

Disinformation landscape in MALTA

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INTRODUCTION

- Malta grapples with a major disinformation problem as a result of its highly polarised political environment.
- The problem got worse in the years following the 2017 assassination of Daphne Caruana Galizia, an investigative journalist who uncovered some of the biggest political scandals in the archipelago's history.
- Most disinformation revolves around the political issues of the day. Much of it has centred on the circumstances of Daphne's assassination and on her investigations, which continue to have an impact.
- Common narratives that sow division and distrust in the country relate to the media, migration and COVID-19.

EMBLEMATIC CASES

Several cases of disinformation permeate Malta's public opinion to this day.

DAPHNE CARUANA GALIZIA: HER WORK AND HER ASSASSINATION

- Daphne Caruana Galizia's car bomb assassination on 16th October 2017 came as a shock but not a surprise – throughout her years of writing, she experienced threats and harassment. But her murder marked a turning point because it showed the extent to which criminals were willing to bury the truth that she had been at the forefront of exposing.
- The public inquiry that investigated the circumstances of the assassination [held the Maltese state responsible](#) because it allowed a culture of impunity to reign. In life, Daphne faced a fully-fledged dehumanisation campaign aimed at censoring her and discrediting her work. As the [inquiry report](#) notes, this campaign was 'orchestrated also by leading government exponents within the Office of the Prime Minister'.
- [A 2018 investigation](#) by The Shift News into the goings-on of secret Facebook groups of Labour Party supporters revealed coordinated attacks on anti-corruption activists, Daphne and Daphne's family. The groups had thousands of members, which included the then-prime minister, several of his senior staff and the then-president of Malta. (The Times of Malta team, reviewers of this report, says that they have seen similar hate campaigns directed at Times of Malta journalists, though they do not always stem from Labour Party supporters.)

2021 COORDINATED ATTACK ON THE MEDIA

- In August 2021, a [major disinformation campaign](#) took place in the form of a spate of spoofed websites and false articles and emails purporting to be by journalists, bloggers and others.
- A lot of these fakes were perpetuating conspiracy theories about the circumstances of Daphne Caruana Galizia's assassination.
- As Times of Malta had reported, the [common thread between the fakes](#) was their apparent attempt to discredit journalists and others writing about the man who stands accused of commissioning and financing Daphne's assassination, and to sow doubt on the prosecution's cases against said accused.
- Similar spoofing attempts and conspiracy theories continue to this day.

THE FALLOUT OF THE FRAUDULENT HOSPITALS DEAL

- In March 2015, Daphne Caruana Galizia [reported](#) that the Maltese government had already struck a deal with a Singapore firm ahead of publishing a call for proposals for the privatisation of three of Malta's state hospitals. The representatives of the firm would go on to set up Vitals Global Healthcare, which – despite lacking any healthcare experience – bid for the concession and won. Vitals would eventually be bought out by Steward Health Care.
- [The deal was fraudulent from the start](#), the Auditor General and a civil court ruled. In February 2023, a court judgement [rescinded and annulled](#) all agreements and amendments made by the Maltese government with Vitals Global Healthcare and later with Steward Health Care.
- April 2024 saw the conclusion of [a magisterial inquiry](#) investigating the role played by Malta's former prime minister Joseph Muscat and others in the privatisation of the state hospitals. In the subsequent days, dozens were marked to be charged criminally. Amongst them were Muscat; Keith Schembri, Muscat's then-chief of staff; and Konrad Mizzi, a minister of Muscat's then-cabinet.
- Repeated comments and actions by Muscat, incumbent prime minister Robert Abela and other figures in government or connected to the Labour Party (which has been in government since 2013) are suggestive of a campaign to discredit the aforementioned magisterial inquiry and the concession story itself.
- When speculation began to grow about whether the aforementioned magisterial inquiry had been concluded, Malta's prime minister Robert Abela [stated](#) that 'justice should not mean political terrorism'. He questioned why the inquiry should be concluded just weeks before Malta's local council elections and the European election, [accusing the magistrate](#) of purposely timing it with the start of the electoral campaign.
- Muscat [described](#) the inquiry as a 'vendetta', and MEP Alex Agius Saliba – who [has been endorsed by Muscat](#) – [wrote on Facebook](#) that the inquiry's timing was 'nothing but political vengeance'.
- The inquiry and the fallout of the fraudulent deal appear to be being framed as a war wrought on the Labour Party by an unnamed 'establishment' having taken over the institutions. The narrative has been repeated again and again by the [prime minister](#), the [Labour Party and its media arm](#), and, inevitably, [the party's supporters](#).
- Their use of the term 'establishment' (incorrectly used with a lowercase 'e') is highly misleading. The Establishment normally consists of those who hold power in society – which, of course, usually includes the prime minister himself.
- Maltese websites and blogs containing articles about the fraudulent hospitals deal [have been targeted](#) by a 'growing disinformation-for-hire industry' in which a myriad of bogus copyright complaints are made to Google to get specific content removed from its search results.
- *This remains an active and developing story.*

NARRATIVES

This section illustrates the most recurrent narratives forming part of Malta's disinformation landscape.

ATTACKS ON THE MEDIA

- Disinformation festers in polarised environments, [of which Malta is one](#). As the cases listed in the previous section show, the country is rife with narratives that seek to encourage hatred towards the media and undermine the role of journalism in society.
- In the fallout of the fraudulent hospitals deal (see previous section), the prime minister [accused journalists of forming part of the so-called 'establishment'](#) that he has repeatedly claimed has taken over Malta's institutions.
- The media is frequently treated as an enemy of the state. In [an interview](#) ten days before her murder, Daphne Caruana Galizia said that she had been turned into 'what in effect is a national scapegoat'. Her house had been targeted by arson attacks, her bank accounts had been frozen, and she had been sued for libel dozens of times by government officials and business people. She had been labelled [a 'witch'](#) by Labour Party lackeys, and [a 'biċċa blogger'](#) (literally translated as 'just a piece of a blogger') by the ex-leader of the Opposition and his supporters – both dehumanising images serving to perpetuate the narrative that she could not be trusted. The demonisation of journalists is still a common practice in Malta. The Times of Malta team say that journalists are regularly targeted from all angles.
- The state broadcaster, PBS, is often seen as a mouthpiece for the government of the day, and it is frequently criticised for turning a blind eye to attacks on independent journalists and other issues of rule of law.
- Given that journalists work to serve the public's right to know, any attack on them and their work is an attack on democracy.

COVID-19: A PANDEMIC OF FALSE CLAIMS AND ANTI-VAXXERS

- Malta was not immune to the spread of false information concerning the COVID-19 pandemic.
- [Misinformation about it](#) reached the country before the virus itself did. This included claims that the virus was manufactured by China 'as a weapon of control'.
- [Swarming tactics](#) in the form of mass reporting have been employed by anti-vaxxers on social media to flag legitimate posts about the pandemic.

- Several protests against COVID-19 rules and vaccination took place during the pandemic. Protestors [described the situation](#) as a ‘medical dictatorship’, and at least one event organiser veered into conspiracy in claiming that the COVID-19 vaccines were ‘experimental’.
- Anti-vaxxers made the media out to be [the enemy](#). Many refused to speak to reporters at protests because the media was ‘fake’ and ‘part of the system’. Someone in the crowd even wore a t-shirt reading ‘the media is the virus’.

IMMIGRATION

- As one of the EU’s closest points to North Africa, Malta tends to be a place of hope for asylum seekers seeking safety and security abroad.
- There is a persistent impression that racism and xenophobia are widespread in the country. It is frequently argued that migrants are taking the locals’ jobs, that they cause social unrest, and that they are the reason why Malta is overpopulated.
- In January 2023, the home affairs minister [repeated the widespread claim](#) that the presence of NGO rescue boats is a pull factor for migrants hoping to cross the Mediterranean to Europe.
- The term ‘immigrant’ is broadly perceived as being synonymous with darker-skinned non-European refugees and asylum seekers. [Research has shown](#) that the Maltese tend to have more positive perceptions of white European refugees and asylum seekers.
- Journalists who have written vastly on the subject of migration and integration have been selectively targeted by hate speech on social media platforms.

COMMUNITY

The main actors countering disinformation in Malta are listed hereafter.

- **Fact-check by MedDMO.** [MedDMO](#) is the Mediterranean hub of the European Digital Media Observatory. It brings together journalists, media literacy experts and researchers from Malta, Greece and Cyprus – as well as the AFP – working to counter disinformation and foster a healthier information space. Times of Malta became a partner in 2022, roping in the Department of Media and Communications within the University of Malta’s Faculty of Media and Knowledge Sciences.
- **Times of Malta.** Malta’s oldest daily newspaper is still in circulation. It established a [dedicated fact-checking section](#) as part of its activities in the MedDMO project.
- **The Shift News.** An independent [online investigative journalism platform](#) born after the assassination of Daphne Caruana Galizia. In 2018, it started its [Disinformation Watch](#) series.
- **Truth Be Told | manuedelia.com.** Manuel Delia is an independent journalist and an activist. [His blog](#) offers commentary on and documentation of political and institutional issues in Malta, with a special focus on crime, corruption and erosion of democracy.
- **Running Commentary | Daphne Caruana Galizia’s Notebook (daphnecaruanagalizia.com).** Daphne Caruana Galizia had been writing for decades before spontaneously setting up a blog in March 2008 when Malta was about to hold a general election. [Her blog](#) was where she broke most of her biggest stories. It is a necessary documentation of Malta over time and a prime resource for understanding the country’s scandals.
- **Repubblika.** A [civil society movement and rule of law NGO](#) promoting human rights and democracy in Malta. It took Daphne’s investigations into the fraudulent hospitals deal up in court, which resulted in a magisterial inquiry that led to criminal charges filed against dozens of individuals, including Malta’s former prime minister and his associates (see ‘Emblematic Cases’ in this report).
- **The Daphne Caruana Galizia Foundation.** An [independent, non-profit and non-governmental organisation](#) created by the sons and husband of Daphne Caruana Galizia, which fights for justice for Daphne, for her stories and for journalists and journalism everywhere.
- **Others:** [The Malta Independent](#), [Malta Today](#), [Newsbook](#), [The Critical Angle Project](#), [Moviment Graffiti](#), [PEN Malta](#), [Aditus Foundation](#), [Blue Door Education](#), and [African Media Association Malta](#).

POLICY AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK

There is **no formal national framework against disinformation**. While Malta's Criminal Code does refer to the spread of false news and hate speech, it is quite a different story when it comes to putting it into practice. Some laws, like libel law, might carry the potential of tackling disinformation indirectly, but this option is often abused as an intimidatory measure to silence public watchdogs and critics – in other words, SLAPPs.

Malta has the highest number of SLAPPs (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) per capita in Europe – see [this 2023 report](#). Libel suits can be filed frivolously and vexatiously, and the burden of proof is on the defendant. Upon the death of the defendant, the lawsuits are passed on to his/her heirs.

Malta's government transposed the **EU anti-SLAPP directive** on 31st July by publishing a legal notice, [bypassing parliament](#). The published legislation only covers cross-border SLAPPs, and it repurposed the indicative qualities cited in para 4(3) of the directive (i.e. the indications of purpose) as being examples of claims that may be unfounded. There is also no legal protection against domestic SLAPP cases. The EU directive, which [became official on 16th April 2024](#), was dubbed '[Daphne's Law](#)' by Vice President of the European Commission for Values and Transparency Věra Jourová in memory of Daphne Caruana Galizia, who was facing over 47 lawsuits in Malta and one lawsuit in Arizona at the time of her assassination (42 of which [her family inherited](#)). Jourová said that Daphne's experience 'helped me to convince many that we need to take action'.

A month before the December 2021 deadline to transpose the **EU whistle-blower directive** into national legislation, Malta published a new bill that, although purporting to transpose the EU directive, was criticised for its [lack of stakeholder consultation](#). This bill went through. It was [labelled a 'Trojan horse'](#) for its failure to address a fundamental flaw in the framework: the extent of the influence of government on whether a potential witness is granted whistle-blower status.

Malta's freedom of information request process is [generally lengthy and frustrating](#). Through the **Freedom of Information Act**, eligible individuals can submit freedom of information (FOI) requests to public authorities. However, individuals making a request are often sent around in circles, the requests are frequently ignored or rejected, and the appeals process for rejected requests is [arduous](#).

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