enhance brand equity.

The English-language news organisations receive no institutional support. This is in stark contrast to Maltese-language papers, which all, bar *Illum*, receive political and institutional subsidy. In this regard, Maltese independent news organisations are heavily disadvantaged and would benefit significantly from Pickard's (2020) thesis which relies on state subsidies for news organisations to lessen commercial pressures, counteract the effects of competition and prevent government monopolies.

English-language newspapers are independently owned with a political slant ranging from pro-PN to neutral. This pattern follows the historical roots of the Maltese press. Polarisation and advocacy are still significant in the Maltese media system and it would seem Sammut's (2007) perception of a move to a more Liberal system has not yet come to pass. Yet, it is a situation that indicates that the watchdog function of the press can be articulated in varied ways, relevant to the society it serves. Though the historical division of politics and language is still present, we continue to see a broad representation of ideals.

1.5.2 Internet news in Malta

Of the top ten visited sites in Malta, listed on Alexa.com (2020), six are news websites. *timesofmalta.com* is the leading Maltese website, surpassing *Google*, *YouTube* and *Facebook*. Both *Malta Today* and *The Malta Independent* also have significant online presences, ranking fourth and eighth respectively with the online news portal *Lovinmalta* placing third (Alexa, 2021). *TVM*'s website, *tvm.com.mt* moved to second place in Malta's most-visited websites, also overtaking *YouTube* and *Facebook*.

Table 1: Online news sites in Malta 2020

Title	URL	Language	Alexa Ranking in Malta	Owner	Political slant in 2021
Net News	Netnews.com.mt	Maltese	7	Nationalist Party (PN) Media.link Communications	PN
Inews	inewsmalta.com	Maltese	56	Union Print General Workers Union	PL
Malta Independent	independent.com.mt	English	8	Standard Publications	PN
Times of Malta	timesofmalta.com	English	1	Allied Newspapers	PN
Malta Today	maltatoday.com.mt	English	4	Media Today	Neutral
Kullhadd	kullhadd.com	Maltese	No data	Labour Party (PL)	PL
Illum	illum.com.mt	Maltese	10	Media Today	PL
Newsbook	newsbook.com.mt	Maltese/English	6	Archdiocese of Malta	PN
lovinmalta	lovinmalta.com	English	3	unclear	PN
The Shift News	theshiftnews.com	English	31	unclear	PN
TVM	tvm.com.mt	Maltese/English	2	Public Broadcasting Service	Neutral

Of interest are two news organisations that exist with only an online presence: *theshiftnews.com* and *lovinmalta.com*. Their existence breaks from the country's institutional mould and could prove to be an important alternative news source. Their very presence and survival in this small state sheds light on the political diversity of the Maltese news audience and, to some extent, negates the framing of Malta as a media system where news in Malta lacks pluralism. This is underlined by significant presence of news websites in the top-ten visited sites in Malta in stark

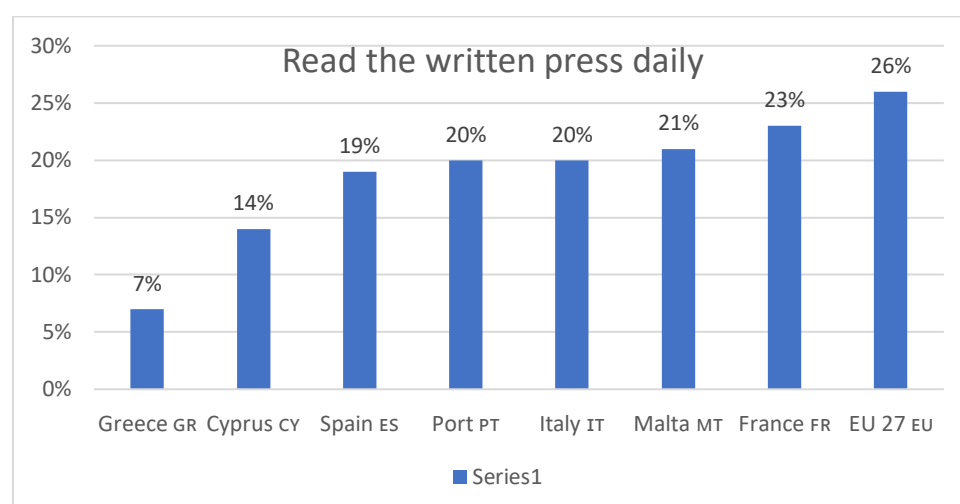
contrast to those of the US, where Reddit is the only news site ranking in the top ten (Alexa, 2022). Indeed, this also diverges from Southern European media systems and is a further indication of the Maltese interest in consuming news. This could be a consequence of a high level of politicisation.

3.6 Comparative media usage

One of the main difficulties in understanding the construction of news in a small state is the lack of existing research, both comparative and general. Malta is frequently omitted from in-depth studies of small states, as exemplified in the excellent work by Hanitzsch et al (2019). Here Iceland and Cyprus have been analysed alongside sixty-five other countries, while Malta does not feature in any way.

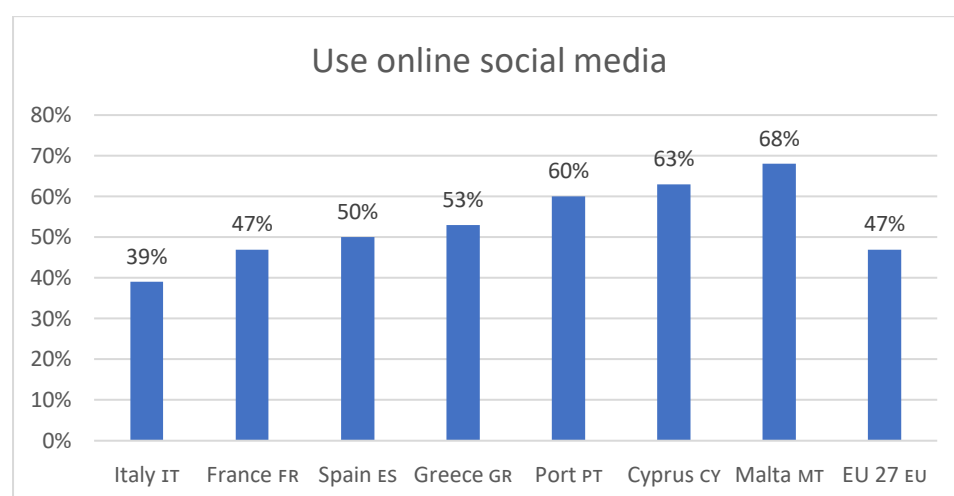
With this in mind, we must refer to Eurobarometer findings of media use within the European Union (European Commission, 2020) to guide us towards a deeper appreciation of where Malta sits among other states in the Southern European/Polarised Pluralist system, thus helping us to reflect on the findings in this work. The Eurobarometer study illuminates media use, outlines the way EU states acquire information, and evaluates a country's level of trust in the media in general.

Chart 1: Read the written press daily/almost daily



The findings (chart 1) reveal that while Malta falls below the EU 27 average, 21% of its population read the written press on a daily basis. However, this is second only to France within the Southern European region and indicates press consumption in Malta is relatively high.

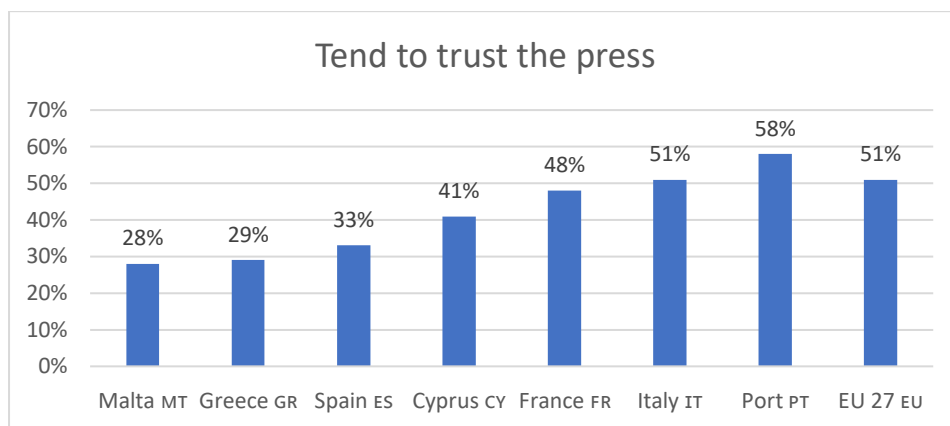
Chart 2: Use online social media



On the other hand, the Eurobarometer assessment ranks Malta significantly higher than the EU 27 average in its engagement with social media as a means of acquiring general information (chart 2), measuring at 68% compared to the 47% average across member states. Indeed, not only is Malta ranked highest among Mediterranean nations for social media use, it also outstrips the other EU nations. In this context the issue is that data scientists are tailoring

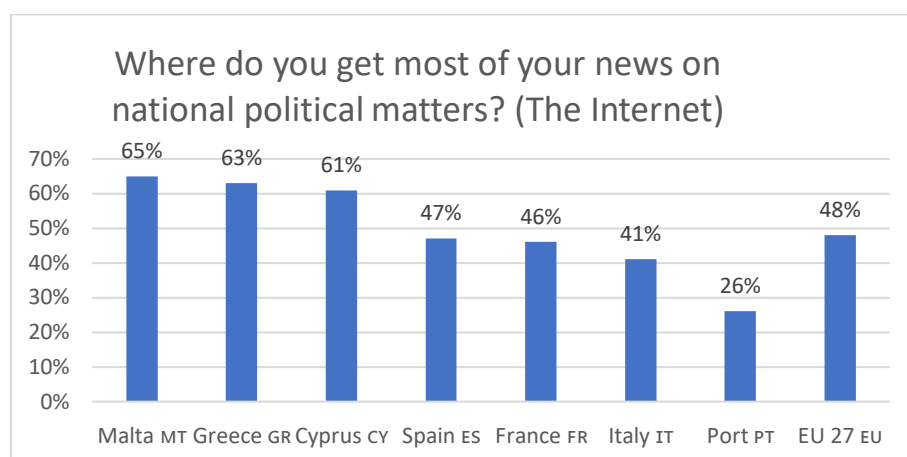
algorithms for news publishing based around eliciting feelings of love, sadness and fear. Given that behavioural advertising and surveillance has been pegged to the commercial internet's core commercial model this is deeply problematic in that the future of the press has been pegged to such unprincipled practices (Pickard, 2020). High social media use will prove to be problematic for this small Island.

Chart 3: Tend to trust the written press



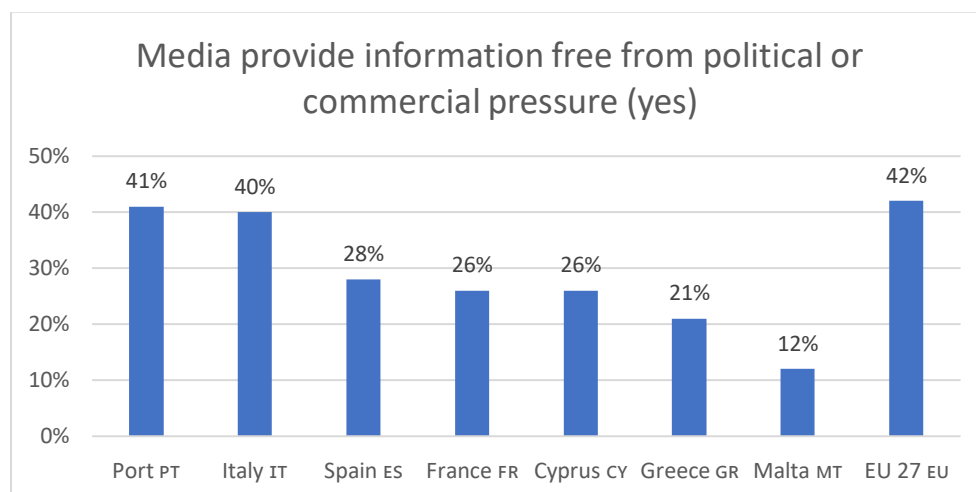
The Maltese population exercises a low level of trust in the news media, the lowest in the region and, again, significantly below the EU 27 average (chart 3). Here we have the juxtaposition of a population which is engaged with the written press yet has a low level of confidence in it, with only 28% of the population stating they consider the press trustworthy.

Chart 4: Where do you get most of your news on national political matters? (The Internet)



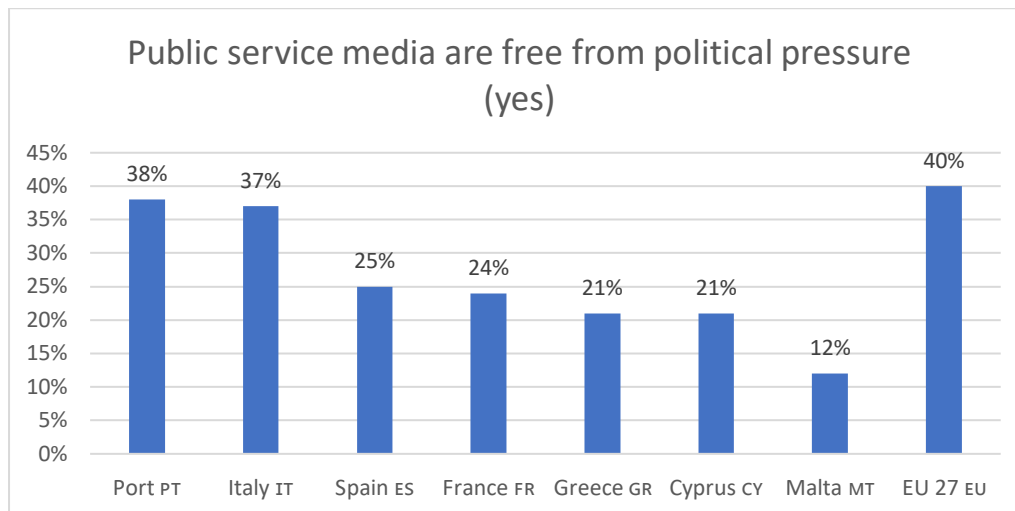
Tied to information-gathering through social media, Maltese citizens' identification as the most active internet users for reading news on national political matters is unsurprising (chart 4). Again, Malta ranks highest in the region for this and significantly higher than the EU 27 average. It is striking that the population is the most active in consuming news and politics online, yet continues to distrust its press and media more than in any other EU country.

Chart 5: Media provide information free from political or commercial pressure (yes)



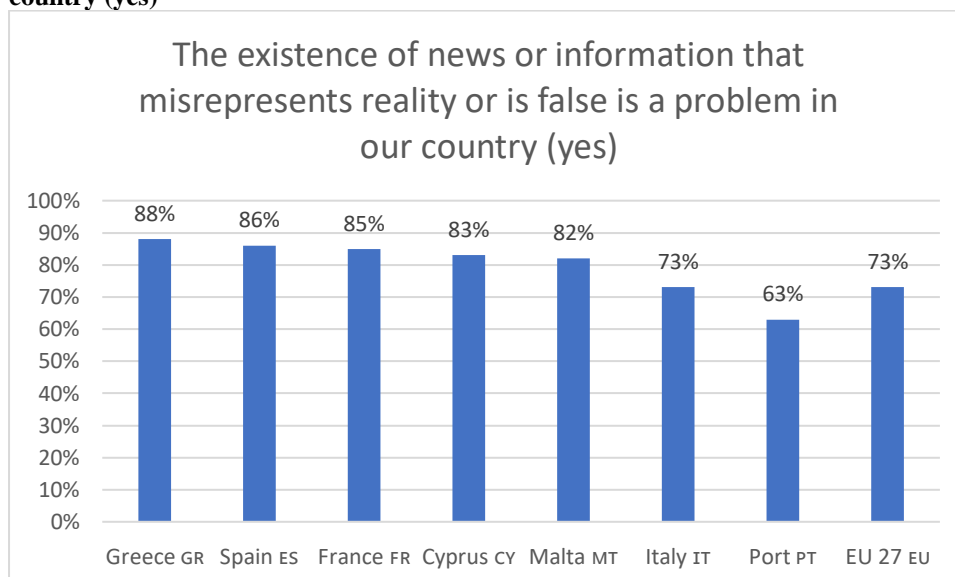
Significantly, when asked if the media are able to publish content free from political or commercial pressure, only 12% answer 'yes', once again the lowest percentage in the EU, (chart 5). It is revealing that, in response to the above statement the number of people answering 'yes' in Malta decreased by 17% between 2018 and 2019.

Chart 6: Public service media are free from political pressure (yes)



This position is replicated in regard to whether public service media are free from political pressure (chart 6). Only 12% of the Maltese agree, the lowest of the EU 27.

Chart 7: The existence of news or information that misrepresents reality or is false is a problem in our country (yes)



When questioned as to whether the presence of “news or information that misrepresents reality or is false is a problem in our country”, 82% of Maltese are affirmative; the EU 27 average is 73% (chart 7).

The Eurobarometer results represent a country that relies heavily on social media to acquire its information and is highly distrusting of the media and public service broadcasting, which they suspect are restricted or influenced through political pressure. Indeed, a significant feature of Maltese respondents is that only 12% of them believe the media is free from political commercial pressure, compared to the EU 27 which averages at 40%.

This indicates that Malta is exceptional in the way news is acquired – through social media – as well as in its remarkable lack of trust in the press and media in general. This Eurobarometer report (Standard Barometer 92, 2019) notes that Malta is also an outlier in two key areas when compared to the Southern Mediterranean/Polarised Pluralist systems. It is the highest user of the internet as a general source of information and specifically as a source of information about national politics. Conversely, it ranks lowest in its belief that media and public service broadcasting provide information free from political or commercial influence. Mindful of these considerations, we will now explore the Maltese electoral process and electoral campaigning to establish how media usage may influence voter turnout and democratic participation.

3.7 Electoral Campaigning

The politicised environment of the media in Malta may seem problematic from a normative point of view, but it is intimately connected to an active democratic life. Malta's voter turnout is significantly higher than any other country in the region (Table 2), and has historically exemplified that the Maltese widely participate in the democratic process (Table 3).

Table 2: Two most recent parliamentary voter turnout.

Country	Year	Voter turnout (%)	Year	Voter turnout (%)
Portugal	2015	55.84	2022	57.96
Spain	2016	69.84	2019	71.76
France*	2017	74.6	2022	73.7
Italy	2013	75.19	2018	72.93
Malta	2017	92.06	2022	85.63
Greece	2015	63.94	2019	57.78
Cyprus	2016	66.74	2021	65.72

(IDEA, 2022) *Presidential elections

It can be assumed that, as a result of Malta's size, the country's electoral turnout goes unacknowledged globally. Hirczy (1995) focuses on the nature of electorate politics and the behaviour of political actors, highlighting that campaigning and 'get out to vote' efforts in Malta are particularly intense. He upholds that strong allegiance to the parties leads individuals to expend huge amounts of energy to help them beat the opposition. "Partisanship in this polarised polity is so pervasive, ingrained, and linked to class, ideology, and locality that preference patterns are known by street" (ibid., p. 257). It is in the very nature of the Maltese to be aware of the political affiliation of their peers.

Another reason for this high level of polarisation is the single transferable vote, which allows voters to rank candidates and to cross party lines. In practice, most voters are loyal to candidates from the same party. There is very little vote switching and this means that participation levels evince intense politicisation and people's willingness to take part in political contests. There must therefore be confidence that one's personal vote has a high probability of affecting the election's outcome, making voting more appealing. It implies that more is at stake in Malta than elsewhere. In a sense we can surmise that it is this high-stakes political game that leads the Maltese to be such determined followers of the news and politics.

Malta has a parliamentary system of government. For leaders, the contest is not only for the control of government and the power to implement policy on behalf of their social

constituency, “but also [for] the perquisites of office and patronage benefits” (ibid., p. 259). Elections in Malta truly determine who holds power; they are competitive and the outcome is very often uncertain. The largely two-party system produces absolute majorities, so coalition dynamics do not interfere with the result. Voting districts are small, around 21,000 voters, and the voting system minimises the risk of wasted votes. This maximises the impact of any vote on the election outcome. The low quotas to elect a candidate in all districts result in turnout being promoted everywhere because all candidates and parties wish to mobilise every possible vote (IDEA, 2022). But what is most striking is the intensity with which the candidates campaign.

High population density and social cohesion in villages allows candidates to employ networks of friends and family to canvas for votes and achieve more social control over their sympathisers. It is not uncommon for them to reward their voters if elected and this acts as an extra incentive.

Table 3: Voter turnout in Malta since independence in 1964

Election year	Voter turnout	PN (%)	PL (%)	Other (%)	Difference between main parties
1966	89.7	47.89	43.09	9.01	6,882
1971	92.9	48.05	50.84	1.04	4,695
1976	94.9	48.46	51.53	0.03	6,303
1981	94.6	50.92	49.07	0.01	4,142
1987	96.1	50.91	48.87	0.22	4,785
1992	96.1	51.77	46.50	1.73	13,021
1996	97.2	47.80	50.72	1.48	7,633
1998	95.4	51.81	46.97	1.23	12,817
2003	96.95	51.79	47.51	1.23	12,080
2008	93.3	49.34	48.79	1.87	1,580
2013	93.0	43.34	54.83	1.83	35,107
2017	92.1	43.68	55.04	1.29	35,280
2022	85.63	41.74	55.11	3.15	39474

(General election: 2022, 2022)

To date, the partisan polarisation is very much alive. The country’s news system is polarised, advocative in its style of journalism and has a significant level of democratic engagement. We have shown this to be a nation with a high level of cynicism about the media and public service

broadcasting, indeed the most in the EU, while having, globally, one of the the highest voter turnout in parliamentary elections.

3.6 Conclusions

Hallin and Mancini (2004) note that the differences between the models have eroded to the point that it is reasonable to ask whether a single, global media model is displacing the national variation of the past, pointing out that the Liberal media model is becoming increasingly dominant across Europe. This is not the case in Malta, where political advocacy is seen as quintessential to journalism, resulting in an already high and growing amount of political parallelism. The absence of state intervention in the private media sector and the permitting of political ownership has led to a rise in parallelism. Not only do connections between media and political institutions exist, but it could be argued that they have strengthened in the last fourteen years.

This is a population with a high level of distrust in news organisations, yet a keen interest in following and acquiring news and information (Sammut, 2007). The question is whether it is possible to sit Malta comfortably inside the Polarised Pluralist model – whether an engaged electorate and political class fits into its system. Perhaps we should not be considering the media system as a static representation of fact but as a fluid system which reflects historic fluctuations. In this way, we can see Malta fluctuating between a Polarised Pluralist system and the Democratic Corporatist model espoused by Bruggermann et al (2014).

As noted, unlike other Southern European states, Malta lacks any form of press subsidies, yet politics is omnipresent. Esser and Umbricht comment on the highly politicised style of Southern European journalism: “the greater dependence of state aid and political favouring, strong party press ties and the late development of journalism as an independent profession have made scrutinising watchdog reporting less likely” (2012, p. 991). This, we submit, is an explanation requiring elaboration and clarification in the case of the Malta. Could it be that, in Malta, the watchdog role remains and is the essence of local-media polarisation? Could it be that diverse forms of advocacy operate there? What role is advocacy fulfilling in this state, and what form of democracy does this result in? These are questions which need to be answered.

We have identified the roots of advocacy journalism as being historically, politically, and culturally based. We noted that, historically, the journalists’ choice of news organisation to work for would, in all probability, determine the political leaning of their work. This suggests that the journalist will follow their organisation’s framing robustly and vigorously. We now recognise that this is well understood by the Maltese, who are able to filter the news they are consuming.

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Appendix

Disclosure

This work is an updated version of a chapter which appeared in my book “The construction of news in a polarised state” published 2022.

Biography

Adrian Hillman has extensive experience of leading media operations, having previously worked as executive director of Allied Newspapers and managing director of Allied Group of Companies. He worked as a consultant to the Maltese Government leading up to the EU pre-accession referendum and has assisted companies, and organisations around the world. He completed his PhD in news construction and political communication at Goldsmiths College University of London, UK, in 2021 and is an associate lecturer at this university.

Ethical approval

This work does not require ethical approval as it does not fall in the parameters of research for which it is required.