

Boardroom to Newsroom

The construction of news in a small polarised media system

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Declaration of Authorship

In accordance with University of London regulations for submission for a PhD. thesis, I herewith declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

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Abstract

This thesis considers Malta, part of the understudied subject area of small states, and outlines a media system which is the product of a micro economy and unique societal culture. Taking a case-study approach, three news organisations are examined to understand the editorial routines, ownership and management structures, and social and cultural factors that affect the day-to-day business of creating news. To establish the fit between what is asserted by staff and what is actually taking place in the news-generation process, in-depth interviews with key stakeholders of each organisation are conducted alongside qualitative textual analysis of the content they publish.

Contrary to previous research, we find advocacy continues to dominate Maltese journalism, indicating that the country has retained similarities to other media systems within its geographic region. However, this advocacy presents in different ways, influencing the nature of each organisation's respective reporting and reflecting individual workplace cultures, routines and ownership structures, as well as constituting a response to the politically involved society in which they operate. This conflicts with the ideal typification advanced by Hallin and Mancini.

The findings highlight the merits of the Maltese tradition – found wanting in the US objectivity canon. In this small state, journalistic advocacy extends media diversity and contributes to the high level of political engagement among its population.

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Chapter One

Literature review

1.1 Introduction

This research looks at Malta, an understudied small state, and questions how news is constructed within this arena. The literature review will consider the principle question underpinning it: what influences on national news organisations, in the news-making process, inform the decisions they take on what news to produce? To answer this question we shall read the literature from three different vantage points, first examining what is generally understood to be the American Liberal media model of news construction, moving on to look at news systems at an international comparative level to help understand Malta's regional fit, and, finally, focusing on small-state literature to identify how the Maltese system compares to countries of a similar scale. It will be argued that there are well-founded reasons for taking this approach.

Inspection of the American Liberal media system will show that there has been steady sociological analysis of structures and work routines from North American sociologists collectively explaining the nature of journalism (Cottle, 2007). Chief among these scholars are Gaye Tuchman, Edward Epstein, Harvey Molotch, Marilyn Lester, Michael Schudson, Herbert Gans, Mark Fishman, Todd Gitlin and Robert Entman. Their central argument is that the way news is gathered and presented determines that, in effect, journalists construct news.

The concept of news construction established, this prompts the realisation that it is not useful to think of journalism as a means for the search for the truth. News is the outcome of strategic work routines at news organisations which, ultimately, are production facilities, and

it is difficult to comprehend the nature of news without getting to the heart of its manufacturing process. This early North American research helps explain how news is crafted by individuals within unique social and professional scenarios. However, its conclusions are anchored to the way news is constructed in the United States, creating a limited model by which other media systems are defined. Although this body of work presents a framework which aids our understanding of the news, it does not adequately explain the nuances of divergent media systems. Nonetheless, knowledge of the Liberal American media system is indispensable to this thesis.

Sammut (2007) asserts that the Maltese media system is in transition towards the American model, given that it is a negotiation between professional culture and market influence. We inquire, is this the case today? To answer this question, I submit a two-fold argument for looking at the United States news model. First, because it looms large in the literature and is the prism through which many people view their media system; as a result, it is enormously influential (Hanitzsch et al, 2019). Indeed, it can be argued that it is the international benchmark against which news is measured. Second, despite the significant differences between the United States and Malta, the Liberal American model continues to offer broad insights into the way that news is produced, which may be helpful to this research.

Though often shaped by similar influences as those in America, the world has very different forms of journalism; international journalisms are shaped by diverse features and distinct saliences. To understand the way in which news is constructed in Malta, it is essential to position its system within a regional and geographical context of the literature on comparative media systems. Malta is a deeply polarised country (Warrington, 2017), and it is necessary to investigate whether this results in unique journalistic and news-making responses. To address and understand this, we shall look at what the literature says about the Southern Mediterranean and Polarised Pluralist systems, and how these conditions impinge on the news.

These systems identify a tradition which is perhaps more pertinent to Malta than the American model. They foreground the importance of advocacy journalism rather than neutrality and identify the power of polarisation within society. The latter observation could result in a vastly different picture than that conjured by the cascade theory of Entman (2004), which we shall discuss. We shall explore whether the literature on Southern Mediterranean and Polarised Pluralist systems provides a preferable, more accurate insight into Malta's news cycle.

The media systems literature could demonstrate a number of interesting perspectives that should resonate with the Maltese case. Nonetheless, even here there could be differences between other countries and Malta. We shall question these contrasts and the role that state size plays in them. To fully grasp how size plays a role in the way news is constructed, it is appropriate to refer to the literature on small states and amplify this by comparing Malta to another small state. This comparison will achieve three results: to identify similarities between the two, to help explore the influences of size on the way media operates, and to question the classifications as described by Hallin and Mancini (2004) and Bruggermann et al. (2014). To underline this proposition, we shall analogise Malta with Iceland. It is important to note that despite Iceland's definition as a small state, its relative size and geographical remoteness from Malta still distinguish it from the latter. Yet Iceland's potential similarities to Malta may help to illuminate the way the media system in that country operates, which could, in turn, shed light on the Maltese media system.

1.2 News, and the construction of reality

Early news sociology work was prefaced by research conducted by White (1950) and Breed (1955). This work was important because it promoted a discussion on the construction of news, emphasising how gatekeeping elements transformed what was defined as news and how the socialisation of journalists influences its construction. From there, accounts of news work flourished in the '70s and '80s (Green Gonzalez, 2017). These were mainly studies of an ethnographic nature, involving participant observation and in-depth first-hand knowledge of news work. Significantly, a number of these scholars used their journalistic experience as a backdrop to their studies. Breed was a journalist and White was an NBC correspondent, news commentator and journalism scholar. However, while these scholars brought an immersive and crucial first-hand understanding of the way the news organisation worked and functioned, it was developed from an editorial vantage point, and unsighted to the different perspectives which can be brought to bear from the executive and ownership level.

These news studies presented different dimensions from the overall picture of news construction. Molotch and Lester (1974) were in the vanguard in the belief that all events are socially constructed; their point was that each event reveals different types of information about how society is organised. Tuchman (1978) developed the idea that news is a social construct. She contends that news is rooted in organisational routines and journalists' performative claims of objectivity, as opposed to an underlying democratic value or principle. Gans' 2004 updated version of his work is a sociological analysis of how national news organisations, journalists, sources, audiences and all other participants in the national news-making process decide what is news and how it is reported. As a major explanation of why the news comes out the way it does, he points to source power, audience power and efficiency. His point is that while journalistic values influence the news, so do external factors, such as political censorship.

On the other hand, Schudson (1981) argues that objectivity is equated with respect for factual information and a distrust of subjective values. He defines objectivity in American journalism as “at once a moral ideal, a set of reporting and editing practices, and an observable pattern of news writing” (Schudson, 1997, p. 149). In his view, newspapers outside the US “are declared allies of agents of political parties and their reporting of news is an element of partisan struggle” (Ibid., p. 150). In this way, Schudson places objectivity as a central tenet in the way news, within an American Liberal media system, should be constructed – a position which is now highly contested (Winston & Winston, 2021). We shall question this further.

Fishman (1988) positions the news source centrally and, through this, endeavours to explain how the articles we read in a newspaper are constructed and how the events they cover are selected. To his mind the source has its own interpretation of the event and will colour it accordingly. Gitlin (1980) was immersed in journalism as an editor and contributor to the *San Francisco Express Times*. His work questions why the mass media reports what it does, arguing that news organisations pursue unique agendas and thus do not represent an objective reality. He takes a forceful position: that the mass media promotes the politically and commercially powerful. Designated routines uphold the political and economic interests of news organisations, which consequently champion one version of events over another in their publications. Likewise, Epstein (1974) asserts that television (TV) cannot reflect reality because its essential purpose is to entertain. He argues that the news-selection process can be viewed through a business lens: media outlets will prioritise staying in business, and curate their news stories accordingly. “Simply put, these studies help to reveal the constraints, contingencies and complexities at work and, in so doing, provide the means for a more adequate theorisation of the operations of the news media and the production of the discourse at play within news” (Cottle, 2007, p. 2). Collectively, these scholars appear to agree that, as a result of the way news is gathered and presented, it is journalists who construct it.

1.2.1 Gatekeeping and socialisation

We could argue that the public is ill-served by the intermediaries – journalists, politicians, talk show hosts and bloggers – that inform it. We might also ask whether democracy falters if its citizens lack access to a steady supply of trustworthy information. Claims that journalists are an indispensable source of information dissolve when they peddle hype and misinformation (Patterson, 2013); when trying to apprehend what informs our understanding of the construction of news, this line of thought brings into play a greater number of perspectives. White (1950) contends that people tend to perceive as true only what affirms their existing beliefs. From his case study he concludes that the editor, “in his position as ‘gatekeeper’, sees to it that the community shall hear as a fact only those events which the newsman as representative of the culture believes to be true” (White, 1950, p. 390).

Through the editor’s rejections, White witnessed how highly subjective editorial decisions are and that they are based on the gatekeepers’ experiences, attitudes and expectations about what news communication should be. He treated his study as a reflection of the wider industry: that the gatekeeper-editors of every publication play an important role in defining its complex process of communication. Writing early in the cycle of news studies, White’s research emphasised that the editor will present that which he *believes* is fact; perceived reality can never be objective. Furthermore, White argues that an editor’s position of seniority enables him to assert his views in the newsroom and that all editors can or will enforce a clear editorial policy. This assertion, however, does not account for cultures where his proximity to sources inhibits an editor, nor the issues this dynamic raises – particularly, the question of a close relationship between editors and their sources affecting the level of autonomy the former will exercise. In turn, it is possible that the gatekeeping role is manifested differently in small states. We shall examine this more closely.

White's (1950) thesis contrasts Breed's (1955), who developed the concept of social control in the newsroom; he identified the most senior positions in any news organisation as having the authority to establish a policy of 'no policy' – the principle that in an ideal democracy there would be no need for control. He defined editorial policy as an overt and "consistent orientation shown by a paper, not only in its editorial but in its news columns and headlines as well, concerning selected issues and events" (ibid., p. 327). However, he also suggests that a policy does not have to be documented to exist, nor a person's conformity to it automatic, for three central reasons: the existence of ethical journalistic norms, including that which prevents a publisher from predominating his staff and the fact that subordinates tend to hold more liberal attitudes than their publisher. This final point highlights the latent strength a journalist possesses. Breed's work is important because it looks at the socialisation of the journalist and sets a precedent for the way future newsroom studies may relate to this issue. However, his research does not examine the motives that drive journalists to join a news organisation, one of which may stem from a fundamental feature of polarised systems, that its institutions attract like-minded individuals, which in fact increases the pressure on those workers to conform (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

Breed does identify other mechanisms that foster conformity, the first being the socialisation of the journalist through the norms of her job and by reading her own paper every day, which is a simple way to diagnose its characteristics helping the journalist define its unwritten policy. White (1950) notes that certain editorial actions taken by editors and older journalists serve as controlling guides, while Breed (1955) observes that the cultural patterns of the newsroom produce results insufficient for wider democratic needs. A key question arises in the latter instance which sets the scene for future newsroom studies: why is socialisation problematic? Cultural patterns shape democracies. Socialisation is incompatible with the objectivity-based model of American journalism, but this premise assumes that news

construction should follow an objectivity-based model and, as a result, may exclude equally relevant methods of constructing news.

1.2.2 The concept of construction of news

Molotch and Lester (1974) introduce another dimension: by suspending the belief that an objective and reportable world exists, they developed the concept that news is a constructed reality. Their premise is that “the result is a process of news creation, a kind of accounting procedure, accomplished according to the occasional event needs of those with access to media” (p. 101). The news does not reflect the 'real world', it-reflects but rather the practices of those with the power to determine the experience of others. They advocated a study of the media based around the event, and methods through which those with access determine the process. The idea is to understand the process of determining one reality over another.

Fishman (1988) was concerned with the “process by which a special reality is socially constructed: the public reality of mass media news” (p. 129). He lays out how themes are created and established in a media organisation when journalists consistently follow them, reconfirming an original news judgement. Through his case study he showed that the news organisation promotes internal consensus by following the theme, building on its form and judgement; news organises and presents the world around us because the media constructs something in society, as well as in our minds: “news creates the environment it reports. The consequences of news *are* more news” (Ibid., p. 200). The contestation is that news is not distorting or reflecting reality, because realities are made, – and news is part of the system that creates it. Fishman’s work sheds light on the issue of whom exactly the journalist is writing for. In establishing the idea of journalists following a theme, he highlights the proximity of the journalist to the media system in which news is constructed. In the context of a small state, this could be an important element to consider.

Having noted that news is created, as opposed to selected, and that it is the product of the methods journalists employ, their routine is consequently central to this study. Fishman (1988) elucidates that the journalist must write something every day and that the beat is a routinized solution to the collection of news. He introduced what he called the bureaucratic foundation of news exposure: that the reporter is regularly exposed to other journalists' view of society, in a bureaucratic setting, and this is the basis on which they are able to detect events. This perspective provides journalists with a map of relevant experts from whom to acquire knowledge and topics of newsworthy happenings.

While this is important, because the journalist is under pressure to produce on a daily basis and bureaucratic self-reporting assures production, this way of thinking does have its limitations. It supposes a structured and multi-tiered complex organisation, an organisation that would be prevalent in a large, highly populated society. It does not consider how small organisations operate in small states and does not consider the need for the journalist to multi-task. As important as the bureaucratic aspect may be, it lacks understanding of the way relationships are created with the source and how elements of proximity will nuance the way a journalist constructs the news.

1.2.3 Tuchman and frames

Fishman's (1998) thinking is resonant of Tuchman's (1978), who looked at news as a frame for how news and journalists combine. In a similar way to Breed (1955), her work concentrated on news organisations as complex structures, which are subject to inevitable processes by news workers and concerned professionals. By seeking to disseminate information that people want, need and should know, news organisations circulate and shape knowledge (Tuchman, 1978). She noted that news is an institutional method of making information available to consumers and that it is an institutional ally of legitimated institutions.

Accordingly, she holds that news is the product of a social institution and is embedded in relationships with other institutions, thereby proposing a theoretical framework of news as a social construction and a social resource.

She concluded that, through routine practices the claims of professionals to arbitrate knowledge and to present factual accounts, news legitimates the status quo. Tuchman (1978) saw that news procedures are neither contemplative nor geared towards determining essence. She postulates that, where facts are embedded in the process of verification and replication of science, news verification of facts is, contrastingly, considered a political and a professional accomplishment. She identifies journalists as professionals who determine facts and frame events: “The idea of news as a frame is directly related to the concept of news as an interaction between the individuals and the world, since the journalist selects which details he will include, and hence exclude, from the story” (p. 32). She goes on to make the point that news and sources construct each other and her explanation of the construction of news is tied to the idea of a professional journalist. The problem with this approach is that it blinds us to the plethora of journalists from disparate backgrounds. Tuchman’s (1978) explanation holds in a society that has a platform to train and produce professional journalists but what happens when a state does not have the resources or institutions to create professional journalism? This exception is not addressed by Tuchman.

1.2.4 Gans, and the power of the organisation

Tied to this, Gans (2004) reported on the roles that information sources, audiences and people who exert pressure to censor the news play in the total process, as well as on commercial and other considerations stemming from the fact that journalists work for news organisations and news firms. He moved into how the selection of stories is routinised, broadly breaking it down into two spheres. The first connects story selection with forces inside the organisation. In this sphere he submits a number of theories. One theory is journalist-centred, which argues that the story is shaped by the professionalism and judgements of journalists. Another locates the routinisation in the news organisation and shows how story selection is influenced by organisational requirements. A third is event-centred, the so-called mirror theory, which proposes that events determine story selection, with journalists simply holding up a mirror and reflecting them to the audience.

The second sphere is a set of theories that align story selection with forces beyond the news organisation. Gans noted this type of externally centred theory, which suggests that the news is shaped by the sources on which the journalist relies:

Information [is what] is transmitted from source to audiences, with journalists – who are employees of bureaucratic, commercial organisations and members of a profession – summarising, refining and altering what becomes available to them from sources to make the information suitable for their audience (Gans, 2004, p. 80).

To him, sources are the actors from whom our journalists obtain information, and represent organisations and larger sections of society, with the transmission of information from source to audience being non-linear and somewhat circular.

Gans (2004) argues that the journalist's role is constructor of nation and society, and manager of the symbolic arena. It follows that the most important purpose of the news is to provide this symbolic arena and supply citizens with comprehensive images of nation and society. Interestingly, he stated that news may be too important to leave to the journalist alone, despite their claims that they should retain sole responsibility over the news. His point is that freedom of the press can only exist if the journalist is detached from the political process and free to decide what news is. This presents an important caveat. In reality, in some media systems, journalists are not detached, which would mean advocacy of one type of politics over another. News has political implications and journalists construct the news in response to the power (political, social, commercial) the source can harness, thus making them part of the political process, too. Does Gans' thinking imply journalists who are politically attached and advocative are not free?

The issue with Gans' approach (2004) is that his starting point excludes the journalist; he does not account for societies, more polarised societies, where the beginning of news construction is the journalist. He believes that to understand how the news is selected one must study how the journalist reports and writes their stories; he also notes that journalists are the product of economic, political and cultural forces external to the organisation they work for. His emphasis is on an unknowing collusion, but he ignores the willingness with which some journalists collude, and assigns authority in the construction of news not to the journalist, editor or owner, but to the process through which all parties and routines pass in the creation of news.

Epstein (1974), stated that what we see on TV is not reality: "what is reflected on television as natural news depends, unlike a mirror, on certain pre-decisions about where camera crews and correspondents will be assigned" (p.16). His view centres on the news company and what it has to do to stay in business. As a result, he believed that news favours the established social order. Similar to Gans (2004), Epstein argues that news is the result of a

process within an organisation which has existing routines, budgets and economic conditions. To Epstein (1974), news is a product of journalistic decisions and business routines; he does not consider the journalist autonomous; she takes the position of the organisation that employs her and does not represent her own values and standards. In this, Epstein (1974) fails to recognise the way in which different social structures in polarised societies can steer a journalist in a particular direction. The problem is, because of the news-making system, the journalist cannot show reality as it is. He does allude to the will of the journalist to select and cover news, yet he does not see the journalist's role as a determining factor.

1.2.5 Objectivity

Epstein, Gans, Tuchman and Fishman converge on the routine of objectivity as being a means to construct news. Central is the assertion that journalists construct reality. Fishman's (1988) point is that the process of news production is of the utmost importance because it is the determining factor which grants objectivity. He reached this conclusion by focusing on the work routine that the journalist adopts. He asserts that the traditional approach has been selectivity of news. By emphasising news-making, the whole concept of construction of reality can be understood. A person cannot reproduce a reality he observes because acquisition of knowledge is not passive but an active event. Fishman's view (1988) is that, while the journalist as a builder of content shapes the world, it is the routine of news work that enables the journalist to do so – to construct reality. He does not recognise the journalist's will or capacity to choose to report an event – a curious omission, given the need for journalists to be assertive and driven when following a key story. Contrastingly, Epstein's (1974) issue is that because of the news-making system the journalist cannot show reality.

Tuchman (1978) notes that the media cannot present what the public is interested in knowing and, as previously addressed, approaches the concept of construction of reality

through the theory of framing, which is a more active approach. She felt that it is the journalist and the media that create reality. This means that the news does not mirror reality. News construction gives reality to the world but cannot reproduce exactly what has occurred and defines routines as ritual. For her, objectivity is yet another ritual. Fishman (1988) goes one step further: starting with the premise that the story is always distorted, he is interested in understanding the process from which this distortion results. This position counters the classic theory of objectivity: that it lies within the journalist and not within the organisational routines (Green Gonzalez, 2017). If this is truly the case, then a clear understanding of the level of advocacy prevalent in the journalist becomes critical to understanding the very possibility of objectivity.

1.2.6 Framing vs bias

Epstein, Gans, Tuchman, Fishman, and Molotch and Lester assume that the character of those involved in news production will influence content, a hypothesis which sits well with journalistic mythology and opposes the notion of organisational and technological determinism (McQuail, 2010). Journalists are subtly or implicitly nudged to change the editorial line or modify components of news coverage. Answering this concern, Schudson (2011) moves away from the idea that the presentation of news events is journalist-driven and instead highlights the professional structure of newsrooms and the necessary compression of events in their output. He argues that these elements, built into the structures and routines of news gathering, contribute to the skewing of objective fact, and labels the phenomenon ‘socially organised distortion’. He highlights the issue of “bias” in this context, implying that editors and reporters do understand what the real event looks like but can colour it to advance an economic or ideological agenda. Like Tuchman (1978), Schudson posits that ‘bias’ should be more appropriately referred to as ‘framing’. In this, they seem to converge on the meaning of frames

in the media as being “principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters” (Gitlin, 1980, p. 6).

To acknowledge that news stories simply *frame* reality is to also accept that it is humanly impossible for individual journalists to avoid doing so. Analysing ‘framing’ as opposed to ‘bias’ enables researchers to examine unintentional, as well as intentional, selective presentation, which diminishes the extent to which instances of selection can automatically be taken as evidence of deceit. This approach is best suited to the study of news construction in a polarised state. Looking at a number of news institutions, Schudson (2011) asserts that journalists consider it their duty to inform the public rather than run a party line or write what their employer desires them to. He does not label the press agents of those who exercise political and economic power, thus overriding the distinction between the media in liberal societies and polarised pluralist ones, the latter an environment where the press is transparently partisan and thus legitimate in presenting news stories from a particular angle.

Ultimately, an emphasis on framing reveals that decisions taken in the construction of news are tied to the market, the nature of an organisation and the assumptions of news professionals, as opposed to the oversimplified concept of bias. To Schudson (2011), media bias derives not from intentional ideological perversion but from professional achievements within the constraints of organisational routines and pressures. These routines produce skewed perspectives regardless of media ownership or the politics of individual reporters. A news organisation’s routines will dampen the framing choices of individual journalists, but Schudson does not explore the potential reluctance of an organisation to impede or undermine their reporters. His research does not explore the robust stance a journalist could take against organisational leadership, nor the significant agency political parallelism already offers her.

1.2.7 Entman’s cascade activation model

A dependence on routines would undermine the chain of decision-making by executives and journalists before and after the event, where the dependence of journalists on elites helps perpetuate the status quo (Entman, 1989). Here, elites and journalists vie for control of the news: the elites have the information and the journalists have the vehicle to provide the publicity needed for it. Short of the ideal, an effective citizen must at least possess some basic knowledge about political leaders and vote using that knowledge, but this does not seem to happen (Entman, 1989). The result is that the citizen's lack of knowledge stalls improvements in journalism and renders politics less representative. "Journalism falls far short of the free press ideal; too much of the public remains ignorant and disconnected from politics; elites compulsively and often successfully manage the news to foil accountability" (p. 29). Entman (1989) describes how the failure to recognise the interdependence of the media, elites and audiences results in heated accusations of bias when discoursing on the political influence of the press. The same author (2004) states that communication scholars have developed approaches to understanding the media which perceive it to be subservient to government, and use the cascading activation model to help explain how thoroughly the thoughts and feelings that support a frame extend down from the government to the rest of the system. The consequence of his focus on an American Liberal media system is that he does not account for a population that is well-versed in the political landscape, or the effect of this on the ways news is communicated. What happens when a population understands how the messages are framed? This question must be further explored.

The model assumes that spreading activation of thoughts or nodes in a knowledge network of someone's mind parallels the way ideas travel along interpersonal networks, as well as in the spread of framing words and images across the different media. This activation occurs on all levels of a system. That is, the activation of thoughts of journalists and leaders creates discussions that disperse ideas between participants. The more often journalists hear these

thoughts from their sources, the more likely their own thoughts will feature words and visuals that confirm the same framing. On the other hand, the more varied the ideas, the less one-sided the framing will be. Entman (2004) uses the metaphor of cascade to emphasise that the ability to promote the spread of frames is stratified. Some actors have more power than others to push ideas to news organisations and, thus, the public. Nevertheless, this model is centred away from the journalist, focusing instead on political or economic spheres of influence, and it assumes the journalist is not functioning in an advocative environment. We must consider what happens when the journalist is determined in her own political outlook.

1.2.8 The ethnographic work

The ethnographic work presented thus far develops the interest in the organisational, bureaucratic and professional nature of news production and news construction, and how it ties to the concept of objectivity. It shows that news is subject to routines, news organisation structure and professional culture; it is an organisational accomplishment that guarantees stories are produced on time, in sufficient quantity and in an acceptable format. These organisational and bureaucratic obligations also help to account for the unconscious role played by journalists in the construction of news – the researchers did observe the pursuit of professional values, but the necessity of fulfilling the routine is foregrounded and made the explanatory key. From this emanates that “objectivity is the most important professional norm, and from it flows more specific aspects of news professionalism such as news judgement, the selection of sources and the structure of news beats.” (Soloski, 1989 p. 213). In essence, these studies assert that the organisational requirements of news, combined with professional ideology of objectivity, routinely privilege the voices of the powerful (Davies, 2007; Curran & Seaton, 2018).

With the exception of Schudson, the researchers also note that reality consists of external facts and events, which exist independent from the journalist's judgements of them. Fishman's premise was that news stories inevitably distort reality, so he was interested in uncovering the procedures that allow this distortion to happen. In this way, the journalist and the news organisation make use of objectivity to construct a model of society as they see fit. These mass media sociologists agree that the nature of truth, impartiality, fairness, credibility, accuracy and detachment have been scrutinized because they are a practical necessity for journalists in their quest to guarantee objectivity in the news. This is the context in which the American media model of the news-making process needs to be understood – a context that will help frame the ways news is constructed within the small state of Malta.

This issue becomes increasingly important when we consider that Sammut (2007) argues that the Maltese media system is in transition. She states that it is moving away, to some degree, from its polarised political system, and becoming more influenced by a professional culture and market influences. Is she stating that news in Malta is becoming more routine-based and objective; of transitioning towards the American Liberal media model and away from a polarised and advocative form of news construction? We shall investigate this further.

Thus far we have looked at a framework, provided by a number of American news media scholars, to build our understanding of the construction of news, acknowledging that this is the framework Sammut (2007) sees Malta heading towards. The next section will position Malta in a regional context to understand how, as a small state, it fits within the broader debate of comparative media systems. We shall question where Malta sits within the media systems described in the existing literature, then move on to explore Malta's idiosyncrasies as a small state and the way in which they affect how its news is constructed and defined.

1.3 Identifying the media system

1.3.1 Comparative media systems

Elvestad & Philips identify a tradition which could better resemble and provide more insights into Malta than the American model. They emphasise the significance of advocacy journalism rather than neutrality, and the identification of the power of polarisation within a society is strikingly different from what one might expect from the cascade theory of Entman.

[A] Southern European media organisation is quite unlike that of Nordic countries even though they mostly have systems of proportional representation. In Southern Europe, the ‘polarised pluralist’ system is based on political parallelism and media represent differing political positions from which they argue a case rather than report it (Elvestad & Philips, 2018, p. 3).

Geographically, Malta forms part of the Mediterranean or ‘Polarised Pluralist’ system presented in a number of studies (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Esser & Umbricht, 2013). These states exhibit a unifying factor of political parallelism, where a significant level of integration exists between the media and government.

To elucidate the construction of news in Malta, a comprehension of the Southern European model is therefore required. It has also been argued that there must be recognition of the small-state perspective when trying to understand how media and news organisations operate in small countries (Mancini, 2009). The pertinence of a country’s size in shaping news, as well as the influence of regional dynamics on its media and culture from neighbouring larger states, must therefore be considered (Puppis, d’Haenens, Steinmauer, & Kunzler, 2009). This means that understanding the small state would require a convergence of a Hallin and Mancini

(2004) typology with a small-state perspective. Thus, we shall adopt a two-stage approach: first, exploring the Polarised Pluralist media system to help understand its relevance to Malta; subsequently, tackling the issue of size to help grasp the complexity that size brings to the construction of news specifically in Malta's case.

1.3.2 Malta in a Mediterranean media System

Hallin and Mancini's (2004) work is informed by history and, to create a lucid understanding of news construction in Malta, an examination of the roots of this approach to news scholarship is essential; indeed, it will be further addressed further in chapter three. Yet within their history-informed approach, Hallin and Mancini do not draw on historical institutionalism (HI). This is pivotal because an HI framework categorises institutions as being composed of "norms, informal rules and procedures, as well as formal rules and structures, as crucially important in explaining political outcomes" (Gibbons & Humphreys, 2012, p.16). Past policy has an enduring and largely determining influence on future decisions. In this way, historically rooted institutional characteristics explain the persistence of national idiosyncrasies: "when change does occur, such as under the force of powerful exogenous pressures like technological change and internationalising markets ('globalisation'), HI predicts that the reforms will follow characteristic national paths" (ibid., p.16). This thesis can perhaps help us to understand the anomalous presence of politically owned media organisations in Malta.

Humphreys (2012) suggests that the unique political and cultural features of a country can explain enduring differences between media systems, and a comprehensive case study allows him to capture the context and complexities of each country. He notes that Hallin and Mancini do not afford detailed attention to factors that could change the nature of a media-politics relationship rooted in historical development. They also treat the late democratisation of polarised pluralism as having left its mark on this system. Humphreys' concern is that in

these conclusions there exists a degree of stereotyping, and he questions a Mediterranean model of democracy which is based on cultural, social, economic and historical developmentalist similarities. Indeed, generalisation is problematic: Spanish and Greek post-dictatorship democracies, for example, featured single-party control of public broadcasting, while in Italy's case authority was subsequently shared between the Christian democrats, Socialists and Communists through its system of *lottizzazione*. This demonstrates that even in scholastic work there can be an element of framing – conclusions depend on a researcher's choice of evidence.. Humphreys (2012) points out that if Hallin and Mancini had used centralised and decentralised variables in their 2004 research their results would have been different.

While most states have political interest in news organisations, more often than not the relationship is tangential and indirect (Hanitzsch, et al., 2010). In Malta the issue is that political party ownership of news organisations entails a particular permutation of the news. It is taken for granted that politically owned news organisations espouse specific political views and agendas. Sammut goes as far as to state: “in Malta, ownership structures largely influence media practice [...] [to the extent] that stations suffer financial loss in order to suit the interests of the political elite” (Sammut, 2007, p.79). Her case study demonstrates that ownership structures and their goals override a principled treatment of news' value or journalistic ideals, even in the case of non-partisan press.

In the Maltese media system, it is understood that when you engage with the political media you engage with a party-political frame and slant (Sammut, 2009). Historically, in some states of the region, the public have only trusted their party-political press, but commercialisation has changed this by replacing party press with independent news organisations (Elvestad & Phillips, 2018). Sammut states that the commercialisation present in the Anglo-American model is not replicated in Malta. “Unlike audience oriented and market driven media elsewhere, Maltese newsrooms still tend to organise their work routines and set

their priorities around the exigencies of political news” (Sammut, 2007, p. 107). The predominant theme through her work is that polarisation overwhelms production process and media content. She argues that advocacy journalism is mainstream in Malta, even when the practitioners are trained to follow a professional paradigm. As a result, journalists have difficulties asserting their independence. Sammut states that this occurs to the extent that it is thought impermissible to place personal interests before party affiliation, with the result that journalists often find it easier to choose sides. This final point is pivotal in that it indicates a loss of journalistic autonomy.

On the other hand, she also suggests that the light presence of corporate interests makes Maltese media less susceptible to hidden commercial agendas. As a result of Malta’s media system being more transparent, the public may also attain a higher level of media competence in order to decipher political agendas: “One of the positive qualities of the Maltese system is that media outlets openly scrutinise and decipher each other’s hidden agendas, enabling citizens to look at various perspectives, make out strategies and unpack subtle spin” (Ibid., p. 246). While the Maltese accept news organisations within the media systems as prime social movers, they receive media messages with a critical eye.

While Sammut believes that the liberal pluralist vision of mass media has failed in Malta, she also states that there are strong undercurrents of a desire for less confrontation and more cohesion on matters of national interest: “Following the referendum, the polarised spirit became less intoxicating and it dawned on Maltese politicians that local divisions may constitute a serious setback if allowed to eclipse Malta’s participation in European fora” (Ibid., p. 179). She submits that Malta is moving towards an American Liberal media model through its commercialisation, which she views as becoming the dominant paradigm over political partisanship and polarisation. Yet, twelve years after her thesis was published, it is not clear that this is indeed the case. Superficial evidence indicates that the political media has retained

its role as a form of rallying service to the political parties. It therefore becomes essential to consider whether Malta has moved towards a more liberal pluralist American model of news media.

Sammut (2007) also notes that the main distinguishing factor between the radio and television stations owned by political parties (Labour and Nationalist parties) and privately-owned news organisations is the language spoken. Politically affiliated news is presented in Maltese; privately produced news is presented in English – a reflection of the country's colonial past (Frendo, 2004). This historic precedent is understood by the Maltese to reflect the type of frame they can expect from a news organisation. Today, English- language media in Malta is likely to frame its news with a pro-opposition Nationalist (PN) slant, a stance with historical roots (Sammut, 2007).

We should also note that the Maltese political stations are different from those in Italy, the *lottizzazione*, where the state broadcaster operates three channels, each representing a different political viewpoint. In Malta, political channels are fully owned by individual political parties.

Sammut highlights Malta's commonalities with other countries that sit within the Hallin and Mancini's Polarised Pluralist system (2004), but this does not make it a neat fit. Yes, Malta may be experiencing a decline in newspaper circulation, but it has always published a high number of daily and weekly newspapers (Borg, 2009) and we will further show that Maltese consumption of online news is significant (Eurobarometer, 2019). With this in mind, online publications will be included in our assessment of contemporary Malta's media engagement and landscape. This medium is not covered by Hallin's and Mancini's work (2004). Perhaps, this is because when their research was published, digital news consumption was not globally prevalent.

This lack of fit can also be recognised by the present situation in that Malta provides no state subsidy for private media and limits on ownership are negligible. In this regard, Hallin and Mancini (2004) consider a system which can create consternation about the way news organisations fall under the influence of the state. We must, however, also question the role of the state as a financial backer of news organisations, albeit at arm's length, as argued by Pickard (2019). He would posit that the Maltese government is obliged to support news organisations, even financially. This monetary reliance may be deemed acceptable when we consider that the Maltese population exercises a considerable awareness of media ownership, as well as its resulting influence over news output (Sammut, 2007).

These are not the sole elements sitting uncomfortably within the received model, and so moves us to question the force and nature of Malta's political parallelism within news journalism.

1.3.3 Political parallelism

The literature elaborates on the region's political parallelism as being one of the defining factors of a Polarised Pluralist system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Hardy, 2012; Esser & Umbricht, 2013). In some instances, state-owned electronic media, radio and television are seen as extensions or mouthpieces of the state (Lloyd, 2017). For example, in Italy, media executives are regularly hired to represent political interests within RAI (Economist, 2015). In Malta, Sammut (2007) notes that this is the case at the *TVM* network, where journalists are often hired specifically because of their political slant.

The presence of political parallelism is also tied to the existence of a high amount of clientelism in these Mediterranean states (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Clientelism affects news content and turns it into a means of negotiation, pushing the journalist to create a logic – distinct from the journalistic logic – that looks towards privilege and party politics (Hallin &

Papathanassopoulos, 2002). In Malta, this leads journalists to treat their profession as passage to a career in politics, or as a platform from which to gain further cultural capital (Sammut, 2007), as evidenced by the number of Maltese politicians who come from a media background. This is fundamental, as it sheds light on the engrained relationships between editorial staff and the political class; no assessment of the Maltese media system can be made until consideration is given to the closeness, or proximity, between the two parts.

This further enhances the level of polarisation that exists in the country. Politics in Malta is a tool, an instrument, used to build cultural, commercial and social capital (Sammut, 2007). It infiltrates all strata of society and has become a way of creating self-identity. The literature shows that while political parallelism is present in the region, in Malta it is a way of life (Borg et al, 2007). Given that the news media in Malta is a political instrument, we should question if this happens through state intervention or through political intervention by the two main parties. The institutional ownership of the news organisation is the determining factor in the instrumentalization of news media for political ends (Sammut, 2007). We need to understand, twelve years on from Sammut's work, whether institutional ownership and media instrumentalisation are still central to the construction of news in this small state.

1.3.5 Malta's fit

It would seem Malta is a highly polarised society and has significantly high levels of political parallelism (Sammut, 2009). Commercial media developed late, it became an independent state fairly recently in the sixties, and there is limited professional training for journalists (Sammut, 2007). All this ties with Hallin and Mancini's (2004) description of a Polarised Pluralist system. The latter model seems to better resemble the Maltese experience than the American media model. Key aspects resonate with the Maltese case, namely its stresses on advocacy and polarisation. Nonetheless, there are also differences between these countries and Malta. Its population has a high ability in distinguishing political text (Sammut,

2007). It has a PBS which is highly monitored legislatively and politically (Borg, 2009). The level of state intervention is unclear, as is the level of external pluralism. The same can be said for the level of internal pluralism existing within news organisations in this country.

These factors need to be examined further to establish which among them distinguish Malta from other states in the region. For example, size matters, but this variable is often skirted in the literature, as noted by Hallin (2009). Notably, in Hallin and Mancini's earlier work (2004) they, too, circumvent the issue of federalism on the one hand and state size on the other. The Maltese system has heretofore been understood within its geographic position, but its individual scale is similarly fundamental. In order to understand how Maltese news is constructed, one should acknowledge the professional and social dynamics the country's size fosters within its media industry. We shall continue to investigate how the literature addresses this issue and its potential implications.

1.4 The issue of size

1.4.1 The distinctiveness of the small state

Small states have almost completely disappeared from the research agenda, as has the issue of size as a determinant in frameworks analysing North America and Western Europe (Jones, 2014). But small states have peculiarities that affect their media landscape and ultimately have consequences on the construction of news. Small states are susceptible to the political decisions of bigger states.

Malta's small media system is thus more likely to conform to foreign media (Sammut, 2007). However, the Maltese language, to some degree, shields it from foreign influence; while small states are said to tend towards an interventionist approach, Malta, with an exclusive language, is less vulnerable and less exposed to competition from abroad (Sammut, 2007). As a result, though Malta has giant neighbours with foreign channels, it is still able to sustain its own media system. This could be an important element to consider when accounting for diversity of news in the Maltese media system. This having been established, we can now move on to discuss some of the additional elements Puppis (2009) and Trappel (2014) present as distinguishing factors of small states, and how they relate to the construction of news in Malta.

1.4.2. Shortage of resources

Trappel (2014) maintains that small states suffer from a shortage of resources through the so-called brain drain of journalists and content creators. To a certain extent, this may be true. However, Trappel also disregards the reality that the skills most journalists develop are relevant to their cultural conditions; we cannot presume that the journalist's competencies will travel well from a small state to a larger neighbouring country or market. Likewise, while quality journalism may suffer in a small media market, so do expectations of the audience – expectation may also be tapered.

Trappel (2014) also writes about the influence of an influx of foreign talent into a small market and its potential impact on that market. This thinking may not be applicable in the case of Malta, which does not have a tradition of foreign participation in the news media market (Borg, 2009). The primary reasons behind this are the language barrier, and a lack of understanding about the country's local political environment and size. This indicates that a grasp on Malta's political environment is crucial to understand how its news is constructed.

So, while market size in small states limits the number of competing media firms, the presence of advocacy journalism and a polarised society could actually stimulate a strong and robust news and media industry. Could it be that polarisation in Malta is creating a demand for more political news? This will be explored further. But first, we should move on to understand the way market conditions are influenced by size.

1.4.3. Market conditions

Trappel (2014) emphasises that the market adapts to the size and volume of its audience, that quality and diversity of opinion are significantly impacted by a diminutive state size, and that limited market competition is a major problem for small states. In small states, the shift towards market competition that EU policy guidelines provoke creates problems, primarily caused by the free movement of goods and individuals.

The role of the media as watchdog requires an independent media in economic and ideological terms, as well as skilled journalists who are able to obtain information from diverse sources (Bennet, 2016). In the case of small states there is a limited pool of resources to achieve this, given the complexity of the task to hold power to account (Trappel, 2014). Larger states, such as Spain and France have greater resources available and a strong professional commitment. Maltese news organisations should be examined with this in mind.

Key to the discussion of market conditions in small states – a factor curiously neglected in the literature – is proximity. In a small market, journalists' relationships with their sources are built differently from those in a larger market (Balcytiene, 2009). In a smaller country, there are typically a limited number of sources available to journalists for comment on a particular political or economic matter (Balcytiene, 2009). Even beyond the implications of a close dynamic between journalist and source, the very nature of a small state means that the journalist is constantly working around a society in which she is closely integrated. This could influence the journalist in a number of ways. Proximity can lead news to be constructed around

issues that are irrelevant to the story, and which are influenced by the personal background of both the source and the journalist.

1.4.5. Advantages of the small state

Most of the literature expounds the disadvantages of small states. However, Jones (2014) writes that there is growing recognition that small states do possess certain advantages over their larger neighbours. While small states may lack the confidence that larger, more powerful states have, this lack of assurance makes them more willing to question “the received wisdoms of globalisation and hegemony of the superpower” (Jones, 2014, p. 7). They seem more able to create alternative models and *modi operandi*. As Hjort and Petrie put it, “the citizen of a small state has a better possibility to influence decision making than a citizen in a large state” (Hjort & Petri, 2007, p. 7). In her 2007 thesis, Sammut indeed suggests that this is the case in Malta. It would be useful to conclude whether this is still true today, and would confirm a clear advantage of being a small state.

Newbigin (2014) proffers other advantages that small nations may have. In Europe, economies grown from heavy industry and mass production are being replaced by a new model of intangibles, such as knowledge, data and software; skills that are crucial to the construction of news. Newbigin (2014) points out that in this new and creative economy, small states are leading the way. As a result of their limited resources they are compelled to be more innovative, and their small scale streamlines the development and implementation of new policies. Furthermore, they are more likely to have the agility and ability to respond to changing market conditions. Newbigin’s (2014) view is that being a sizeable state is no longer automatically beneficial. Does this small-state advantage apply to the construction of news? This is another significant proposition which should be elaborated upon.

Puppis et al. (2009) argue that the small-state perspective remains useful when analysing media systems and regulation. They note that it must take political tradition into

account, too. In this way, traditional models of media systems must be amended to include notions of smallness. Yet, while smallness remains significant, can it alone explain media regulation or systems?

Trappel (2014) notes that there is little comparative analysis on how small nations are portrayed, which can be a useful way to reveal patterns in how small nations are represented. It is therefore sensible to briefly compare the media system of Malta to that of another small state, in order to understand the divergences, patterns and similarities, as discussed above, that state size creates. Could size be a determining factor in how news is constructed?

1.4.6. A small state to the North

Comparing the Maltese media system to that of another state with a similar population size reveals a number of issues that undermine the application of existing theses to small states. This research examines the similarities and differences between Maltese news reporting and that in Iceland . Like Malta, Iceland is often missing from comparative work in media and communication studies, which further limits our understanding of news construction in these states. One reason for this is that journalism, media and communication studies are generally under-researched in Iceland, as is equally the case in Malta (Sammut, 2007).

Malta and Iceland sit at extreme ends of population density. The former has a population of 3.2 people per square kilometre, the lowest globally; with the exception of city states, Malta is contrastingly the most densely populated country in Europe, home to 1,400 people per square kilometre (Marian, 2021).

The Icelandic media system is often grouped with other Nordic countries, but it is also distinct from them in that while moving towards a liberal model, in the past decade partisanship in its press industry has increased (Johannsdottir & Olafsson, 2018).

Newspaper readership is high, as is circulation, but numbers are declining (Johannsdottir & Olafsson, 2018). The share of individuals who read news publications, however, is still exceptionally high, at 95% compared to 83% in Malta (Share of individuals reading news online, 2021). This indicates that both countries' populations are significantly engaged in the consumption of news. In terms of digital platforms, Iceland benefits from having two online news websites primarily owned by journalists, a situation which is beginning to emerge in Malta with the launch of journalist-run publications *The Shift* and *LovinMalta*.

One major discrepancy between the two states, however, is evident when we consider the revenue they gather through media and entertainment. Between 1975 and 2019, Iceland generated €366.4 million; the figure in Malta was just €104.2 million.

Johannsdottir and Olafsson (2018) note that the clutch of political parties started to subside in Iceland in the late twentieth century, with the last political party newspaper ceasing publication in 1997. Yet there still remains a high supply of all forms of media. The authors state that the quantity and diversity of media presence in Iceland is greater than would be expected in a country of its size. Does Malta mirror this high concentration of media relative to population, thus differing from what is witnessed elsewhere in the Southern European system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004)? This chapter shall establish this as the case. Iceland and Malta, a pair of small states, do not always exhibit the behaviours and conditions we would expect in a restricted market with restricted resources. These observations do not feature in the existing literature.

Corporatism is less developed in Iceland than in other Nordic countries, and any state intervention there has been limited to Public Service Broadcasting. All other media is built on commercial foundations (Gudmundsson, 2016). The press does not receive any direct subsidies and government aid is not available to newspapers (Johannsdottir & Olafsson, 2018). In this way, Iceland is dissimilar to the Nordic states but aligned precisely with Malta (Borg, 2009).

Past opinion in Iceland has been that the private media should not be funded, but this is changing. Since 2016, there has been a rise in support for some form of public aid to secure the future of independent, quality journalism (Gudmundsson & Kristinsson, 2017).

Iceland still possesses deep-rooted dynamics between political parties and traditional media, with politicians distrusting the impartiality of the news media (Johannsdottir & Olafsson, 2018). It has a history of state intervention in the economy, just as the states in the polarised pluralist model of Southern Europe do. In Public Service Broadcasting in Nordic states, there is separation between institutions and political powers to varying degrees (Nord, 2008), but this is not the case in Iceland, where RUV, the public broadcasting service, enjoys less institutional autonomy than public broadcasting service in Nordic countries, and has also been subject to political interference (Johannsdottir & Olafsson, 2018). We shall confirm if this is also the case in the Maltese PBS, which has historically also suffered from politically motivated interference (Borg, 2009). Party patronage in Iceland shows attempts by political parties to gain control over not just the PBS, but also other private media companies (Kristinsson, 2012). In both countries, the media is seen as having great politically strategic importance.

A high degree of professionalism is characteristic of the democratic corporatist and liberal models (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Professionalism in Iceland developed later than in Nordic countries, the cause mainly rooted in the stronghold of the political press, “which meant that politics and political views were an important indicator of a person’s ability to work in the media, whilst professionalism was not held in particularly high regard in the field” (Johannsdottir & Olafsson, 2018, p. 200). The reason behind this is that journalists in small media systems are deemed less autonomous than their counterparts in larger countries (Puppis, 2009). This is particularly prevalent in the Maltese media system, where party loyalty is still seen as decisive in recruitment at most news organisations (Sammut, 2007). Smaller audiences

and markets translate into fewer job opportunities, creating a need for political affiliation to enter this particularly polarised job market. In small states, journalists are very rarely specialists, making them more dependent on sources and their agendas, and the competitive job market can also make them less inclined to resist commercial and political pressures.

Iceland is different from other Nordic countries and is described as a hybrid of the three systems identified by Hallin and Mancini (2004), though not necessarily a combination of their best features (Johannsdottir & Olafsson, 2018). It is portrayed as a highly commercial media system with less developed professional journalism. It does not have a public service requirement or public support of the private media, which is characteristic of democratic corporatist countries. Iceland's PBS is less sheltered from political forces than other Nordic countries. The issue is that the smallness of size creates anomalies that separate these states from the media system models that prevail in larger states and in their geographic region. The political parallelism present in Iceland is a distinguishing factor in distancing it from other Nordic states.

There is little doubt that both Malta and Iceland have structural ties between media and political organisations, and strong political affiliation of journalists, owners and media managers. In Malta, media content is politically framed, and news consumption patterns show party affiliation determines this (Sammut, 2007). The untidy fit of the two countries within existing media models needs to be further evaluated. With this in mind, we can turn to Bruggermann et al. (2014), who produced four clusters of media systems instead of three, naming the fourth the Central Cluster, which encompasses Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Britain. What sets the Central Cluster apart is its absence of press subsidies.

Bruggermann et al. also note that the existing literature, in part, misunderstands the Southern European system, probably reflecting the dominant role of Northern European researchers. The argument is that this demonstrates that any media system classification needs to be considered

to develop over time: “this remains one of the domains where qualitative in-depth case studies of single or a small number of countries should be conducted. Especially those countries that are in the process of shifting their alignment to another type of media system and should be of special interest for this kind of study that could explain the how and why of these shifts” (Bruggermann et al., 2014, p. 1062). We shall investigate whether it is time to reconsider the understanding of media systems and the small state, questioning whether size directs these systems to create a separate hybrid model.

1.5 Conclusions

The literature advances a professional model that sets out to understand the business of news, examining the construction of news at an organisational, cultural and a journalistic level. We have found that it also advances a polarised advocacy-based system and have looked at the way a Polarised Pluralist system operates, thus helping us to understand the Mediterranean region. This has been useful, since it assists in explaining how regional politics and media systems come into play in the way news is constructed and how this applies to Malta.

The literature depicts advocacy journalism as one of the defining factors in a Polarised Pluralist system and questions its function in a truly democratic society. We are led to understand that the media system in Malta is turning towards a more liberal-based system, away from the prevalent advocacy that existed in 2007. The small-state experience also emerges in the literature, offering insights into the nuances of the small state and how media systems should be understood relative to a country's size. The comparison with Iceland shows that small states do not necessarily fit within their regional systems, and that there are important differences between the small state and its larger neighbours.

The existing paradigms may not adequately fit Malta. The country does not benefit the American media model, nor the Hallin and Mancini models. Essentially, the Hallin and Mancini (2004) argument is that different types of political organisation give rise to different forms of journalism. For example, a clientelist state in a polarised society gives rise to advocacy journalism, but this theory is complicated by the potential for different kinds of advocacy journalism. We must question Malta's place in the small state model, as the literature foregrounds the issue of limited resources but barely touches on proximity. These variables must be scrutinised further in the case of Malta, alongside whether Sammut's (2007) argument

still holds that Malta will become less polarised over time. We shall also ask, twelve years on from Sammut's 2007 thesis, if the Maltese media system has radically changed.

This leads us to restructure and tighten our research question in the following way: "what drives the construction of news in a small polarised state?" The literature reviewed suggests the need to refine this question by exploring specific areas which can reveal the key components of the construction of news in Malta. We shall further investigate the role proximity plays in news construction in a small state, and question the participation of the journalist, their level of agency, and, crucially, what role advocacy plays in their work. Finally, we must deliberate whether it is time to reconsider our understanding of media systems and the small state, and question whether disparate size requires a separate hybrid model. Could this lead to a hybrid form of system that collects elements from other classifications, as described by Hallin and Mancini (2004) and Bruggermann et al. (2014)?

Chapter Two

Methodology

2.1 Relating the research question to the research design

Any empirical study aiming to illuminate the relationship between news narratives, the sources that inform them, the news workers who produce them and the structures that own and direct them should adopt a multi-level research design. This enables us to individually examine each tier in this communication process and establish their points of intersection. With this in mind, the design of this research stems from a detailed consideration of the principle question underpinning it, namely: “what drives the construction of news in a small polarised state?” This leads to two different, albeit related, objectives: first, to challenge the hegemony of US-centred accounts of journalism by reflecting on their limited applicability to smaller states; second, to evaluate the model of advocacy journalism in Malta on its own terms, and consider its impact on journalists’ personal politics, as well as that of its citizens.

We seek to elucidate the key elements in the construction of news in a small state, specifically in Malta. Rather than working on the macro level, this research will work through a micro lens, attempting to understand the individuals involved at the different strata of news organisations and how their personal interests interact to influence their news output. The literature review outlined a number of key areas that need to be assessed in order to do this. Of these, the environment within which news is constructed must be understood first.

Curran makes a strong argument for this case: “people have prior values, opinions and understandings, formed by early socialisation, membership of social networks and personal

experience. This influences what they consume; how they interpret information; and what they remember” (Curran, 2018, p. 156). To understand Malta, we shall first establish its media structure, alongside the historical precedents that underpin it. We shall then look at the internal operations of three news organisations, questioning the ownership, organisation, routines and culture of each of these entities, before finally examining the external influences that affect them, including any commercial and political forces at work. The aim is to gain insight into news’ construction in this small state.

2.2 Locating the population

One of the key considerations of this research is the location of the population. Benson (2012) discusses his concerns regarding the US-centric research that dominates the literature, which presumes the inferiority of journalistic practice elsewhere in the world. A reaction to this has been a growing tide of national comparative research to challenge the American-centric model (Curran & Park, 2000; Dons, Bach & Patterson, 2004; Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Downey & Mihelj 2012). Though Hallin and Mancini’s “Comparing Media Systems” (2004) remains essential reading, it is not the last word, and its regional political/journalistic models (North Atlantic Liberal, Southern European Polarised Pluralist and Northern European Democratic Corporatist) do not fully encompass the diversity of global media today (Hanitzsch et al., 2019).

Some researchers reflect on the nature of the Polarised Pluralist model and its alleged applicability to many media systems beyond the Western world; they argue that it is used as a catch-all residual model (ibid., 2012). A related issue is whether the Polarised Pluralist model contains negative normative implications (relative to the two other models) that intimate it is

an inferior or a less “developed” mode (Hallin & Mancini, 2012). Further research is required to challenge this potential prejudice.

With this in mind, the population chosen for study should be located in a state characterised by Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) Southern European Polarised Pluralist model. There is a bias towards the Liberal/North Atlantic model in the literature, revealed by its very limited coverage of smaller states. This makes Malta, a small island state in Southern Europe, a logical choice for the present research. We shall therefore begin by setting out the media system of Malta, which will help contextualise subsequent parts of this thesis.

2.3 Qualitative research

Given that the emphasis of this work will be on investigating news construction, it is necessarily qualitative, giving the researcher scope to draw inferences from individual news items about their underlying intentions or agendas. These inferences will be reached through close reading of the language, headlines, images, and other framing devices used to convey news. We recognise that, until recently, empirical qualitative research has been confined to the margins of academic activity. This practice has been challenged, with media research now opening to more interpretive and contextual methodologies (Richardson, 2007). A qualitative interpretation considers the meanings of texts, rather than simply quantifying textual features and deriving meaning from them. It situates what is written within the context in which it is published and can be used to argue that textual meaning is an interaction between producer, text and consumer. This thesis will employ approaches used by other authors in this field, for example Hansen et al., who tried to “indicate ‘the overall impression’ they got from” (Hansen et al., 1998, p.114) stories about science and technology in the Canadian press.

The favoured method for analysing the wording and projection of individual articles draws heavily from the practice of frame analysis. This technique is exemplified by Gitlin, who focuses on discerning the “principles of selection, emphasis and presentation” (Gitlin, 1980, p. 6) underpinning the construction of texts, and who conceptualises the verb ‘to frame’ as the “the act of selecting and highlighting aspects of a perspective of reality so as to promote a particular interpretation” (Entman, 2012, p. 28). It could be argued this latter definition is especially relevant to the business of deciphering news messaging. Entman underlines this, discussing how “framing in the media can determine how likely people are to notice, understand, react emotionally, remember and alter their evaluative criteria and weight [their] response to unfavourable information about politicians” (ibid., p. 95).

Jensen (2012) also highlights that the last three decades have seen important developments in the field of qualitative research. He states that qualitative communication studies have three common dimensions: a focus on meaning; a belief that communication should be examined, as much as possible, in a naturalistic context; a conception of researchers as interpreters. These dimensions are present and required in this study.

2.4 Case studies

We shall apply qualitative research techniques to our analysis of case studies. This is because taking a case study approach is not so much a methodological decision, but a selection of what is to be studied. Flyvbjerg (2011) discards the idea that a case study approach cannot provide reliable information about a broader area of study and criticises the prohibitive use of case studies as a pilot method considered only suitable for the preparation of “real” studies’ broader surveys and hypothesis testing. Likewise, Yin challenges the idea of the case study

being a weak methodology in the social sciences, arguing that the case study is not just “a data collection tactic” (Yin, 2003, p. 14), but rather a strategy employed “when how or why questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events and when the focus is on contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context” (ibid., p. 1).

Flyvbjerg (2011) also advocates context-dependent education, but states that social science has not succeeded in producing general, context-dependent theory, and thus can only offer *context-independent* knowledge to its students. If people are restricted to context-independent knowledge and rules, they cannot progress beyond the beginner’s level in the learning process. This is the limitation of analytical rationality, and is inadequate for pursuing the best results in the exercise of any profession, such as that of an academic. However, few educational institutions have taken this on board, Harvard university among them. Both teaching and study in professional schools are modelled on the basis that case knowledge is central to human learning (Christensen & Hansen, 1987); the case study approach is especially suited to produce context-dependent learning.

Case studies differ from other forms of research strategy, in that they focus on a bounded case. It is the natural approach to use in this thesis, given our focus on deciphering why members of an organisation act in a certain way. Merriam (1998) states that the defining characteristic of case study research lies in how the case is drawn out: it is a unit, a phenomenon, with defined boundaries. He notes that interviews have been the most common source of data in case studies.

Stake (1995; 2005) views the case study as an interpretive endeavour, and suggests this is its most productive use. His understanding of the role of the scholar is not as a revealer of reality, but rather as a creator of a clearer vision, using explanations and descriptions to elucidate an area of study. He, too, acknowledges that the key factor in case studies is a system of boundaries: “the purpose of case study is not to represent the world, but to represent the case

[...] the utility of case research to practitioners and policy makers is in its extension of experience” (Stake, 1994, p. 245).

Hallin and Mancini (2016) sustain that case studies and field-based methods are often necessary to access certain information or evidence, such as journalistic practices and routines, which cannot easily be studied by quantitative methods, and that they provide a depth of knowledge that is essential to judge the validity of numerous quantitative measurements. Case studies allow the kind of process tracing that is often crucial to establish links between cause and effect, and thus to move beyond a recognition of patterns to understanding their cause (George & Bennet, 2005).

The discourse on case study research by Merriam, Yin and Stake confirms the importance of this strategy in qualitative research. It can “contribute uniquely to our knowledge of individual, organisational, social, and political phenomena” (Yin, 1984, p. 14). In his endorsement of case studies, Flyvbjerg (2001) additionally points out that maintaining contact with the subject of the study and using one’s own experience and intelligence to interpret are requisite. Given this thesis’ author’s background working within news organisations, Flyvbjerg’s view is particularly relevant. The case study encourages and stimulates a creative approach to problem-solving.

Having established the methodological robustness of the case study strategy, an explanation of the research design within each case will follow.

2.4.1 The Cases

The three cases chosen are *Malta Today*, Television Malta (*TVM*) and *Times of Malta*. In terms of ownership, size and output, each organisation brings a different dimension to the discussion. All are national news organisations with websites ranking in the top ten in Malta.

This is significant, as the key area of focus and data capture will be on and from their online content. All three websites are published in English, with *TVM* also offering a Maltese version.

Malta Today is owned by two private individual shareholders, one of whom also fulfils the role of Managing Editor. The pair have divergent political interests. *TVM* is owned by the state and run by a board of directors, whose members are appointed by the two main political parties; the membership balance tends to favour the government of the day. The final choice of directors is approved by Malta's Minister for Justice. *Times of Malta* is owned primarily by a foundation and run by a board of executive and non-executive directors. The foundation and board of directors have commercial and political interests which lie outside the organisation.

The thesis will develop an understanding of each organisation, study the individuals inside it and establish the spheres of influence at work in each case. Being of a qualitative nature, this research does not strive to be representative but will focus on these three news organisations at both the corporate and editorial levels. Their different ownership structures create a spectrum that adds breadth to our findings. The three organisations have been selected specifically for their diverse ownership structure, as well as because, technically, they should produce independent news content. This study will focus primarily on the news-construction elements within these organisations.

2.5 Research design

This research possesses three different instruments in its design which are complementary and converge to create an in-depth understanding of each case. They are: in-depth interviews, the collection of primary data (from financial and credit authorities), and textual analysis. We will set forth the rationale behind the use of each instrument.

2.5.1 Interviews

The first level and primary method of data capture is in-depth interviews, one of the most commonly used methods of data collection in qualitative research, just as it is in journalism (Jensen, 2012). They are considered the instrument of choice for understanding interviewee perspective through the use of everyday conversation. Jensen states that interviews are, in the real sense of the word, data, and “become sources of information through interpretation” (Jensen, 2012, p. 270).

Approaches to questioning in social research range from very structured and standardised to highly non-structured and non-standardised (Deacon et al., 2014). Informal questioning techniques are intended to foster interactive dialogue with interviewees and reflect conversational norms; the interview assumes the form and feel of discussion between peers: loose and informal. While these interactions can be directed or undirected, it can be argued that this organic and responsive approach is fundamental to gaining deeper insights into subtle and complex perceptions and beliefs. An informal questioning approach was adopted in this research precisely because of the need to acquire meaningful insights into what could be a complex understanding of news construction. The intention was that the interviews will allow the researcher to penetrate areas of reality that would otherwise be inaccessible – namely, people’s subjective experiences and attitudes.

2.5.1.1 Selecting participants

This thesis is a qualitative investigation for which sampling was purposeful in nature. The selected group of participants were chosen to constitute a cross-section of roles within the Maltese media industry. Ten individuals from each organisation were chosen to embody three different strata: editorial, management and executive. In each case the intent was to choose two senior individuals from each strata. This was supplemented by four junior members of staff

from the editorial teams, allowing for a more rounded understanding that, while maintaining an emphasis on their editorial workings, would welcome the perspectives of staff at all levels. Through this, we are able to build a representative microcosm of the businesses, shedding scientific light on the decision-making processes within each company. Subsequent to a discussion at the leadership level of each organisation, wherever possible, individuals were chosen randomly from a list supplied by the organisation. It should be noted that in some instances scale of the organisation and simple availability limited the pool to choose from.

As a form of pre-testing, four in-depth interviews were completed with senior-level executives from American and British news organisations prior to undertaking this study.

Initial contact (in person, by phone, or email) was made to establish whether the participant was willing to be interviewed, was available and had the necessary experience to join the study. The interview date, time, and topic were then individually arranged beforehand through a subsequent phone call or email. In this communication, the researcher clarified how long the interview would take and provided contact information in the event the interviewee wished to reschedule or withdraw. This discussion was further used to build a rapport with the interviewee, aimed at securing their confidence. Further to this, interviews were conducted in an environment that was comfortable and convenient for the participant.

Each interview lasted, on average, two and a half hours and included standard cues to ensure a level of uniformity between each organisation. These were supplemented by further questioning in order to throw light on pertinent insights as they arose.

Each of the strata interviewed brought a different dimension to the research design. The executives were able to discuss the commercial and corporate nature of their organisations and shed light on practices in their sales, finance and administrative departments. The aim was to understand the ways in which executive arms of each organisation perform their roles, and whether they have the capacity to impinge on the construction of news.

The senior editorial staff interviewed include masthead or website editors, heads of news and senior journalists. During these conversations, the researcher explored whether journalists enjoy a considerable degree of autonomy and/or whether they are disciplined by routine. Hiring procedures and the criteria behind who the companies employ were also discussed.

The interviews with directors and CEOs intended to illuminate how these individuals perceive their roles, probing in detail their contribution to the running of the organisation and whether it impacts the construction of news. At this level, we explored whether influence is ultimately located within the corporate structure or if it resides beyond the organisation and is then delegated to it. It is believed that the breadth of experience held by this group of interviewees provided a comprehensive view of the structures within each of the three organisations.

This researcher's experience leading media organisations helped inform his interview questions and format, and had the added value of allowing him to review statements made by participants through a professional, as well as an academic, lens. This eighteen years career experience also fostered a peer dynamic between the researcher and his interviewees. The present work therefore introduces a new dimension to existing research, whose authors have frequently worked on the editorial side of news organisations. This researcher's management experience can offer a fresh perspective.

2.5.1.2 Preparing the protocol

Prior to commencing each interview, the researcher outlined the purpose of the study and the steps involved. In particular, the following information was shared:

- a description of the primary and secondary research questions;

- the personnel involved in the study;
- the process being followed by the interviewer;
- the nature of the questions being asked (usually four to five primary questions);
- that there will be follow-up questions to help participants expand on their answers;
- a final thank you statement.

2.5.1.3 Managing the interview

The location of each interview was private, quiet and ensured no interruption. This was done to put the interviewee at ease. Electronic devices were switched off and every effort was taken to minimise competing distractions. The meetings were audio-taped and subsequent transcripts supplemented with notes taken during the interview. In two instances participants requested not to be recorded but detailed notes were taken throughout the interview.

Building a rapport in a qualitative interview context is vital and was established in advance of each; it then naturally continued to develop during the interview itself. This dynamic also increased the likelihood that interviewees would provide rich and detailed accounts of how each news organisation functions. The researcher approached interviewees with transparency and an open mind, stating specifically why he was interested in their unique point of view. The length of the interviews necessitated a number of breakout sessions, experience which further cemented the trust between researcher and participant.

2.5.2 Collection of primary data

The second instrument in the research design enabled a fuller understanding of the media organisations and of the relationships between the individuals involved in them. Corporate background checks were conducted using the Malta Financial Services Authority (MFSA) database and archive, as well as the *Creditinfo* database. The MFSA database

provided the list of shareholders, memoranda and articles of each company, as well as basic audited accounts. This information reveals the structure of each organisation and the reasons for their creation.

Creditinfo operates in the business-to-business sector, selling consumer credit reports and related analytics. The portfolio of services it offers consists of negative information, court rulings, monitoring products, company information, business information reports, annual reports, marketing lists, real estate collaterals, a debt collection system and individual registration information. This allows us to build a picture of the commercial spheres of interest of the individuals, as well as the companies being studied, while making links to other entities that may be of interest. This branch of the research will create an insight into the networks and relationships that exist between different entities and individuals who are involved in the news organisations.

2.5.3 Textual analysis

The third research instrument will be used to follow news events as they are covered by the organisations online, and examined the way in which stories are captured and narrated, paying particular attention to whom the contributing journalist is and the diversity of sources reported and used. Textual analysis is employed to gather and analyse the data, the data being news content itself. Here, we follow Curran et al. (2017), who report that their qualitative approach entailed reading, summarising, rereading and analysing patterns of meaning. The objective was to establish the relationship between what the organisation is saying and what is finally reported, and to look at the relationships between structure and output.

While in-depth interviews can illuminate the processes of a professional news operation, they do not establish how the resulting content will appear, or, in other words, whether a news organisation's output does ultimately project a version of reality laced with

routinised values and/or elite (or any other) ideology and influence. Perakyla and Ruusuuri (2011) uphold that by reading and rereading texts they attempt to pin down the themes that will build a picture of the suppositions, presumptions and meanings of the cultural world from which the text originates. They also note that an informal approach may be the best method in research that focuses on written text.

The multiplicity of (plat)forms through which news is presented and consumed today means it is beyond the scope of this study to offer a comprehensive analysis of news output in Malta; so, we have opted to focus on news websites. Aside from the practical limitations precluding an all-encompassing study, the decision was taken to examine top news websites, in recognition of the growing body of evidence to suggest the growing demand for news on digital platforms. For the sake of clarity, the websites analysed were: *maltatoday.com.mt*, *tvm.com.mt* and *timesofmalta.com*.

Using these three levels of research, a portrait of the organisations' structures is created that will also reveal where the influences and leadership roles within these organisations really exist. The aim is to understand the overt and covert influences at work within each of these organisations, where and what exactly the spheres of influence truly are, and how they operate. We also investigate how far shareholders' and other elite interests are incorporated into the final construction of news.

2.5.4 Choice of period for textual analysis

The text will comprise news items that appeared on the three websites, respectively, between the 1st of May and the 4th of June 2017, a period that covers a general election in Malta. The choice to analyse news written during an election with the aim of understanding its political framing is justified by four features, described by Blumler and Gurevitch (2001): first, the calling of an election shifts gear in the construction and consumption of news; second, election

news is accorded a high status in Malta, as will be demonstrated in chapter three; third, the fashioning of election news is a struggle to reconcile newsworthiness and fair coverage; fourth, news organisations make clear efforts during elections to strengthen the analytical contributions of their output. We can assume that any slant or frame will have been more conspicuous during this period, as a result of political mobilisation.

The top Five headline news items were chosen at random times, using a random number generator, each day from the three news websites, totalling fifteen per day. The period of analysis covered thirty-four days, the length of the election campaign, for a total of 510 news items. The analysis involved a detailed examination of all audio-visual items, as well as their accompanying text. Limitation of time and resources precluded a broader sample of text.

2.6 Conclusions

In conclusion, the theoretical field is vast and, as a result, this research will tackle a defined area. The literature directs us towards five broad elements to generate a general conception of news construction. These have been identified as ownership, organisational structure and routines, culture, the social environment, and, finally, external pressures. These factors work to mould the construction of news in all three media systems described by Hallin and Mancini (2004), including the Polarised Pluralist system, in which Malta (our country of study) is currently categorised. But the literature also clearly exhibits deficiencies in the understanding of how news is constructed in small states like Malta. Therefore, there are further areas that we must examine in the present research.

The literature does not address the implications of proximity and scale, neglecting to discuss these nuances as potentially inherent to news construction in a small state. Another area warranting consideration is the level of agency and, perhaps, drive that news workers in a small state possess. In a polarised system we should question the role of individual journalists and how much autonomy they have in the pursuit of their personal agendas. These areas will help underscore the third area of exploration.

A final and key area to explore is advocacy, underlined by Hallin and Mancini as a defining factor of a Polarised Pluralist system, and what form it can take in a small state. It is perhaps time to argue that advocacy is not uniformly understood and may take different forms and uses in different media systems. Given the limitations and restrictions encountered by a small state, as presented in the literature, we look at the journalist's role from this perspective. Each of these elements will be evaluated within each case study.

Chapter Three

The Maltese media system

3.1 Introduction

With specific reference to Malta, the main research question is: “what drives the construction of news in a small polarised state?” What follows is an examination of the historical roots of Maltese newspapers and how they may shape the political slant followed by a paper and its owners. The lack of research and understanding of small states 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.

This chapter also presents the political context in which Maltese journalists operate and moves to probe the present media system and acquire an insight into the electoral system, how it enhances polarisation and has pushed the main political parties to own and champion their own media houses. This may help us illuminate some of the issues that emanate from proximity and size. Finally, using Hanitzch and Mellado’s (2011) model, we shall endeavour to depict the country’s democratic credentials for a clearer view into its media.

3.2 The political context

In 2017, in a strongly worded letter addressed to Frans Timmerman, Vice President of the European Commission, a number of the world's editorial leaders expressed deep concern about events in Malta. In the letter, Katharine Viner, Editor-in-Chief of British newspaper *The Guardian*; Wolfgang Krach, Editor-in-Chief of Germany's *Süddeutsche Zeitung*; Dean Baquet, Executive Editor of the *New York Times*; Lionel Barber, Editor of Britain's *Financial Times*; James Harding, director of news and current affairs at the BBC; Mario Calabresi, Editor-in-Chief of Italy's *La Repubblica*; Antonio Caño, Editor-in-Chief of Spanish daily *El País*; and Jérôme Fenoglio, director of French newspaper *Le Monde*, jointly lamented 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. Her death rocked the country and stirred global interest. It is not the intention of this work to address directly the grave issues exposed by this event, but the way the international media engaged with Maltese news organisations and the version of events foreign journalists portrayed is relevant, as it throws the way news is constructed *within* this small, politically polarised state into sharper relief.

Their presentation of Malta's media landscape went counter to what many journalists interviewed for this research said they had understood their role and culture to be. Particular concerns regarding the international press' portrayal of events included how people were selected for interview, as well as how their comments and interviews were edited and presented (Catherwood, 2017). Discrepancies between what the international and local news reported are

clearly evidenced in their coverage of Galizia's murder and its wider context; a contradiction appears to have existed between what the international press believed was the correct way of processing information and framing the resulting story and how professionals in the Maltese media system believed they were operating.

This gap existed because of foreign media's limited knowledge of the contentious and, at times, risky position of Maltese journalists, the result of a political climate which could, at best, be labelled 'intense'. Political scrutiny frequently leads to an incivil dynamic between news outlets and politicians, as a lack of respect for the conventions of the political system means the main political parties seek to influence or control the media (Sammut, 2018). Tribalism has nurtured a fragmented political environment in which people exclusively identify with their political group and show limited drive to compromise (Sammut, 2007). The flames are stoked by the political elite, who seemingly exercise a policy of 'divide and rule'. The extreme political stances of Malta's citizens heighten their interest in political affairs, resulting in a large, polarised public following of politics-related information. This environment further increases pressure on journalists and has spilled over into varying degrees of aggression being expressed towards them. Verbal abuse, jostling and limited manhandling have taken place; political leaders and MPs have previously had to publically intervene to defuse tensions. Journalists' homes have been targeted and vandalised, as have been the building premises of a number of media houses. Contemplating the position of a journalist from this angle, we begin to appreciate the difficulties faced by Malta's Fourth Estate. As Sammut notes, "The downside to all this is that polarization remains deep-seated and highly endemic and efforts to deify or demonize are typical traits of Maltese politics" (2019, p. 89).

Set against this backdrop, the murder of journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia fundamentally alters the acrimony which has been present in Maltese politics for decades. Her interest in politics dated back to the 1980s when, as a teenager, she was arrested for

participating in anti-government protests. This developed into an interest in journalism when she was employed as a news reporter with *The Sunday Times of Malta*, eventually becoming a regular columnist. By 1992 Caruana Galizia was an Associate Editor at *The Malta Independent* and later became a columnist for that organisation. She developed a reputation in media circles as dexterous: she was able to balance these roles with her work as editor for ground-breaking lifestyle magazines *Flair* and *Taste*, and also worked in media and public relations consultancy.

In 2008, she launched her blog, *Running Commentary*, which imprinted her own brand of journalism on the Maltese psyche. *Running Commentary* changed the way politics is expressed in Malta and her use of the English language as a tool for political attack broke ground which had previously been reserved for the Maltese-language press. Advocating for her particular belief system, through her expert knowledge of the social and cultural systems in Malta she was able to marshal a significant following. Sammut noted that the “blog had a transparent political orientation with her personal views even enhancing those of the Nationalist Party which she openly endorsed” (2019, p. 91). Her platform stood her apart from traditional Maltese media and she leveraged the advantages of a blog to increase reader participation, interactivity and immediacy. Caruana Galizia was able to recognise the threat and social implications of an evolving digital domain.

Her controversial content unleashed public anger towards Maltese journalism which had until then been hidden. There were a number of attacks on her family home, as well as on their pets. What had she done differently? First, she was writing about subjects and individuals in a radical way compared to the legacy media. She was more direct, frank and perhaps even aggressive. Second, her writing contrasted the way other Maltese journalists in the independent press were writing. Perhaps the routines and culture of most newsrooms would not adopt her style of journalism, but while under her own masthead she was free to publish her own thoughts, feelings and advocacy.

Caruana Galizia's murder signals wider disquiet about the position of journalism and its watchdog role on this small island.. Whoever killed her or ordered her killed was apparently fearful enough of her reach to silence her. The murder had a chilling effect on the media's confidence to operate freely in Malta; their safety has been brought into doubt. This implicit threat was likely intentional.

It is widely thought that an assumed level of impunity was factored into Caruana Galizia's murder, a possibility that exists because of Malta's deeply contentious political environment. A Maltese journalist exercising some form of political autonomy in their content may now justifiably feel vulnerable and unprotected. In independently moving towards that position in the summer of 2017, Daphne Caruana Galizia was potentially left exposed.

As previously outlined, the journalists interviewed for this study consider themselves able to exercise editorial independence, but the impact of Galizia's murder on the press industry should not be underestimated. As a result of this event, the safety of journalists was called into question and, with it, the freedom of the Maltese press. The political autonomy of the Maltese press has now been brought into question and needs to be fully evaluated as espoused by the editorial leaders at the beginning of this section.

3.3 Historical roots of Maltese media

The Maltese Islands, with a surface area of 316 square kilometres and a population of just over 435,000, is one of the smallest but most densely populated countries in the world. Made up of the main island, Malta, and a secondary one, Gozo, the country became a member of the European Union on the 1st May 2004, adopting the Euro as official currency on the 1st January 2008 (National Statistics Office, 2017). There are three 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) and the Democratic Party (PD), which acquired two seats in the general elections in 2017. Although not represented in Parliament, Alternativa Democratica (AD) positions itself as a Green Party. While Malta's history, geographic location and military role are well known and researched, little is understood about its media (Kaul, 2017).

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 proportionate presence of a great deal of media and press is a complex issue in itself, and not easy to dissect since the impact of size makes the operation of domestic media organisations difficult (Sammut, 2007). As a largely bilingual state, Malta has a giant neighbour offering foreign news channels; in a limited way, the Maltese media is influenced by its proximity to Italy. Yet, it has also been able to sustain its own media system. 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.

3.3.1 The first press

Malta does not possess a robust framework to define the fields of journalism (Kaul, 2017). There are no historical narratives and no comprehensive data containing accurate circulation and readership figures. There is no doubt that the stronghold of the partisan press, as well as that of “non-secular institutions, and the protracted struggles over language from the late nineteenth century, have combined to impede a cohesive development of print” (ibid., p. 3). The emphasis of research in general on the Anglo-American model, combined with the small size of the country, result in Malta being judged as “idiosyncratic and limited in scope for useful comparison” (ibid., p. 4).

This situation also reflects that 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. We can conclude 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 how news is disseminated.

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, which demanded approval from no less than three separate entities within the church to start a press: The Bishop, the Inquisitor and the Grand Master (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 – with the stated aim that “most of all, you ought to know about the great work which France is doing to set up and strengthen the rule of justice, liberty and equality. These advantages can only be acquired by means of a political newspaper” (Frendo, 2004, p. 11). 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 before the Maltese took up arms and forced the French garrison to seek protection in the islands’ fortified cities (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.

3.3.2 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; ironically, ‘agitators’ were allowed to publish their speeches in London but not in Malta (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.

From the very start the history of Maltese journalism to date, [it] is littered with titles and subtitles boasting of ‘impartiality’ and ‘independence’: in a Maltese historical context, one could hardly think of a more hackneyed and possibly meaningless title for

a newspaper. On the other hand, it was interesting that such titles or attributes should have been so marked when suspicion of government, church and later party influence was paramount (Frendo, 1994, p. 10).

One of the results of the Treaty of Paris was that Malta was granted the right to print newspapers, and the resultant launch of English-language publications reflected the imposition of a British model of advocacy and control. This echoed Britain's imperial efforts for control in other parts of the empire, such as India (Kaul, 2017). The mirroring of a media model built around Fleet Street is also represented by the way Maltese press Barons, such as 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.

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). Malta was home to many Italian exiles in the 19th century, as a consequence of the Italian Risorgimento, which resulted in considerable influence and agitation over Maltese intellectuals during this epoch (Frendo, 2010). 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). Its significance lay in the fact that its readership consisted of opinion makers and persons of weight and standing in both the public and private sectors of Maltese society (Sammut, 2007).

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 politician and had his offices vandalised during riots in 1919 (Aquilina, 2015). Alongside this was the establishment of Progress Press, created in the wake of the founding of a political party by Count Strickland. The latter’s portfolio of British-leaning newspapers eventually constituted the most powerful press organisations in the country (Aquilina, 2010).

3.3.3 Maltese journalism and language

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 stances 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 represent all that was present. The third is that the Maltese language began to make headway in print in the towns and villages. The Maltese language seems first to have been printed where “publications [...] tend to be more satirical or religious oriented” (ibid.). These trends present us with two clear themes: that polarisation was an historical norm, formed part of Malta’s cultural identity and was, indeed, a distinguishing characteristic of what it meant to be Maltese; equally, that political parallelism was historically present from the inception of Maltese newspapers.

At this point in time Maltese was not read by the well-educated, and the press grew to treat language as indicative of the political stance of a paper (Frendo, 1994). Those working in Italian opposed anglicisation, while the English titles described themselves as garrison gazettes

(Frendo, 2004). The audience was a barometer for future trends, in that the Italian papers depended on continental support, whereas English titles were read by local communities and seen to be safer for businessmen to advertise in (Aquilina, 2010). This division spread to party alliances, which,

[...] on the whole, 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, one's choice of newspaper represented a state of mind; allegiances were consciously or unconsciously formed and institutionalised. The written language was a way to define social status, which was also mirrored in the newspaper that was read. It was more than political allegiance; it spoke to the education and cultural capital of the individual purchasing it and was also an indication of where one lived. These newspapers spoke to the aspirations of their readership, the language user.

On the other hand, the Maltese-language newspapers were generally less inhibited than before and were able to show a dimension of Maltese society that had hitherto remained hidden (Frendo, 2004). This Anglo-Italian rivalry remained throughout the twentieth century and continued to peak during the interwar years, a result of the Abyssinian war in the mid-thirties, and continued to worsen 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. The 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 points out that English was the lingua franca during the interwar year, boosted by Italy’s fascist aggression during the Second World War. The audience for English-language papers was influential, which allowed these papers to “exercise a disproportionately seminal agenda-setting role” (Kaul, 2017, p. 2). The role of the press in this period was further enhanced by the political uncertainty that came with the curtailment of self-government during the interwar 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” (ibid., p. 5). It is therefore unsurprising 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 tool for the political elite. Rather than diminish over time, the levels of political parallelism and polarisation seemed to be increasing, reinforcing division in the country. Moreover, the writing quality of the papers was 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 taken by the English-language papers led to an outlook that strove to make Malta less Italian and Nationalist and more British – an agenda pushed by Strickland (Aquilina, 2015). The Strickland mantle was passed to his daughter Mabel, who managed to keep the presses going through the Second World War, while also 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 during elections (Editorial, 1950). “To have people of the country trust the press, the press must submit to the appraisal by the people.” (Editorial, 1950). In a culturally, politically and socially divided country, Ms Strickland brought a fresh dimension into the fray, a position that was far more liberal than expected in the Maltese milieu, and which 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 because 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). The growth of print culture was counterbalanced 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 today, 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 to target audiences and procure influence with 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 inception and throughout their development, with the very possession of a newspaper defining its reader and their political affiliation. This was understood by the Maltese, which allowed them to filter the news as it was presented. Historically, the Maltese have been able to identify a political slant in the news by its language, as well as the masthead.

This is the history of a politically divided country with high levels of political parallelism and polarisation. How is it relevant to today? What follows is a portrayal of how

the contemporary Maltese media is structured: its ownership, breadth, and use of media. We shall look into the use of language as a political instrument and whether this is still prevalent, and shall explore the domination of an advocacy-based press.

3.4 Contextualising journalism in present-day Malta

Sammut (2007) has highlighted that the Maltese have an awareness of who owns its media organisations and thus who journalists work for, suggesting a level of transparency. However, it should be noted that media companies are not legally required to publish their ownership structures. On the other hand, all company shareholders and directors can be identified through the Malta Financial Services Association (MFSA) and the Registrar of Companies, a government body that records public and private businesses operating in Malta. In the latter case the business must include a Memorandum of Association which, in turn, includes the name and residence of each director. Most of these details can be acquired by the public for a fee. Finally, the Broadcasting Authority (BA) may obtain any information it deems necessary from its license holders, but it is not published.

Journalists in Malta operate in a highly concentrated market; the leading media houses (TVM; Net; One) in audio-visual and radio collectively have a 50% audience share (Nenadic, 2020). The Broadcasting Authority rules that no nationwide radio or television service, including the provider of public service broadcasting, can also be editorially responsible for community radio. That said, there are no provisions to enforce competition rules (Nenadic, 2020). Alongside this, print and online media markets are unregulated and no official data about them is available, nor their audience share, and it should be noted that Malta has no restrictions on the capacity for non-Maltese owning operations in the telecommunications market (Nenadic, 2020). However, limitations do exist in general company ownership for non-

EU companies which can be restrictive if the shareholders own more than 25% of the company. These systems – and, in places, a lack of them – make it difficult to assess the breadth and influence of the main owners across all media markets.

While significant inroads in the quality of investigative journalism have been made through the work of *Times of Malta*, *The Malta Independent*, *Loveinmalta*, *Malta Today* and *The Shift News*, journalists face new threats. Strategic Lawsuits against Public Participation (SLAPP) are the latest concern in the journalistic landscape (Vassallo, 2020) and, although freedom of expression is in the Maltese Constitution, the Freedom of Information Act is not stringently enforced, namely in that journalists often encounter resistance while enlisting it, leading to delays and misdirection. Adding to this, investigative journalists exposing high-level corruption or criticising the state have been subject to hate campaigns run by state-sanctioned online groups (Vassallo, 2020). This can further inhibit the freedom and impartiality of the press.

Journalists are generally trained by their own organisation. While some programmes and courses in journalism do exist at the University of Malta they are nascent and broad in scope, and research in the field is lacking. An absence of academic training, as well as Malta's small market size, mean specialisation is uncommon. This may have also led to a lack of diversification within the industry. The absence of a tabloid culture could reinforce the presence of advocacy within the traditional media.

3.4.1 Contextualising advocacy

To appreciate the environment in which Maltese journalists operate, we must define what advocacy means in this context and shed light on the idea – increasingly prevalent in academia – that objectivity is an outdated and unachievable myth (Laws & Chojnicka, 2020). “As a result, media organizations rapidly became the main channels for constructing new forms

of “them” and “us” distinctions. To date, they have reinforced and broadened political divisions, and the party brand has become increasingly blended with the image of party leaders” (Sammut, 2019, p. 87). Sammut indicates that all journalists come to stories with inherent biases – whether personal, financial or institutional – advocative journalism should maintain high standards of factual accuracy, fairness and thoroughness. A rigorous partisan journalist will also approach neutrally positioned sources to establish facts and reach conclusions.

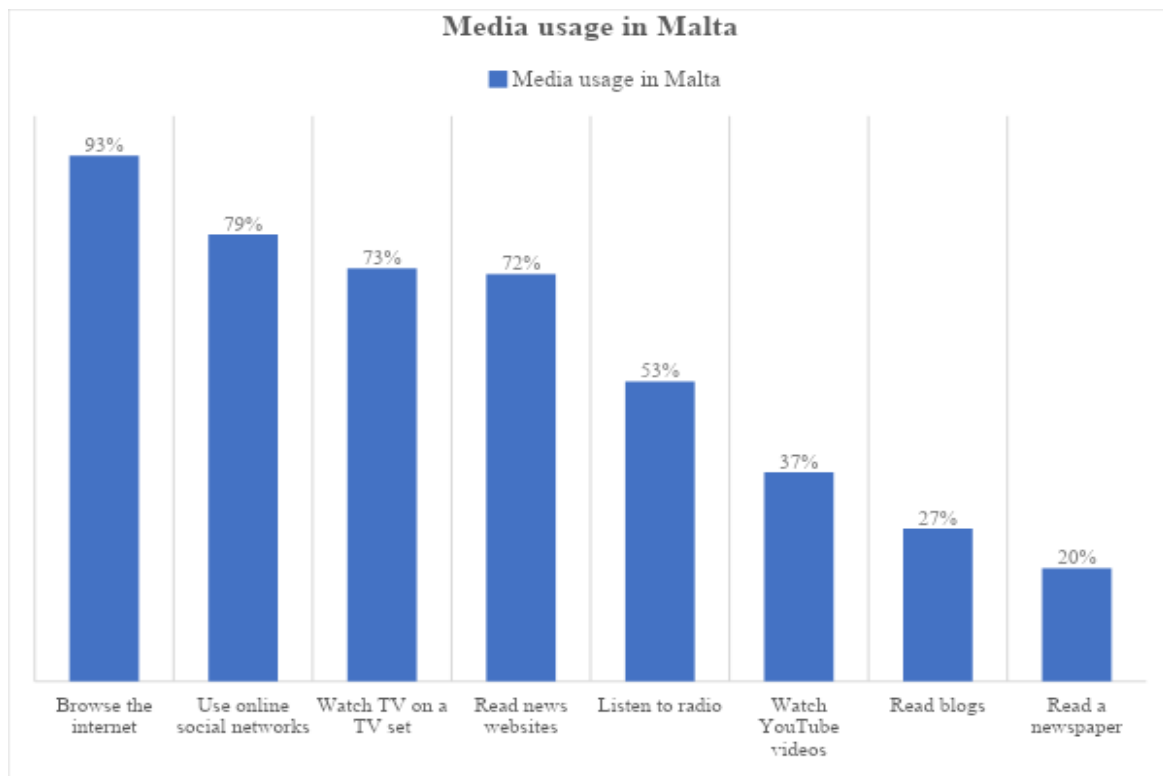
3.5 Media in present-day Malta

Malta is characterised by a high level of media usage, unusual in a Polarised Pluralist system, and a high level of bilingualism. This is reflected in its news organisations, where language separates social groups (Borg, 2009). Malta’s level of political parallelism is apparent in its ownership structures – the two main political parties own their own media outlets.

The surveys below underscore that this is a society where the general consumption of news is high. When Maltese people were surveyed on what they do daily, 93% of respondents said they browsed the internet, while 72% stated they used the internet for news (Misco, 2018). Chart 1 shows that, in 2018, TV usage was at 73%, while readership of print newspaper was at only 20% (ibid.). While newspaper readership is low, news consumption, in general, online and through broadcasting, is high and more akin to what you would expect from a Democratic Corporatist system (Charts 1 and 3). This indicates that, rather than driving its people away from the news, this politically divided country seems to hunger for it. Unlike other states in Southern Europe, the country lacks a news agency comparable to ANSA and AFP. While the

Malta News Agency was set up in 2014 in partnership with Italtpress, newsrooms rely on their own resources or on international news agencies for their coverage.

Chart 1: Daily media usage in Malta 2018



3.5.1 News in print

As described above, newspapers 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, with the latter two owning a pair of daily and four weekly newspapers between them. Only one Maltese-language newspaper, *Illum*, is owned by private business. In this arena, the most widely read English-language papers are those owned by Allied Newspapers. *Times of Malta* and *The Sunday Times of Malta* have been in existence in different permutations since the 1920s, entered the market in August 1935, and have never missed an

issue since. Its ownership structure will be discussed at length later in this study. Suffice to state, at this point, that its major shareholder is the Strickland Foundation.

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, which is the leading logistical hub and newspaper printer in Malta and has significant printing interests in the UK and Cyprus, too. Standard Publications owns *The Independent*, *The Independent on Sunday* and *The Malta Business Weekly*. The group has never made any real inroads into the market dominated by *Times of Malta* and has played a secondary role in the newspaper industry.

The third newspaper business is Media Today, which publishes two editions of *Malta Today* per week. It will be discussed at length in this research. 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, with sales figures of all daily newspapers now being under 5,000 per day. 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 newspapers receive no institutional support. This is in stark contrast to Maltese-language papers, which all, bar *Illum*, receive political and institutional subsidy. The General Workers Union owns *L-Orrizont* (The Horizon) and the weekly *It-Torca* (The Torch). This institution has undergone significant downsizing in the past five years, and has shut down its printing press. This means that Malta now has one web-offset printing press owned by Progress Press, which is a fully owned subsidiary of Allied Newspapers, and a digital press owned by Miller Newsprint Ltd. Table 1 lays out the Maltese newspapers, together with their owners, language used and political leaning. The latter was determined through the textual

analysis, company ownership and through numerous discussions and interviews with news workers.

The table shows us that the institutionally owned newspapers are all written in Maltese, reflecting the political position of their owners. On the other hand, all the 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. The lack of state subsidy is an anomaly when compared to other countries in the Polarised Pluralist region, while institutional ownership allows these organisations to take a stance advocating for the political parties or institutions that own them. 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. This line of thought will be pursued further.

Table 1: Newspapers in Malta, 2019

Title	Published	Language	Est.	Owner	Political slant in 2019
In-Nazzjon	Daily	Maltese	1970	Nationalist Party (PN) Media.link Communications	PN
L-Orizzont	Daily	Maltese	1962	Union Print General Workers Union	PL
The Malta Independent	Daily	English	1992	Standard Publications	PN
Times of Malta	Daily	English	1935	Allied Newspapers	PN
Malta Today	Bi-weekly	English	1999	Media Today	Neutral
It-Torca	Weekly	Maltese		Union Print General Workers Union	PL
Il-Mument	Weekly	Maltese	1970	Nationalist Party Media.link Communications	PN
The Malta Independent on Sunday	Weekly	English	1992	Standard Publications	PN
The Sunday Times of Malta	Weekly	English	1935	Allied Newspapers	PN
Kulhadd	Weekly	Maltese	1992	Labour Party (PL)	PL
Illum	Weekly	Maltese	2006	Media Today	PL
Il-Lehen	Weekly	Maltese	1928	Catholic Action	PN
The Malta Business Weekly	Weekly	English	1994	Standard Publications	PN
The Malta Business Observer	Monthly	English	2014	Allied Newspapers & Content House	Neutral

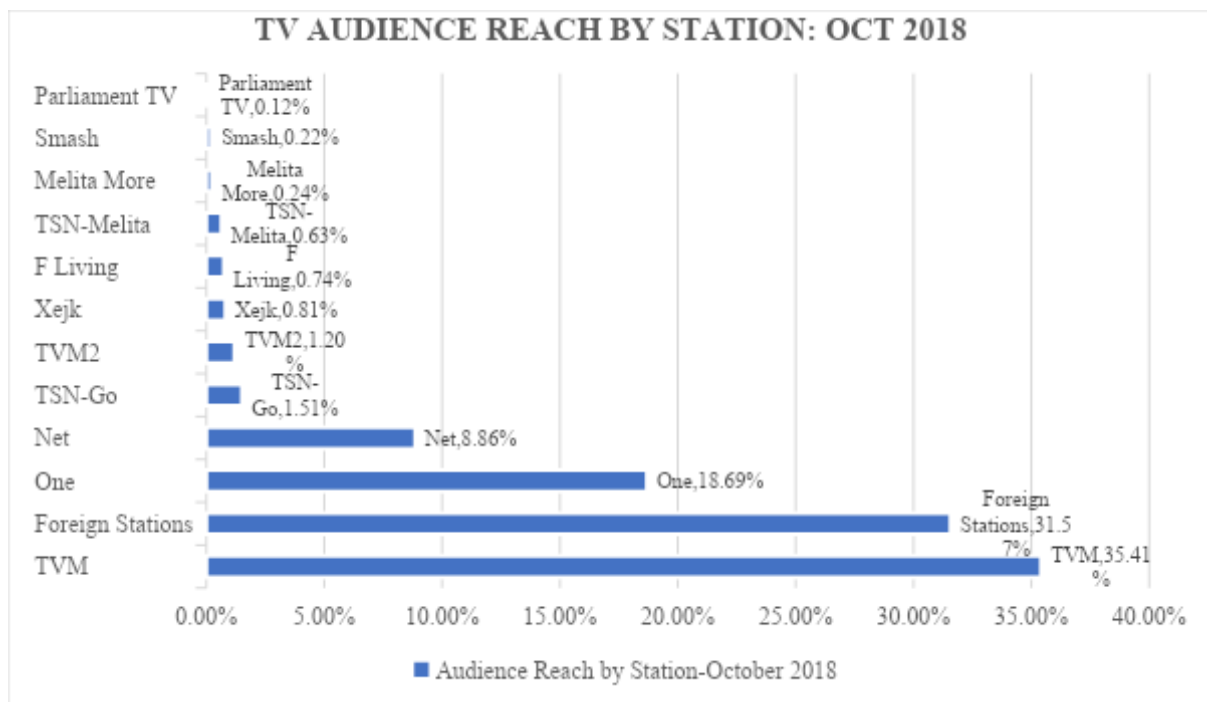
3.5.2 Broadcasting in Malta

Broadcasting pluralism was introduced in Malta for radio in 1991 and for TV in 1993. This opened the door to institutional ownership of broadcasting, with a precedent set that all the TV newsrooms are owned by institutions. In the audience assessment published in December 2018, television was a highly used medium with 63.72% citing regular use. Chart 2 shows that, of the population still watching TV, 68.43% of all viewers follow local stations,

while less than a third (31.57%) watch a foreign station (Broadcasting Authority, 2018). The two main political parties own TV and radio stations. *One Radio* and *One TV* are owned by PL, while PN owns *Net TV* and *Radio 101*.

The political parties target the party faithful, who mostly view the station connected to their party affiliation. While the news content in the start-up phase of these stations was not overtly political, this has gradually changed in the past decade. As the country has increasingly polarised, the political stations have reduced their commercial rationale to appeal to a wider audience and generate content which appeals directly to party partisanship. This is in clear distinction to what is described in the literature as happening within a Polarised Pluralist system (Hallin & Mancini, 2017), and the trend towards commercialisation described by Elvestad and Phillips (2018). This has simply not happened in Malta and is a further indication that the historical trends are still anchored in the Maltese media system.

Chart 2: TV audience reach by station



The Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) runs three radio stations and two television stations and has, by far, the greatest reach (Broadcasting Authority, 2018). PBS is heavily regulated by the Broadcasting Authority (BA), a system which will be discussed at a later point in this chapter. *TVM* has a significant hold on the provision of news in Malta and is the most-watched news service. While the Maltese party faithful will follow their respective political stations of choice, most will complement this with the station *TVM* (Broadcasting Authority, 2018), indicating the important role the public broadcaster can perform in a politically divided society as a unifying force. Of all the local TV stations, *TVM*, *One*, and *Net TV* have audiences from all demographic groups, with *TVM* and *One* ranked first and second in audience reach. The average number of hours spent watching TV over all stations amounts to 1.84 hours per viewer (Broadcasting Authority, 2018).

TV viewers watching foreign stations did so for an average of 2.4 hours per day, while viewers watching *TVM* did so on average for 1.44 hours per day. Chart 3 shows that local and foreign news were the most popular programme genre, with 26.3% of respondents preferring it. Drama programmes ranked second, at 16.4%, and discussion and current affairs programmes ranked third, at 11.1%. This further exemplifies the keen interest in news present in the Maltese media system, which is different from a typical Polarised Pluralist system and distinct from the trends of Liberal American media model.

When time spent on each station is factored in, the weight shifts as the ubiquity of foreign stations begins to increase. With this adjustment, Chart 4 shows that, while *TVM's* share is at 27.6%, foreign station usage rises to 41%. This change is likely to reflect the nature of foreign content consumed, such as international sport, rather than a trend away from general Maltese content.

Chart 3: Favourite programme genre

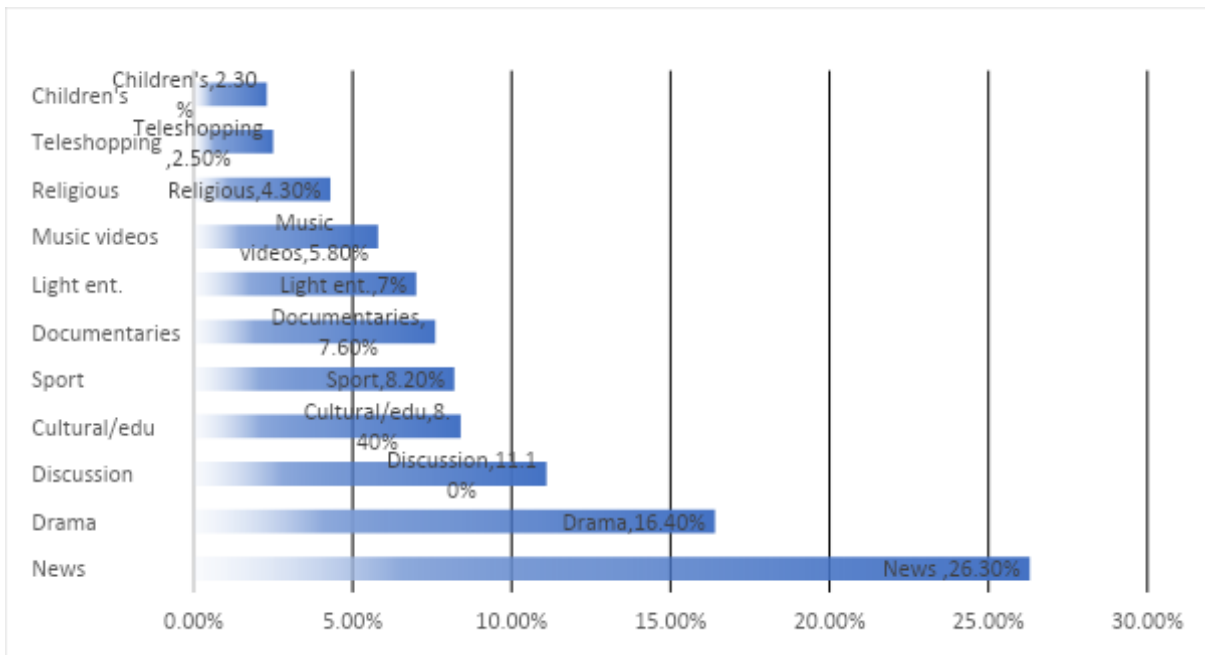
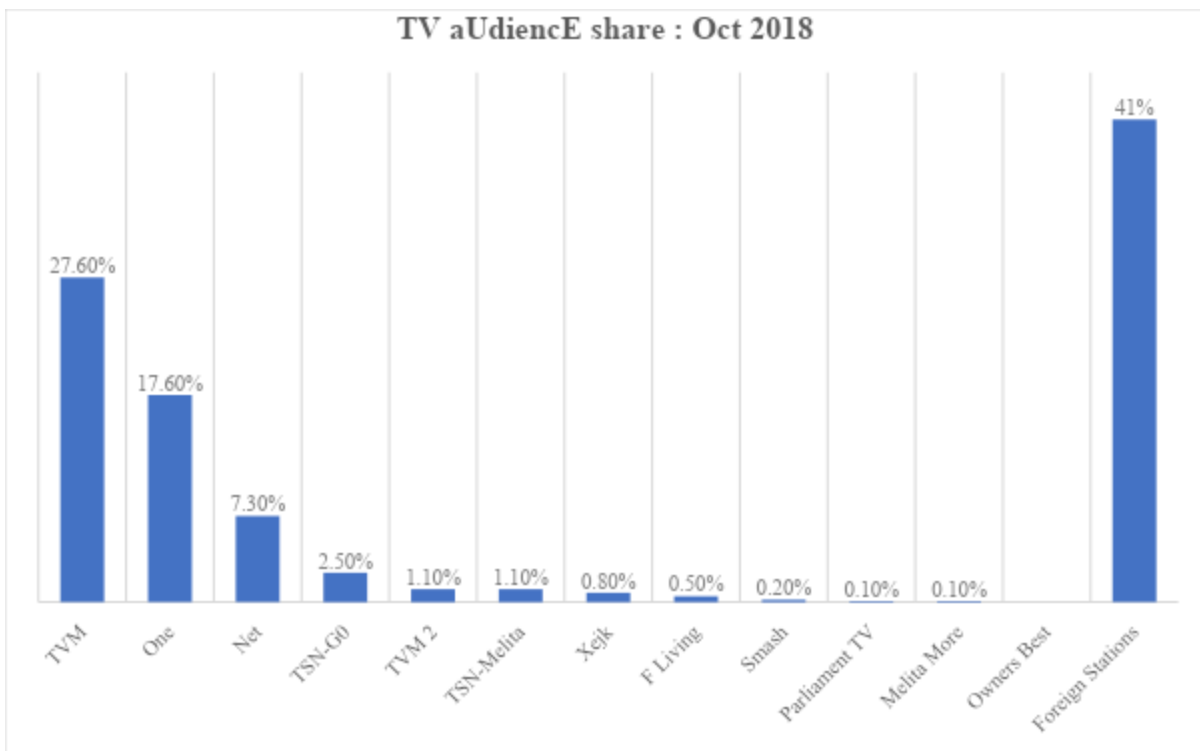


Chart 4: TV audience share



3.5.3 Internet in Malta

As indicated, survey results show 93% of the Maltese browse the internet daily, while 78% use online social networks and 72% read news websites regularly (Misco, 2018). As far as internet use is concerned, 83% said they use it to check news, weather and sport; 82% for banking; and 74% for shopping. The most accessed social media platforms are *Facebook* (87%), *Google* (50%) and *YouTube* (46%). Though 62% of the population browse and share content, just 9% said they created it.

The acquisition of news through the internet has grown significantly in the past five years. Of the top ten visited sites in Malta, listed on *Alexa.com* (2019), 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 fifth and eighth respectively.

TVM has recently changed its online strategy, having launched an English version of its website, as well as an on-demand service of all its audio-visual content. Over a two-year period, this moved *tvm.com.mt* to second place in Malta's most-visited websites, also overtaking *Google*, *YouTube* and *Facebook*. Each example represents the central role news plays within the Maltese media system and underlines its idiosyncrasies both within a Southern European context and as a small state.

The political parties have their own online presence, with news sites that mirror their broadcasting offering and which, as in the case of all their media, are largely followed by the party faithful. Of interest are two news organisations that exist with only an online presence: *theshiftnews.com* and *lovinmalta.com*. While still in their infancy, 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 organisations lack independence.

The significant presence of news websites in the top-ten visited sites in Malta is in stark contrast to those of the US, where Reddit is the only news site ranking in the top ten (Alexa, 2019). Indeed, this also diverges from Southern European media systems and is a further indication of the Maltese interest in consuming news. In this context it is a consequence of a high level of politicisation. If the news service available in Malta is closely followed and highly politicised, is there therefore a high level of democratic engagement in the country, and what form does this democracy take? Are the Maltese beginning to distance themselves from the political process? This question will be addressed.

Table 2: Online news sites in Malta 2019

Title	URL	Language	Alexa Ranking in Malta	Owner	Political slant in 2019
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

3.5.4 Regulatory bodies

Media regulations need to be examined in order to understand the role of the state in ensuring the free flow of information and the protection they offer, by law, to journalists and news institutions. Regulations are also crucial to understanding the construction of news in this small state.

The two most important laws regarding this in Malta are the 2018 Media and Defamation Act (April), and the 2000 Broadcasting Regulations Act. The enactment of the former represents the repeal of Act XL of 1974, known as the Press Act, thereby eliminating criminal provisions affecting journalists and other media actors for slander, libel or defamation. Besides abolishing criminal libel, the new act removes garnishee orders. Article 7 of the Press Act, which stated that anyone found injuring public morals or decency could face imprisonment for up to three months, has also been removed.

The law also includes some remarkable provisions with regards to defences in libel civil actions, as well as to the imposition limits of libel damages by the Court. The text refers to several procedural aspects regarding legal actions for defamation, as well as criteria for the assessment of the sum to be awarded by the court. The document also includes a series of provisions on the concrete orders that can be given by the Court when it has decided for the claimant. Specific provisions regarding trade libel and defamation of deceased persons are also included, as well as a comprehensive regulation of the right of reply. Some of the most important provisions refer to the possibility for media outlets to register before the so-called and newly created “Media Registrar”. The text also incorporates a series of provisions related to the protection of journalists’ sources. (Barata, 2017.)

Furthermore, the Broadcasting Act is important because it served as a foundation for the Broadcasting Authority, a regulatory body relating to radio and television broadcasting. In addition to these laws, the Malta Communications Authority was established under the Malta Communications Authority Act (2016) and is based on the Electronic Communications (Regulation) Act (2016). The Malta Communications Authority has regulatory functions “regarding electronic communications, certain aspects of data protection in electronic communication, postal services, electronic commerce and similar areas in the field of communications” (Malta Communications Authority Act, 2016).

While there are no limitations on the press other than through general law, the broadcasting sector itself is lightly regulated. For example, an amendment in 2000 to the Broadcasting Act permits the same company to own one radio service, one television service and one radio or television broadcasting service devoted exclusively to teleshopping; there is a limit on the number of broadcasting stations which can be owned and controlled by one entity. These rules apply to the private sector but there are no corresponding limits on government-owned platforms.

The Broadcasting Authority (BA) is responsible for balance and impartiality, and should be able to monitor private stations and Public Broadcasting Services (PBS). This regulation distinguishes Malta from other Polarised Pluralist systems. Within this context, Article 119 of the Maltese Constitution mandates the BA to ensure that “due impartiality is preserved in respect of matters of political or industrial controversy.” However, in 1991 the Broadcasting Act directed that the BA must consider the output of all stations collectively in its assessment of impartiality in TV and radio broadcasting. This has effectively enabled the interpretation that the politically owned media balance each other’s biases, and thus measures that guarantee impartiality or balance are not implemented. This has led to a stance that is, for example, directly contrasted by the UK industry, where press impartiality and balance in

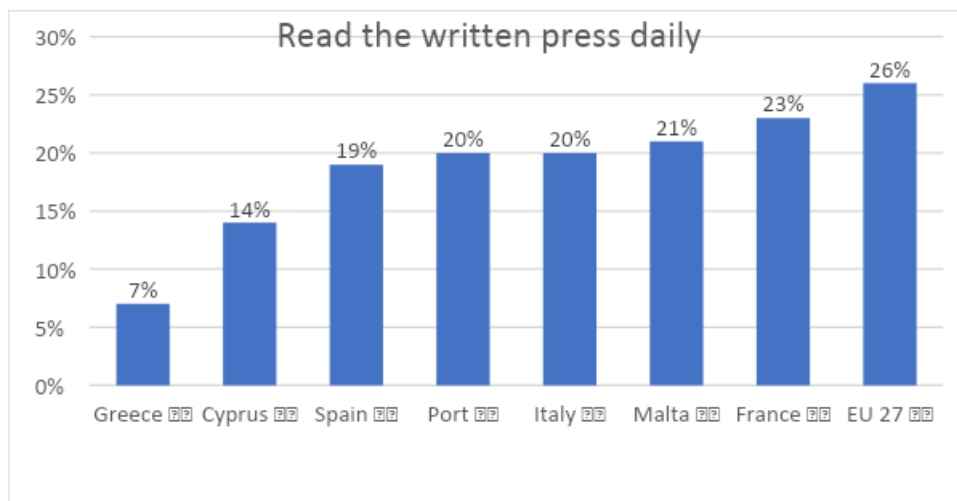
broadcasting is heavily monitored by its communications regulator, Ofcom (Barwise and York, 2020).

3.6 Comparative media usage

As discussed in the literature, one of the key hurdles to understanding the construction of news in a small state is a lack of existing research, both comparative and general. Malta is frequently omitted from in-depth studies of small states, as exemplified by the excellent work of Hanitzsch et al (2019). In their research Iceland and Cyprus are analysed alongside sixty-five other countries, but Malta is overlooked.

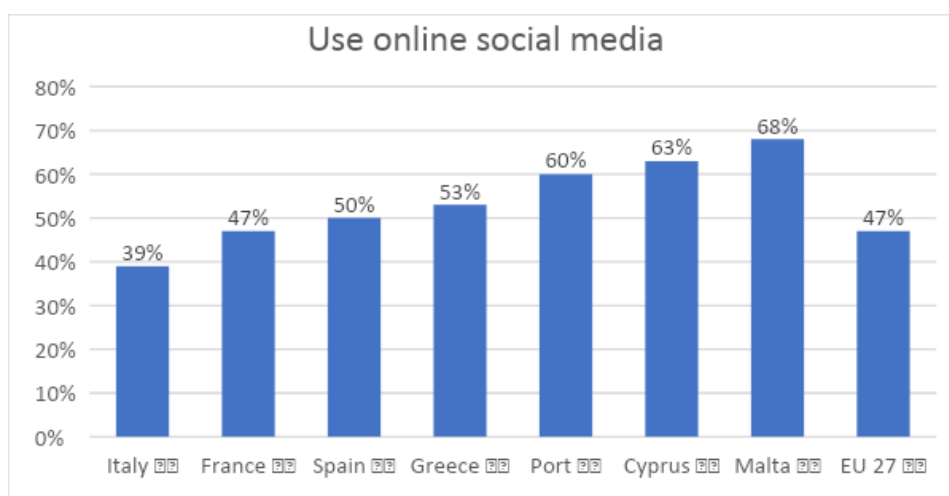
With this in mind, we must refer to Eurobarometer findings of media use within the European Union (Standard Barometer 92, 2019) to guide us towards a deeper appreciation of where Malta sits among other states in the Southern European/Polarised Pluralist system. The Eurobarometer study illuminates media use, outlines the way citizens of EU states acquire information, and evaluates a country's level of trust in the media in general.

Chart 5: Read the written press daily/almost daily



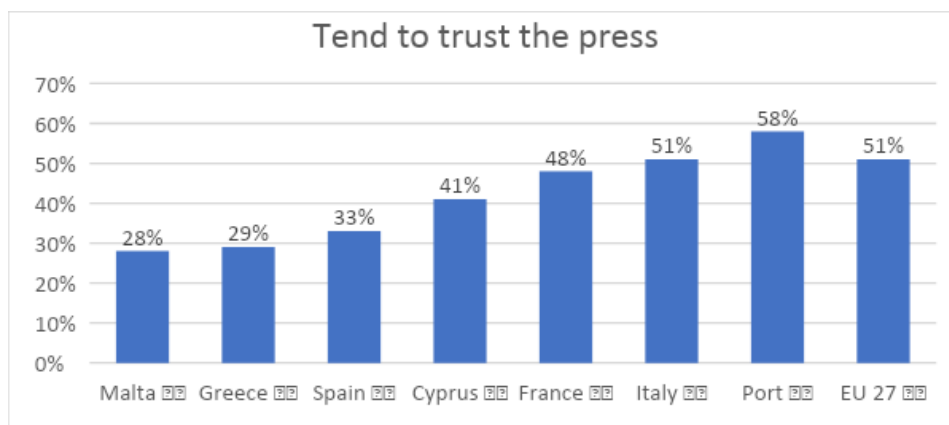
The findings (chart 5) reveal that while Malta falls below the EU 27 average, 21% of its population read the written press on a daily basis. This is second only to France within the Southern European region and indicates that news consumption in Malta is relatively high in the region.

Chart 6: Use online social media



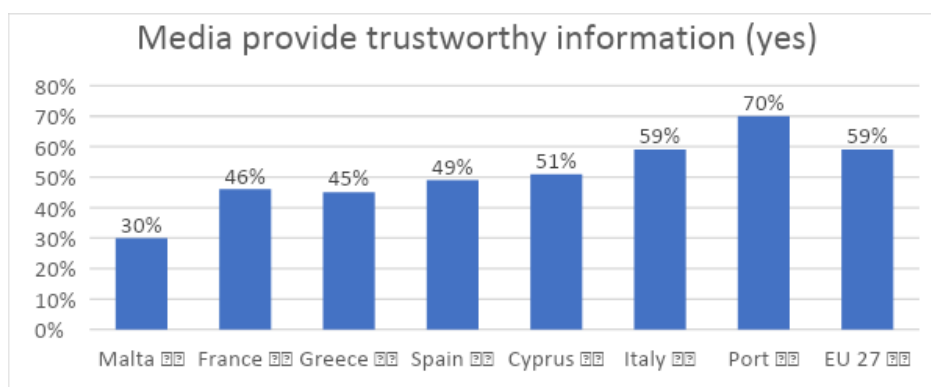
On the other hand, the Eurobarometer assessment ranks Malta significantly higher than the EU 27 average in its engagement with social media as a means of acquiring general information (chart 6), measuring at 68% compared to the 47% average across member states. Indeed, not only is Malta ranked highest among Mediterranean nations for social media use, it also outstrips the other EU nations.

Chart 7: Tend to trust the written press



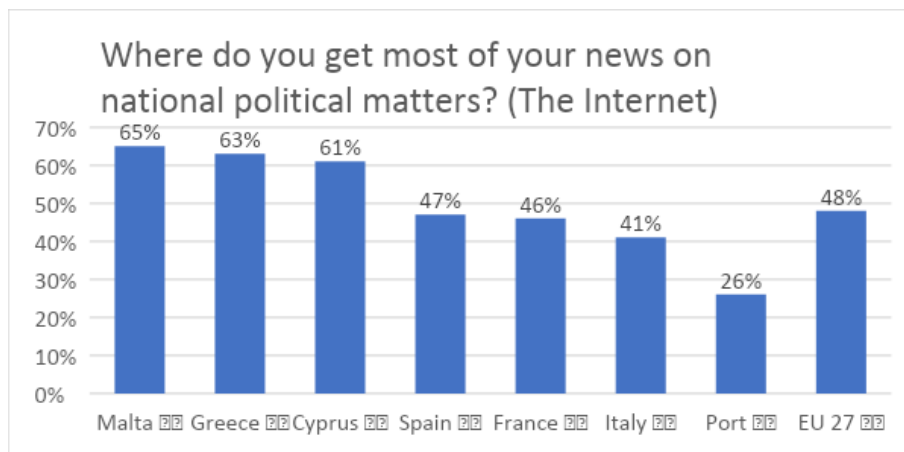
The Maltese population exercises a low level of trust in the press, the lowest in the region and, again, significantly below the EU 27 average (chart 7). Here we witness an interesting juxtaposition: the population is engaged with the written press yet has a low level of confidence in it, with only 28% of the population stating they consider the press trustworthy, compared to an EU 27 average of 51%.

Chart 8: Media provide trustworthy information (yes)



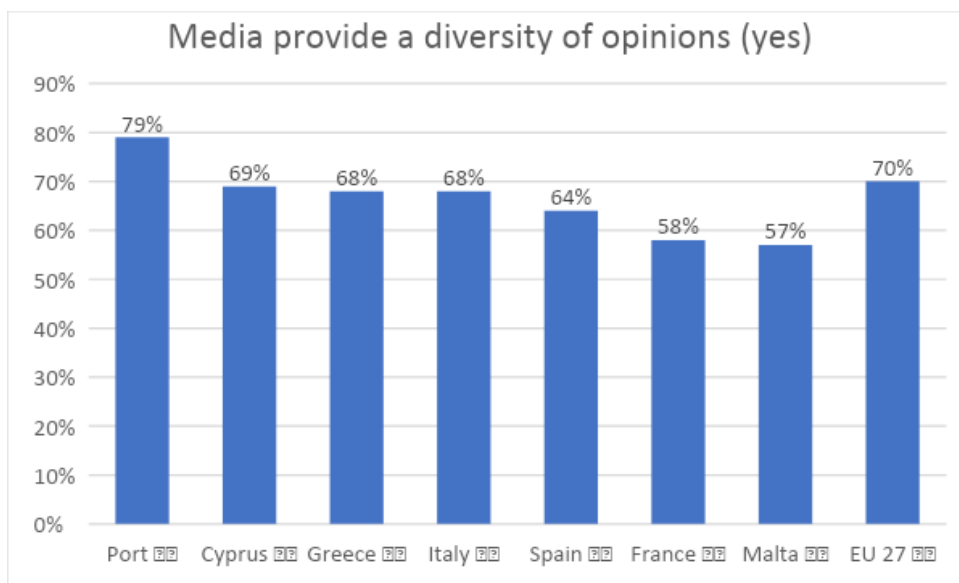
This distrust is also prevalent when the population is asked whether the media provide reliable information (chart 8). Only 30% of the Maltese population answers 'yes', the worst in the region and significantly below the EU average.

Chart 9: Where do you get most of your news on national political matters? (The Internet)



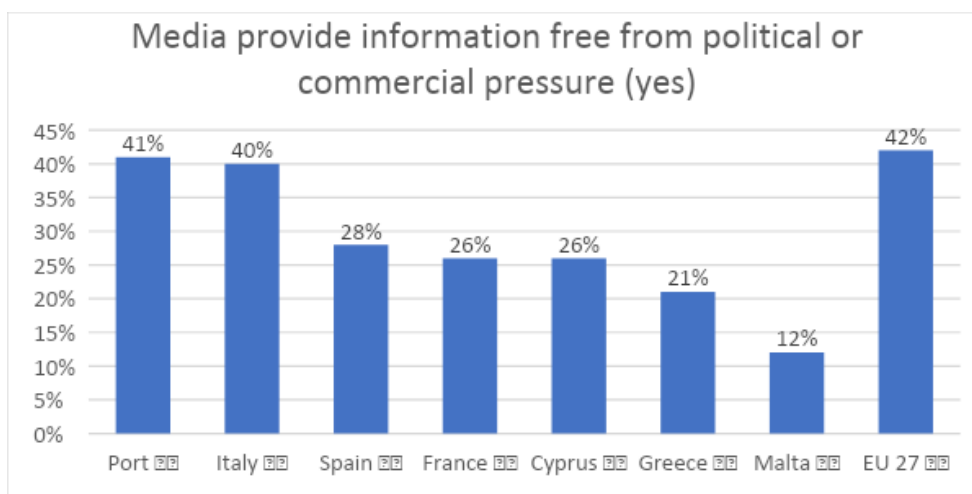
Tied to information-gathering through social media, Maltese citizens' identification as the most active internet users for reading news on national political matters is unsurprising (chart 9). Again, Malta ranks highest in the region for this and significantly higher than the EU 27 average. It is striking that the population is comparatively 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 10: Media provide a diversity of opinions (yes)



This can be contrasted with the findings of whether the Maltese believe the media provide diverse opinions. 57% answer ‘yes’, the lowest figure in the region (chart 10). An EU 27 average of 70% answer ‘yes’.

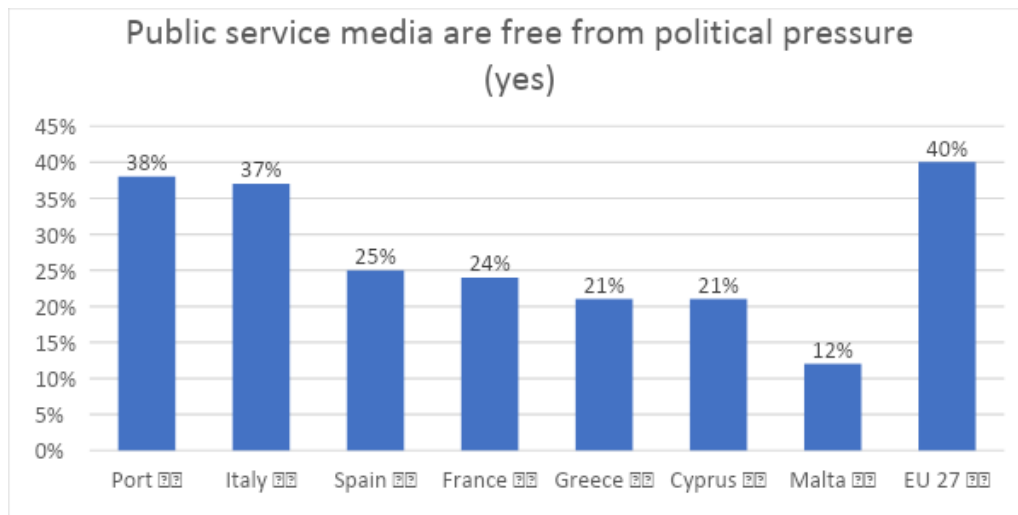
Chart 11: Media provide information free from political or commercial pressure (yes)



Significantly, when asked if the media are able to publish content free from political or commercial pressure, only 12% answer ‘yes’, again the lowest percentage in the Mediterranean

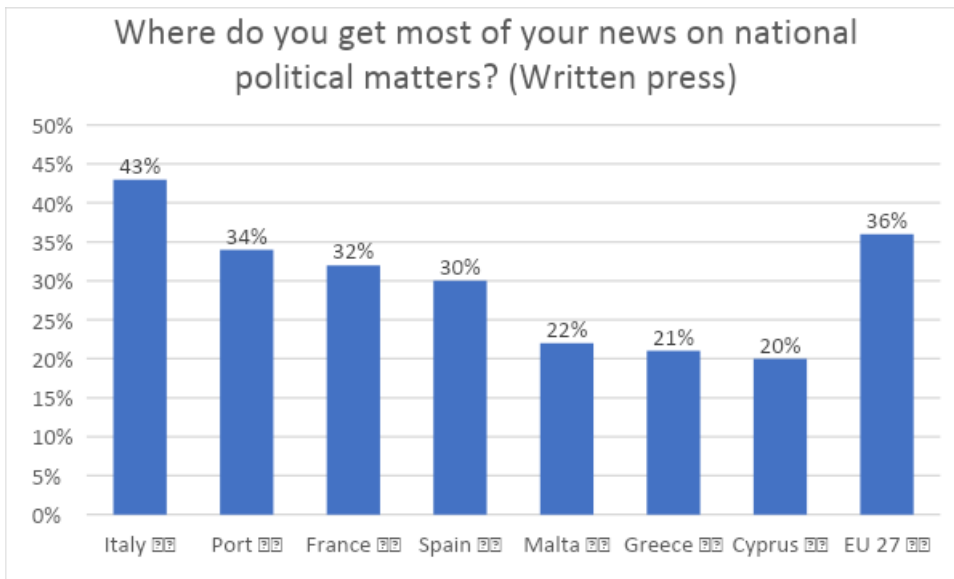
region and the EU (chart 11). It is revealing that, in response to the statement “media provide information free from political commercial pressure”, the number of people answering ‘yes’ in Malta decreased by 17% between 2018 and 2019.

Chart 12: Public service media are free from political pressure (yes)



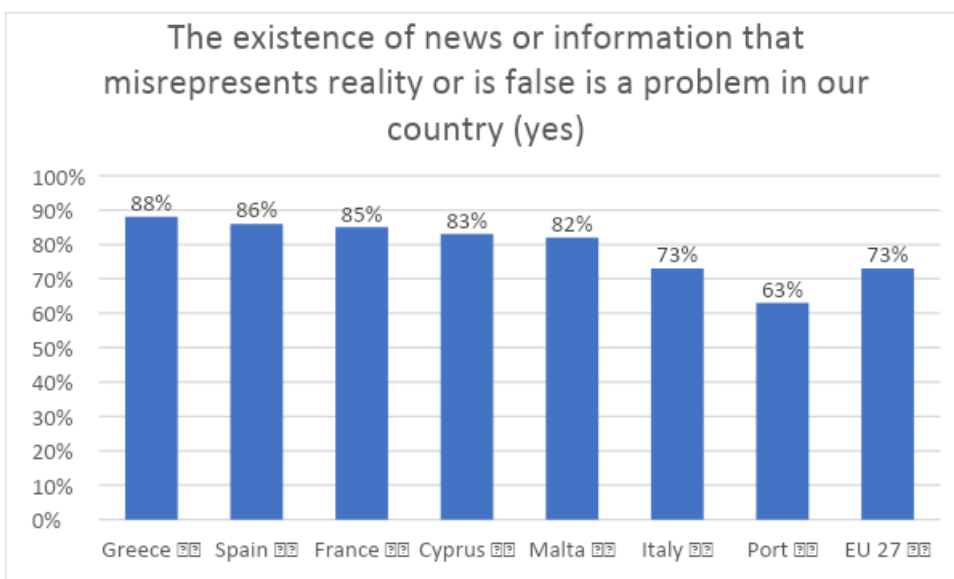
This response is replicated when asked whether public service media are free from political pressure (chart 12). Only 12% of the Maltese population agrees, the lowest of the EU 27, which averaged 40%. As is the case in the previous chart, Malta has returned significantly fewer (by 12%) ‘yes’ answers to this question between 2018 and 2019.

Chart 13: Where do you get most of your news on national political matters? (Written press)



When asked how they gather information about national politics, 22% of Maltese respondents state that they obtain it from the press, one of the lowest in the region and again significantly lower than the average of 36% across other member states (chart 13).

Chart 14: 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 14).

The Eurobarometer results depict a population that relies heavily on social media to acquire its news and is highly distrusting of the media and public service broadcasting, which they suspect are restricted or influenced by political pressure. Indeed, a significant fact about 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%; within the Southern European/Polarised Pluralist system, 12% is also significantly lower than the the nearest result, for Greece, which stands at 21%.

Within the Eurobarometer study, the Maltese are exceptional in their use of social media to follow current affairs, as well as in their overwhelming distrust of the press and media in general. The report notes that Malta is an outlier in two key areas when compared to the Southern Mediterranean/Polarised Pluralist systems (Standard Barometer 92, 2019). It is the highest user of the internet as a general source of information, particularly to keep up to date about national politics, but ranks lowest in its faith in the media and public service broadcasting to inform without having been influenced by political and commercial pressures. It is not only leading international editors who query Maltese journalism’s political independence, as expressed in their 2017 letter. Mindful of these considerations, we shall now explore Malta’s electoral process and election campaigns to establish how media usage can influence voter turnout and democratic participation.

3.7 Electoral Campaigning

Hallin and Mancini comment on the absence of consensual values in their Polarised Pluralist model, and state that this does not imply an absence of ideas about media and politics. They note that the model has “plenty of achievements, which, though they might not have become dominant globally, either institutionally or as normative models, are worthy of study” (Hallin & Mancini, 2012, p. 282). These ideas deal precisely with how a democratic media system can deal with the absence of consensus.

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 3), and has historically exemplified that the Maltese widely participate in the democratic process (Table 4). So, while Malta has elements that define it as a Polarised Pluralist system, as indicated in the literature review, it has also created a system which is well recognised by the population and which has produced an electoral process with an extremely high level of participatory democracy.

Table 3: Most recent local parliamentary voter turnout.

Country	Year	Voter turnout (%)
Portugal	2015	55.84
Spain	2016	69.84
France	2017	42.64
Italy	2018	72.93
Malta	2017	92.06
Greece	2015	63.94
Cyprus	2016	66.74

(IDEA, 2018)

It can be assumed that, as a result of Malta's size, the country's electoral turnout goes unacknowledged globally. Hirczy (1995) states that there is a cultural explanation for this high voter turnout. Since turnout is universal, the relevant attitudinal characteristics that drive voter turnout would have to be shared by all citizens and would be unlike those of citizens in other countries. We can therefore expect Malta's institutions to differ from those of other states, in a way that would nurture political participation among its population. It can be argued that its news organisations should be different too. Hirczy 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. "When we focus on attributes of Maltese citizens in order to understand their participatory behaviour, intense partisanship suggests itself as an obvious explanation to anybody familiar with Maltese politics" (Hirczy, 1995, p. 257). 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). On this point, Frenco (2004) notes that PN had strong links to the Catholic Church; PL was born and bred among the working class. "Malta has the purest two-party system found under proportional representation anywhere" (Hirczy, 1995, p. 257). These points are key to understanding what underpins the influence of advocacy and proximity. This suggests 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. "Evidence of stark polarisation of the electorate is also provided by the confrontational style of electioneering, the stridency of the campaign rhetoric, and mutual

recriminations of party leaders and functionaries” (ibid., p. 259). These comments infer significant partisanship, especially since voting is not legally required. 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, a direct consequence of the size of the state. This highlights that proximity has an influence and points to the weight given to advocacy. 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.

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. Though minor parties have participated, 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. Should a citizen’s first choice not require the vote, the single transferable vote system means that their second preference is counted. This maximises the impact of any vote on the election outcome. The low quotas to elect a candidate in all districts, between three to four thousand votes, result in turnout being promoted everywhere because all candidates and parties wish to mobilise every possible vote (IDEA, 2018).

Coupled with this is the ease of voting. Voting is actively encouraged in all towns, including offers of transport to the elderly or people with a disability. There are sustained telephone campaigns from political parties with appeals to vote which involve reaching out to family, group loyalty and more direct material incentives. These strategies are brought to bear as a direct result of proximity, elements which are hard to imitate outside a small state. Candidates go to great lengths to engage with the public, holding house visits, one-to-one

meetings, joining local band clubs and eliciting voters' enthusiasm as a local patron trying to win their support.

But what is most striking is the intensity with which the candidates campaign. In effect, there are two types of campaign: the candidate level and the party level. The candidate is effectively campaigning against his own colleagues: "failures of MPs to get elected are due to shifting preference votes within parties, not changes in the aggregate shares of party votes. Incumbents lose to challengers from within their own ranks" (Hirczy, 1995 p. 263).

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. We should also note that a rise in voter turnout in the 1970s coincided with the disappearance of smaller political parties and the increasing polarisation of the electorate into two camps. "Over the course of this period (70s) Malta became a pure, and intensely competitive, two-party system characterised by high partisanship, and often quite confrontational and tumultuous politics" (Smith, 1989, p. 350).

Table 4: 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

(Malta, 2018)

Smith (1989) perceives an erosion of the stark partisan polarisation (in parliament as well as in parliamentary politics) and a decline in the power of government (as a result of future accession to the European Union). However, to date, the partisan polarisation is very much alive (Warrington, 2017). The state’s news system is highly polarised, can be heavily advocative in its style of journalism and has a significant level of democratic engagement. We have shown this nation exercises a high degree of cynicism about the media and public service broadcasting – far more than the other EU 27 members – while also having, globally, the highest voter turnout in its general elections. How does this shape the way the country is positioned democratically and geopolitically?

3.8 Comparing Malta's democratic credentials

All this further demonstrates that Malta does not qualify for the broad Polarised Pluralist model, given the state's considerable polarisation and widespread democratic participation. Together with this, its size and scale have also resulted in a dearth of research into the functioning of its media. This is a country with high levels of political parallelism, and a population that is politically engaged and heavily involved in the democratic process of campaigning and voting.

Historically, the country's news system is polarised and advocative in its journalism; yet, the news has a significant following. While the state exercises limited influence on the institutionally independent media, there is no form of state support and subsidy. What does this tell us about Malta's democratic credentials? Does the level of polarisation and political parallelism impinge on them? Hanitzch and Mellado (2011) devised a simple method to measure political performance, media freedom and economic freedom, using information obtained from publicly available sources.

One measure of political performance is the *Economist Intelligence Unit's* Index of Democracy, which is based on the ratings of sixty indicators and grouped into five categories: electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, the functioning of government, political participation and political culture. These values are used to place countries within one of four types of regimes: full democracies (scores of 8–10), flawed democracies (6–7.9), hybrid regimes (4–5.9) and authoritarian regimes (less than 4). Malta was rated 8.21, determining it a full democracy and ranking it the highest in the region and eighteenth globally. To put this into context, the United States rated 7.96, the UK, 8.53, and Germany, 8.68.

To review media freedom, data from the *Freedom of the Press* series, published by Freedom House, are applied. An independent review of press freedom studies, commissioned

by the Knight Foundation in 2006, found that Freedom of the Press is the best in its class of Press Freedom Indicators (Becker, Vlad, & Nusser, 2007). Although not without its limitations, the index is widely used (ibid., 2007). It is based on rating the answers to 23 questions, which are divided into three broad areas: the legal, political and economic environments. A total score of 30 or less places a country in the free-press group, 31 to 60 in the partly free group, and 61 to 100 in the not-free group (Karlekar, 2005). Malta scored 23, placing it in the free category, in the same position as the United States and slightly better than the UK, which scored 25. Germany scored 20.

The Economic Freedom of the World (EFW) index, annually reported by the *Fraser Institute*, is a measure for economic freedom. It is the most widely applied index of its kind, is known for its relative rigour and transparency (De Haan et al., 2006) and includes five distinct components: (1) size of government, (2) legal structure and security of property rights, (3) access to sound money, (4) freedom to trade internationally, and (5) regulation of credit, labour and business (Gwartney & Lawson, 2008: 5). On the basis of index values, countries were categorised as most free (scores of 8.0 or more), moderately free (7.0–7.9), less free (6.5 to 6.9) or least free (less than 6.5). In this case Malta scored 7.73, ranking it highest in the region. It comes in at seventeenth globally, while the UK is ninth, the US, sixth and Germany, twentieth. With this information in hand, how does Malta compare to other Southern European states?

Malta is anomalous in the Polarised Pluralist system, in that the country is seen to be democratic, has significant political engagement and benefits from press freedom. State subsidy is practically non-existent with a strong democratic performance, comparatively strong press freedom and high political parallelism.

Table 5: Political performance, press freedom, economic freedom

Country	Index of Democracy 2018 (Global ranking)	Freedom of the Press 2017	Economic Freedom 2018 (Global ranking)
Portugal	7.84 (27)	17	7.51 (36)
Spain	8.08 (19)	28	7.56 (30)
France	7.80 (29)	26	7.25 (57)
Italy	7.71 (33)	31	7.27 (54)
Malta	8.21 (18)	23	7.73 (17)
Greece	7.29 (39)	44	6.46 (107)
Cyprus	7.59 (35)	23	7.71 (18)

3.9 Conclusions

Hallin and Mancini note that the distinctions between their media system models have blurred to the point that it is reasonable to ask whether a single, global media model is displacing the national variation of the past, and they highlight that the Liberal media model is becoming increasingly dominant across Europe. The differences are diminishing: “the homogenisation of media systems involves, most centrally, the separation of media institutions from strong ties to the political world” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 251). This is corroborated by Esser and Umbricht, who write that “neo-institutionalism holds that news organisations within various countries become more similar to one another as they, in a historical process, seek to differentiate themselves from their political environments and gain independence” (Esser & Umbricht, 2013, p. X).

This is not the case in Malta, where political advocacy is seen as quintessential to journalism, resulting in an already high and rising level 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 also be argued that they have strengthened in the last twelve years. The level of public engagement indicates that the political class is not removed or detached from the electorate.

Unlike other Southern European states, and while we would expect state subsidy for the media to be present in a polarised model, Malta lacks any form of press subsidy, yet politics is omnipresent. However, subsidy is increasingly viewed, globally, as a necessary policy; indeed, an important prerequisite of a democratic system (Pickard, 2019). 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” (ibid., p. 991). This explanation requires elaboration and clarification in the case of the small state Malta. Could it be that, in Malta, the watchdog role remains and is the essence of local-media polarisation? Do diverse forms of advocacy operate there? What role is advocacy fulfilling in this small state and what form of democracy does it nurture? These questions will be answered in this research.

In our addressal of the main research question, “what drives the construction of news in a small polarised state?”, we have identified the roots of advocacy journalism as being historical, political and cultural. We have noted that, historically, a journalists’ chosen workplace will, in most cases, indicate or influence the political leaning of their work; they are likely to follow their organisation’s framing robustly and vigorously. We have shown that this is well understood by the Maltese, who are discerning about the news they consume. We have

also established that proximity is influential in the electoral process and has considerable bearing on voter intention.

Having established the historical context in which Maltese journalism operates, we shall move on to study three of its news organisations. They display significant differences at all levels, especially in their ownership structures – one is owned by a foundation, another by the state, and the third by private shareholders. Other meaningful distinctions involve their size, routines and culture.

We shall also explore their similarities to help identify other factors that may influence the way news is generally constructed in a small but highly polarised state. These findings can then be used to analyse and compare the content each organisation publishes. This process should help to reveal how these elements influence the construction of news in each organisation.

Chapter Four

Being an outsider: *Malta Today*

4.1 Introduction

Malta Today initially seems very similar to other news organisations subject to time pressures and limited resources, and operating in a polarised political environment. We shall demonstrate it is different in a number of crucial ways, the result of a form of advocacy that's tailored to a polarised readership. We shall question if this mechanism is in place to keep readers of different political persuasions accessing the news, as well as trying to maintain some form of harmony within a news organisation that operates within a polarised framework. Through this, we shall begin to answer our research question, "what drives the construction of news in a small polarised state?"

Editorially, *Malta Today*'s stated aim is to distinguish itself from other news publications which may have more politically partisan agendas. Its journalists believe traditional Maltese media outlets present the world as seen by the institutions, the establishment and political parties, with citizens cast in the role of passive observer. With this in mind, *Malta Today* also strives to be different from *TVM* and *Times of Malta*; we can infer that the dominance of the two main political parties, Partit Nazzjonalista (PN) and Partit Laburista (PL), in news journalism elsewhere is not considered acceptable by this organisation.

As a consequence, it transpires that this newspaper is able to run stories that are politically sensitive and which contest both political parties. Yet, as we shall discover, this does

not mean that *Malta Today* does not have affiliations or agendas. In common with *TVM* and *Times of Malta*, strong links exist with political parties. It also emerges that this news organisation has an influential proprietor, who is also one of its Managing Editors. We shall confirm that his influence is central to the publication's identity, which is, in turn, dominated by an owner with strong political and social views, though not tied to the main political parties. This enables his journalists to pursue their stories unencumbered.

It has also given rise to a rift within the organisation, and its journalists vie for control over the news they cover. What happens within this organisation, and indeed, we shall argue, in all three case studies presented, must be contextualised, not only within the country's regional media system, but also by its nature as a small state. This will demonstrate that, by varying degrees, it is the very fabric of Maltese journalism to be advocating. We shall establish how this engenders coping mechanisms that differentiate the Maltese system from an American Liberal media system and its model of objectivity. By not providing clear political direction, the leadership of *Malta Today* creates a vacuum of influence where journalists are seeking independence, namely for political and ideological reasons. Within their organisation, these journalists are entitled to advocate for the political party they choose. This case study will show us what happens when there lacks clear editorial direction regarding what political stance to adopt.

4.2 Ownership of *Malta Today*

4.2.1 Levels of control

In late 2003, Saviour Balzan purchased *Malta Today* and the *Malta Financial and Business Times* from Network Publications, and subsequently launched a publishing firm called News Works, whose name was eventually changed to Media Today. By 2004, *Malta Today* had become a growing media concern challenging the position of *The Malta*

Independent on Sunday. In 2004, Balzan gained the support of Roger de Giorgio, who was, at the time, Standard Publications' (*The Malta Independent*) Managing Director. He became co-owner, acquiring fifty percent of the company's shares, and brought with him a wealth of experience, having run the PN newspaper *In-Nazzjon* (*The Nation*), as well as having set up the PN TV station *Net TV*.

Unlike *TVM* and *Times of Malta*, *Malta Today* lacks any form of institutional ownership. *Times of Malta* is largely owned by a foundation and *TVM* is owned by the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). Both, in turn, have hierarchical structures that bear influence over the way news is constructed and how the publications operate.

In the *Creditinfo* business report, accessed on 16th August 2018, *Malta Today's* publisher, Media Today, is listed as a limited liability company whose shareholders are Saviour Balzan and a company called Elvaston Company Limited. Elvaston is owned by Roger de Giorgio, his wife and two children, with de Giorgio holding the class-A shares that effectively give him control of the company. Balzan and de Giorgio are the legal and judicial representatives of the company, as well as Directors of it. This immediately brings into play two distinct levels of authority: operational and allocative (Pahl & Winkler, 1974), which we shall see is pertinent, as both shareholders involve themselves strategically and operationally to varying degrees. They share control over the legal and economic infrastructure of the business and are Directors with equal voting rights likewise distinguishes Media Today and, consequently, *Malta Today*, from *TVM* and *Times of Malta*.

As a founder of the green party Alternattiva Demokratika (Democratic Alternative), Balzan's roots are from the arena of third-party politics. Contrasted with this, de Giorgio headed the PN boycott office during their campaign against partisan broadcasting by *Xandir Malta* (known today as *TVM*). While theirs could be viewed as a surprising political alliance, the following interviews will show that this has further anchored the company's position as

politically independent. The reason is that, on the one hand, de Giorgio is removed from the day-to-day running of the business, limiting any form of influence his political affiliation may have had; on the other hand, the interviews show that Balzan, who is deeply involved in the running of the organisation but has no clear attachment to either of the main parties, has allowed his journalists to follow their own choices. To their own minds, this frees them from the self-serving interests of major political parties and corporate players. In stark contrast to *TVM* and *Times of Malta*, this has created close proximity between the operation and the organisation's ownership, and there is no attempt to mask it.

This closeness has allowed Balzan to obtain the role of Managing Editor of *Malta Today*, while simultaneously moving into television broadcasting, presenting two weekly programmes (*Xtra* and *Reporter*) on the state-owned Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). We can safely assume, therefore, that his personality would significantly impact the way news is constructed within this organisation, an implication that needs to be examined. The various roles performed by a Managing Editor need also to be placed in the setting of a small state, because limitation of resources is endemic and allows individuals to perform diverse tasks and roles.

Saviour Balzan has reported on Maltese politics and society for the last thirty years and, as noted, has a political background as a founding member of the Maltese Green movement, *Alternativa Demokratika*. "I contribute by bringing in stories. Most of the 'A' stories are brought in by myself. I do not necessarily write them myself, but I would sign them. Politically, those stories that attack the government are written by me. Those against PN are written by [Executive Editor, Matthew Vella,] or someone else. That is our internal understanding" (Balzan, owner and Managing Editor, *Malta Today*). Balzan's words exemplify that the newspaper's Managing Editor is involved operationally and strategically. This arises primarily as a result of the small size of the organisation and, as will be evidenced, its culture of multi-

tasking. This mode of operating would be unimaginable in an idealised Liberal American media environment, but here we quote one of *Malta Today*'s directors freely and openly recognising direct involvement from the ownership level. The backdrop of intimate business structures within a small state determines this as a norm. This gives Balzan three levels of responsibility, which, in most organisations, would be distributed to separate individuals. He is responsible for the strategic vision, a role which would usually be fulfilled by a board of directors; he runs the organisation very much in the vein of a Managing Director, notwithstanding the fact that its part-time, titular Managing Director is actually Roger de Giorgio; finally, he is Managing Editor, involved in editorial decisions on a regular basis. The size of the country and organisation does not allow for multiple individuals to perform all these roles. Essentially, Balzan has both allocative and operational authority, a level of control that would only be acceptable in a small state, as a direct consequence of its scale.

This scarcity of resources is at variance with what we would identify in larger premier media outlets in the American media model. At *Malta Today*, this does not result from a lack of finance, although this problem does exist. Rather, it reflects an operational scale that normalises professional multi-roling within the Maltese media system. This does not, however, resemble *Times of Malta* and *TVM*, where a clear distinction is drawn between its editorial and directorial roles. Yet, notwithstanding this centralisation of roles, the consequences are not what we would expect within *Malta Today*.

With Balzan involved in both editorial and commercial decision-making, situations inevitably arise that will impact the commercial nature of the organisation and, in these instances, he will have little option but to prioritise financial needs. He has to earn a living and his limited liability company must turn a profit. This results in the need for him to be able to call on a spectrum of perspectives, which necessitates the hiring of individuals with different political agendas. In this way, it could be that news construction is also determined by

organisational needs, in that commercial obligations influence the content that is created. This, in itself, would not be unfamiliar to an American Liberal media system.

Roger de Giorgio's background is also deeply rooted in the media. As a lawyer-turned-businessman, he also has a diverse range of interests, including a nightclub. As described, de Giorgio has been a vociferous supporter of the PN since, at least, the 1980s, yet he has retained a low profile and has shunned publicity. A quiet, softly spoken gentleman, far-removed from the media-mogul stereotype, he was responsible, as noted, for the PN newspaper and TV station. He has described *Malta Today* as a no-holds-barred newspaper which focuses on those in power; interestingly, blind to the reality that he is a member of the very elite that his publication should report on.

This ownership arrangement may seem an affront to the idealised Liberal American media system of fact-based, news-driven, objective reporting. However, we shall discover that the owners' decisions and the way their organisation operates gives journalists the independence they need to advocate their own views. The result is that a broad spectrum of opinion is presented, meaning this news organisation does not fit into the Polarised Pluralist model, in that there exists a freedom to express advocacy which is not determined by ownership or political parties. A lack of direct influence from the ownership of each media organisation is prevalent in all three case studies. However, as we shall see, the key word is, 'direct'.

4.2.2 Boundaries of control

As Managing Editor, Balzan works from the offices of Media Today on a daily basis.

My trepidation is that there is a story which is going to have a backlash from either political or commercial sides [...] But I do not stop them from writing such a thing.

That is the nature of the game. That is how it works. I see that what is written is what

is expected from our readers. If there is a new opinion writer, I get involved. If there is a major change, I get involved. I insist on the story counts. I insist on local news. I know what the editorial is going to be about (Balzan, owner and Managing Editor, *Malta Today*).

His comment highlights that he is involved in the newspaper's day-to-day running and freely admits that he is consistently aware of what its position is. Nonetheless, he states that the final decision on what is published falls to the editors of each masthead or portal. This was attested to by other journalists at the newspaper. "Matthew [Vella] was in charge of the newsroom and Saviour [Balzan] was in charge of the whole company. The editor [Vella] would get a story and assign a journalist, saying, 'this is interesting – follow it'" (senior journalist at *Malta Today*). The implication is clear: the Executive Editor is in control of the routines that dictate how news is constructed. By contrast, de Giorgio's involvement is much less apparent, with the consensus being that he is present, at least, twice a week. "Roger is quiet and looks at the other side of things, which is good as well. He has vast experience. His ideas are valid" (senior journalist at *Malta Today*). In saying this, the news worker referred to de Giorgio's role as being limited to the company's administration.

When we consider the position of the owners, it is difficult to conclude where the boundaries lie in this organisation, given its interlocking interests. It is in this arena that elements such as structure, profitability, target audience, influence of advertisers, competition, roles and ownership come into play to determine how news is constructed. Most of the paper's values and orientations present themselves during the journalists' coverage of news events. Though organisational leaders can dictate content directly with explicit guidelines, most organisational policy is traditional and fixed; in addition to this, journalists learn unwritten practices through experience, very much in the way described by Breed (1955).

Notwithstanding the presence and involvement of its owners, we shall see that, at this newspaper, it is left to the journalists to deduce what their supervisors want, and decide if they wish to deliver it.

The drive exists at *Malta Today* to try to maintain an editorial integrity distinct from the ownership structure of the business. Tellingly, Vella, its Executive Editor, had this to say:

One of the relationships [that has developed] was the owner of the newspaper [Saviour Balzan] becoming a little newspaper baron – OK, now you’re going to start speaking to other directors of newspapers; then you are going to start speaking to politicians; then you will have the confidence of certain politicians. So, it happened in the history of *Malta Today* that it became an antagonistic relationship with the Nationalist [PN] government from 2004 onwards. This was after EU accession, because of certain issues, from the divorce referendum onwards – certain criticisms of the Nationalists’ government, the establishment, disagreements on policies, the environment and things like that. After 2013, there was more proximity with the powers that be [PL government] and the owner of the newspaper. A very normal development, and I believe any newspaper director and owner has certain proximity to people in power. Business leaders. Religious leaders. *The Times [of Malta]* has been close to the establishment, and so what? What newspaper does not have this? (Vella, Executive Editor, *Malta Today*.)

Vella indicates that allegiance to a political party at *Malta Today* originates from its editorial direction and, as we shall see, from the advocacy of the individual journalist. However, it is not a permanently anchored political alignment. Nor is it ultimately defined by the shareholders. This differs somewhat from *TVM*, as well as *Times of Malta*, and this is a crucial

point. We find varying levels of political alignment among these news organisations and shall need to explore if this is determined by the ownership structure.

Vella makes a further point that issues were coming to the surface when senior journalists began questioning the agenda of the newspaper's owners, becoming increasingly uncomfortable with what they perceived as a cosy relationship with a power elite. Significantly, this influence was also adamantly denied by Vella. In effect, his above statement touches on the key factor of proximity. Political and commercial relationships are easier to maintain in a small state, as they often overlap social and cultural elements of Maltese society. In this way, we are able to understand the relationships that surround Balzan as Managing Editor.

This discussion is also present at *TVM*, where we shall note the ways in which proximity forms boundaries within the organisation and results in what the textual analysis concludes is a kind of 'neutered' news reporting. At *Malta Today*, the picture is very different:

That is where we were not completely aligned, which makes it very interesting. I think it is actually healthy for a newsroom. We were not all politically aligned. In fact, it was very clear. Some people were pro-Labour, others were pro-PN, in the middle or pro-PD. There was no specific party. Even if there were people who were clearly backing one party, they got neutralised by others... Given that the editorial line is not top down, there was no imposition as to what questions need to be asked
(Ibid.)

Vella is clear that there is no politically aligned editorial policy. This is unusual. *Malta Today* is not positioning itself as a model of balanced, objective journalism, in that there is no attempt to prevent advocative journalism. This also varies radically from what we see at *Times of Malta*.

Perhaps balance is not viewed as allowing both sides to have their say in a debate, but rather to allow journalists to frame a debate in relation to their interpretation of reality.

While the editorial team vocalised its desire not to establish a political line, boundaries or agenda, the unspoken perception of ownership moving closer to government – real or imagined – created tension within the organisation. This problem was underlined by the reputation and drive of Balzan and highlights the issue of perceived or genuine conflict of interest between ownership structure and the political elite.

It is fair to say that there was a clear drive to allow journalists at *Malta Today* to write freely, supported by the culture and routines within the newspaper, yet questions were still being asked about the motives of its owners. This led to a fracturing in the historically strong relations between the organisational leadership and its senior journalists. Its clearest manifestation was the resignation of one of *Malta Today*'s most prominent reporters James Debono, in 2017, months after the general election of that same year. Anecdotally, it can be surmised that his departure was a consequence of what he considered the weak stand the publication took against the government's position on good governance. He demanded a more robust stand. In an intriguing turn-around, he returned to *Malta Today* by February 2018. The acceptance of Debono back into the fold is testament to his calibre, the company's collegial ethos, as well as the fact that he may not have fully grasped the cultural currents prevalent during the 2017 election.

This tells us that the professional parameters at this newspaper are blurred and led to confusion over the different levels of control. Journalists largely felt empowered to stand up for the issues they believed in, which we shall see is a recurring theme throughout the three case studies. The margins of each organisation have allowed journalists to frame events in the manner they see fit. They are not controlled by organisational boundaries, nor are they constrained by conventions of objectivity and balance. Clearly, this happens to varying degrees

at each outlet, but it is anyway distinct from a model of news-driven journalism. This distinction is vital because, though Malta's media do not fit comfortably within a Liberal American system, nor does it find a natural place in a Polarised Pluralist system.

4.3 Organisational structure and routines

Saviour Balzan's livelihood depends on the success of his business. He has shared a political affinity with a minor political party and has a deeply anchored belief in the values of his news organisation. It is also obvious that his character looms large over the company. While the ownership of most newspapers has some form of influence, the literature points out that its extent depends on organisational structure and routines. "First of all, I think there was a perception in the beginning that *Malta Today* is Saviour Balzan. In the last six months, people realised there was more than Saviour Balzan" (Balzan, owner and Managing Editor at *Malta Today*). Mr. Balzan is stating that his influence is diminishing. He adds, "my role, my first obligation, is to the truth. In this melee of being owner and Managing Editor, and glorified journalist, I do find ways of finding a balance" (ibid.). This balance seems to be confirmed by *Malta Today*'s staff, as one of the commonalities through their interviews was an attitude of respect towards him. A feeling of imposition is never expressed: "I am not sure if Saviour was imposing. Saviour is a dominant character. I don't know how much he imposed the agenda. He sparks the agenda. He gives you the spark and we say, 'yes, look, let's run with it'" (senior journalist at *Malta Today*). It must be noted that Balzan also has the power to override organisational structure and routines, simply because he defines them. This is possible in Malta, as in other similar small states, as a direct result of relative size and scale.

There is a counter-argument to the idea that Balzan holds too much control over his newspaper. Despite Balzan having a past political affiliation, his paper is not associated with a

political party, and having an owner who is also Managing Editor is described as a strength at a newspaper with an anti-establishment outlook: “When you are owned by a person who is the Managing Editor and a businessman, it is very easy not to have institutional ties. It is very easy to tell someone to fuck off in the paper. No problem” (Vella, Executive Editor, *Malta Today*). Here, the Executive Editor states that he directly benefits from the active engagement of his Managing Editor. The point being made is that Balzan acts as a shield: Vella suggests that the shareholder’s influence and positioning liberates and strengthens their hand. The presence of the owner within organisational routines also offers tacit support for all that is written and presented. It is this type of insight that necessitates interviewing executives from each organisation. Without this level of access, many defining issues would remain otherwise unaddressed.

This is similarly expressed in the *TVM* case study, in which the role of Head of News is portrayed as a defining personality within the organisation and of having a beneficial influence. In effect, he, too, was seen as a buffer; the Managing Editor and the Head of News at *TVM* deflect criticism from journalists. This sentiment stands in direct contradiction to the theory expressed in the literature that these leadership roles serve only as so-called gatekeepers.

This can be interpreted as a form of coping mechanism and speaks to us about the media environment in a polarised system in a small state. The very fact that a figurative protective shield exists tells us that there are heightened pressures born from proximity and scale. This deflection tool is a response to working within a polarised system and offers us an alternative view from the editor as gatekeeper, as has been expressed in academia thus far. This denotes that, in certain instances, the presence of leadership is empowering, especially under the pressures that come with a journalists’ close proximity to a source. We should note this is not the case at *Times of Malta*, where we see that the hierarchy has devolved editorial control to the journalists themselves, with resultant journalist-dominated advocacy.

Beyond this, Saviour Balzan readily admits that he has influence on editorial output, perhaps not as he did in the past, and recognises that he must allow his editors the latitude to take their own decisions, even if they do not move the political direction he would like. His personal political beliefs, being removed from the mainstream of Maltese politics, gives him the mental flexibility to accept divergent political views. Although he has both allocative and operational control, there is internal consensus that he acts judiciously, and this is captured in the attitude of some news workers, who are vociferous in defending the newspaper's editorial integrity. When discussing editorial policy, one journalist has this to say:

It's a tough one. I do not remember being consulted on it, but I do not remember having a problem with it either. I think what it was – we used to have discussions every day. We are all journalists. In the newsroom [...] we would know where we would stand on these issues. We did not need a formal meeting. So, they knew I was in favour of migrant's rights. Spring hunting: there were some hiccups because some people were related to hunters. Overall, there was no friction. I did not feel there were some journalists who were forced to take a stance that went against what they actually believed. I did feel that, for myself, it was definitely not the case.

This journalist tells us that the editorial policy was understood because of shared values: “we would know where we stand on these issues”. It is not dictated by the Managing Editor. The policy is communicated between journalists and is a result of like-minded individuals gravitating towards a news outlet they can relate to.

One reason for this journalistic confidence is that the newspaper has routines which invite open discussion. During these briefings news workers are encouraged to pitch their own stories and offer input. The regular newsroom meetings are structured thus:

There was a Managing Editor at the top, then the editor, the deputy editors and the journalists [...] at the start of the day, the editors would say, ‘this is what you are going to work on’ [...] there was space for the individual journalist to do what they want. [...] I did not need to ask my editor. No, in fact, it was encouraged – and if a good story comes out you write it (senior journalist at *Malta Today*).

This depicts the structure of this organisation as hierarchical and robust, in that it allows contributions from journalists, in an open environment, to establish the salience of events that the newsroom would like to cover. It does not transpire from interviews that the leadership structure has a dampening effect on the construction of news, much unlike what would usually be expected in a Polarised Pluralist system. However, the possibility cannot be entirely excluded; there is no yardstick to precisely measure the level of involvement of any business owner within their company.

The interviews show that *Malta Today*’s organisational structure creates a forum for the generation of ideas; journalists with differing opinions can openly air their concerns to one another. This has resulted in journalists taking on contradictory positions, which is, in a sense, encouraged by the editorial team. The editors confront the opposing views, but at no time would this confrontation stifle the journalists’ story.

In this, *Malta Today* parts from the other case studies, in that its routines create a field in which views are confronted and questioned. The key point is that, of the three organisations studied, only *Malta Today* holds daily newsroom meetings. We shall later examine the reasons the others do not.

4.4 The Culture of *Malta Today*

One of the key elements to understanding the culture of *Malta Today* is to appreciate its history. When he joined the newspaper as Executive Editor in early 2001, Vella got the impression that he was definitely *not* joining a conservative newspaper: “little bit radical, left of centre, pro-European, and readier to take on the establishment” (Vella, Executive Editor, *Malta Today*). He elaborates on the political leaning of key members of the newsroom: “I think everyone who has been in an editorial position or a senior position, [for example,] Karl Schembri, James Debono – everyone came from a sort of radical green left of centre origin” (ibid.). This was further amplified when associates from the same political network surrounding the Alternativa Demokratika party (AD) also joined *Malta Today*. This resulted in a group of like-minded individuals working together “when it came to set the newspaper: setting leaders, gay rights, tax justice – these things. These were par for the course for us. They were the normal things we would have to talk about...” (senior journalist at *Malta Today*). This statement is important, as it reveals a detail inadequately covered in the current literature: how news workers choose which media outlets to work for. One of the primary reasons for joining a news organisation seems to be a respect for its projected values and politics. Indeed, this is a trend we shall discover in all three case studies. At *Malta Today*, news workers have chosen *not* to join an organisation with links to the major political parties.

Journalists at *Malta Today* appear to feel duty to question the political dominance, according to a stated ethos, while earning themselves a reputation for speed and sensationalism – a positioning not without consequence. As a result of this type of news, the organisation has faced the financial stress of libel lawsuits. These strengthened the bonds, culture and relationships within the company, and eventually shaped the way their news is constructed.

Another defining event in the cultural formation of *Malta Today* that is mentioned in the interviews was in May 2006, when, early in the morning, the editor’s home (then, Balzan)

was attacked by arsonists. No one was ever arrested for the attack. These challenges were landmark moments in the history of the publication, and helped build a culture of rallying support around the newspapers' leadership, specifically the Managing Editor and shareholder, Saviour Balzan, as well as imbuing strong reverence for the responsibility shouldered by him.,

In common with our other case studies, *Malta Today* does not have a written editorial policy. As a result, although the organisation's ethos and culture are frequently expressed as being very important, the way this is diffused at this newspaper is through members of its editorial staff. They themselves outline whom they are working for and what the company's history is. "In a way, it happens like you are telling a story. Like a tribe. That is why these [journalists who have been with the newspaper since inception] are really important" (journalist at *Malta Today*). The reporter refers to an oral culture through which the values of the newsroom and organisation are conveyed, and which leads to a form of mentoring, as alluded to in the literature. The paper has its own reputation for how it recruits staff and attracts, what it terms, 'a certain type'.

This type of social control in the newsroom is a result of the fact that senior editorial staff have built their reputations over many years and are, in turn, mentors to newcomers. This theme occurs in all three newsrooms studied and is prevalent in the literature reviewed. But little thought is given to the moderating effect that senior journalists may have on new recruits. What happens in a news organisation when the forcefulness and agency of individual characters nudges newcomers towards a particular agenda? In a polarised system, we are led to accept the presence of advocacy, yet the literature does not probe elements of advocacy in a workplace culture that is imbalanced and where individual agency is being stifled or ignored. What happens when a senior journalist has an overriding political agenda that dominates, and this is not addressed? How would this influence new recruits?

4.4.1 Socialisation

The idea of mentorship is built around a reinforcement of positive ideals, which are very much inspired by the ideal of balanced and objective journalism. In a polarised advocacy-based model, this could result in a problem. At *Malta Today*, a mentorship culture created a unity of purpose. In the other case studies, this was not necessarily the case. We note that, while at *TVM* it is felt that the unwritten editorial policy has to be explained to newcomers, this form of mentorship is not said to be prevalent at *Times of Malta*. In the latter case, the sentiment that emanated from the interviews was that mentorship culture forces newer members of staff in a particular political direction. A lack of a daily routine where the journalist is able to openly query and contest issues does have a dampening effect on that newsroom. We shall delve further into this in chapter six.

At *Malta Today*, the mechanism promoting conformity is the socialisation of the journalist, with regard to the norms of their job. The journalist reads her own paper or website; initially, it seems simple for the new recruit to understand the paper's characteristics; she tends to fashion her own stories after those she sees in it. At the same time, certain actions taken by editors and senior journalists also serve as controlling but indirect guides. The way the publication covered the Panama Papers in 2016, and the subsequent events, showcases this workplace culture.

The significance of the Panama Papers to Malta, released in April 2016, was that they disclosed that two prominent government officials had set up trusts in New Zealand through companies in Panama. The political fallout was severe, forcing the Prime Minister to publicly state that he still had confidence in both officials. He removed the ministerial portfolio of one, but allowed him to retain the position of Minister. This penalty was seen as a political slap on the wrist. It is remarked by journalists that the period following the release of the Panama Papers was one of the most difficult faced by *Malta Today*, and it affected relationships between members of staff. The reason behind this was that some of the editorial team, who, by

their own admission, never hesitated to write what they wished to report, became involved in civil society in an active way.

It was pointed out on a number of occasions that the editors (both Managing and Executive) did not prevent them from being involved. The journalists were only directed that they could not take a front row seat at any activities or events. Most of the journalists disobeyed, and yet no internal action was taken against their decision or actions. “Irrespective of the fact that they had all the freedom they wanted, they still interpreted our lack of zeal on certain issues as censorship, which was not the case. They still did their analysis; they still did their opinions. They still carried this reportage. There was an element of souring” (Vella, Executive Editor, *Malta Today*). It is evident that, while over the last seventeen years the newsroom had been united on their editorial stance when an issue arose, in 2016, this began to change.

The belief is that some editorial staff became more politically motivated in 2016, creating a rift in the newsroom. “Perhaps we— when I say ‘we’, I mean, me [Balzan, Managing Editor], Matthew [Vella, Executive Editor] and, to a certain extent, Miriam [senior journalist] — got more sensitive to what the government was saying. I would not say agree [with the government].” This caused friction. Until then, over seventeen years, the newspaper’s reporters had been given the space to write, to report, to be issue-driven and to create an issue-oriented paper on their own terms. The difficulty faced was that the independent press in Malta were taking an aggressively anti-government position. This is apparent in their editorial positions and the verbal exchanges in audio visuals on their news websites, and can also be identified by the textual analysis conducted within this research. This weighed heavily on some *Malta Today* journalists because, as also noted in the literature, they are writing for and emulating both their own colleagues in their newsroom, and also their counterparts at other news organisations (Schudson, 2005; Curran et al, 2017).

A parallel can be drawn with why a number of the top legacy media houses in the United States were following one particular agenda in the last US election. Benkler et al. (2018) extracted an unusual pattern: attacks from the right happened not only to the left and Trump's Republican rivals, but also against media outlets on the right that did not fully support his candidacy. This led to attacks on traditional institutions on both sides of the political spectrum. To an extent, this was mirrored in Malta. This offers answers to questions about people such as senior journalist James Debono – for example, who was he writing for? It could well be that he was writing for an audience of other like-minded journalists. The journalists' agenda may be their pet peeve, or an issue they want to champion.

Balzan has this to say: “keeping in mind I do not give a fuck about these institutions; I need to write what I see and what I believe is correct” (Balzan, Managing Editor, *Malta Today*). While this may be true within this business, a feeling is also conveyed that the journalists at *Malta Today* were acutely aware of their paper's anomalous position among other English-language news organisations, and some resented this at the time. This breaks from the historical precedent laid out in chapter three. But it is also a significant indication that the journalists were confident enough in their profession to adopt the mindset of ‘not giving a fuck’. As a result, they were able to construct the news in the way they saw fit.

In itself, this approach is far from the kind of advocacy we would expect to see in a Polarised Pluralist system, and shows that advocacy at *Malta Today* has been driven by journalists themselves and has even generated divergent forms of news reporting. It was a bipolar advocacy which, we shall outline, created a form of balance and internal pluralism. It could also be said that this form of pluralism is polarised.

We may now start to recognise the value of advocacy in the context of a news media's role in a democracy. While the American objectivity-based model makes its arguments for a liberal representative democracy, in Malta, advocacy may represent value in a monitory form

of democracy. Perhaps we are beginning to see a role for advocacy as a tool to monitor the elite and political class, and ensure that diverse voices are heard. We shall develop this proposition further.

What is clear is that an organisation that has built its strength on a cohesive and unified purpose and policy, which had afforded it the reputation as the newsroom which asked the hard questions, was experiencing unsettling disagreements. This was likely a result of the level of advocacy journalism that had driven the journalists at *Malta Today*.

In a sense, this goes counter to what we shall see happening within *TVM* and *Times of Malta*. The socialisation within *TVM* led to a very hierarchical method of constructing the news, which centred around the Head of News. In this case, we shall show that advocacy, though present, was limited, even neutered. *Times of Malta*, on the other hand, displays a very uniform direction of news, based around the frames that are rendered by a number of senior journalists. In turn, this also fosters a linear approach to advocacy. This also speaks to us about the position of the individual journalist within the Maltese system. Although hierarchy was a determining factor at *TVM*, this is not the case within *Malta Today* and *Times of Malta*. What does this begin to tell us about advocacy in a small state?

4.4.2 A culture of advocacy

We have stated that *Malta Today* was founded on a culture of internal cohesion and typified by a unified external front, primarily because they did not have an overriding political agenda. Yet, some journalists could not understand why *Malta Today* maintained a relationship with the government in 2017, and equated this connection with the influence of Balzan, who they believed may have been acting in commercial interests. However, the argument put forward by Vella is simple:

I think that [communication with the government] may have rubbed people the wrong way [...] in the sense that they start questioning the origins of a story. When they start questioning the origins of a story [...] because access journalism can give you certain stories which can come from certain sources, since when is that a problem? Do stories have to originate from the opposition only? Can it come from a government source? Leaks are very common. What's wrong with that? (Vella, Executive Editor, *Malta Today*).

Vella addresses the enduring debate on the self-serving relationships media outlets maintain with government institutions in a Southern European media system. Yet this is a trait which is divergent in the Maltese context, a trait which, to varying degrees, appeared in all three case studies.

In the lower echelons of this editorial team, resistance built up against the institutions of government. Interestingly, this met with no opposition from the organisational leadership. At the top editorial level, a need was felt to keep all doors open; some journalists interpreted this as a political overture. The difficulty was not that junior journalists were flying their own political flag, but problems did arise when they attempted to pressure or exclude other opinions. This could be a symptom of unbridled advocacy:

They wanted to fly the flag of opposition, which was perfectly acceptable. We did not have a problem with that, even though we had pressure from the government. But that is part of the game. I fought with people in government. I told them to fuck off and I defended my journalists in every way I could, but it was hard for them [journalists] to understand what was happening behind the scenes and I think they misinterpreted when we tried to convey what we were going through (Ibid.).

Vella is suggesting that, regardless of his or any journalist's personal belief, facts need to be borne out and all institutions have the right to reply, a position akin to a model of balance and objectivity. The internally fraught atmosphere at *Malta Today* is a departure from its original identity and could prove to be a destructive weakness. On the one hand, it takes confidence and resolve to ensure questions are asked at all levels of a news organisation about how news stories are chosen. On the other hand, the way it is done can be corrosive; the period we are examining ended with a number of senior journalists resigning, for reasons ranging from conflict over editorial policy to the stress of covering a polarised general election. Vella's approach does incorporate a form of internal pluralism, albeit in this case a polarised one, as a result of the agency his journalists have and how their personal advocacy creates a form of internal accountability.

As noted, the Panama Papers story showed itself to be a polarising story in Malta for a number of reasons, ranging from the ethical to the political and legal; "Panama Papers radicalised a lot of people. If you saw it on social media, it radicalised people. It just radicalised people" (journalist at *Malta Today*). This raised the journalistic temperature and, in a sense, created a feeling of crusade:

They saw that this, Panama Papers, was so serious in their eyes that [they said,] 'don't give me this bullshit about journalism, there is something bigger'. And these people [*Malta Today* journalists] felt that they were the people out there to say it. OK, choose your role. You want to be a columnist. You can sit on your arse and pontificate. But if you are going to be a reporter and a journalist, that is a different job... (Vella, Executive Editor, *Malta Today*).

What Vella is referring to above is whether the paper should have taken on a more singular advocacy journalism line. The textual analysis shows that the publication did, in fact, shift to a form of advocacy, but it was based on issues championed by individual journalists and not those of the organisation as a whole. The newspaper allowed them to take strong positions on the way their news was being written, filmed and framed. The textual analysis shows that different journalists were even publishing divergently framed news stories on the same day. These circumstances find no equivalence in the existing literature (Waisbord, 2009), which presents advocacy as a propaganda tool for political institutions. Perhaps what we find here is a kind of balance being created through advocacy and ensuring different voices are heard.

This is not typical of a Polarised Pluralist system, in that there was no real uniformity of message within this organisation. We are beginning to see that Malta stands apart from this model, in that there are clear, strong and, crucially, contradictory forms of advocacy. We shall see that all three news publications produced irregular forms of advocacy, which were defined by the way the journalists positioned themselves. The argument set forth is that this is the way in which this instance of internal pluralism dealt with a polarised market: advocacy journalism geared toward a polarised society.

This shift met with opposition from without the paper. Vella rebelled against the way *Malta Today* was being treated: “in a way, I felt radicalised, as well, by the way the opposition used to speak about *Malta Today*. In the end, I lost patience. This is not a serene way. It has cost people. Even over here. Some people will leave *Malta Today* not because of politics, [but] because they are psychologically stressed out for being under attack for asking a question. It will happen” (Ibid.). In the highly politicised and polarised society that is Malta, we identify that politics creates cultural and real – even fiscal – capital, as a result of proximity. We noted in chapter three how electioneering in Malta has real influence among voters. This means that

politics raises the stakes within this culture. These must be examined, in order to grasp how news is constructed in this small state.

4.4.3 Bias or framing

This leads to the issue of whether a form of bias was infiltrating the way the news was being constructed. The literature tells us that when sources are split on an issue, with two or more sides faithfully representing the differing viewpoints of knowledgeable experts, the news tends to offer broad, credible viewpoints (Bennet, 2016). We shall establish that what we have in *Malta Today* is a bi-polar advocacy, with the two sides monitoring each other.

To a lesser extent, we also find this at *TVM*. If one faction is more powerful and faces no substantial opposition, then the news tends to be one-sided, even if it is out of touch with important evidence or popular viewpoints. This is not what seems to have happened at *TVM*; however, it did at the *Times of Malta*. The PN, the government opposition, sent out powerful anti-government messaging that alleged corruption at all levels, questioning its authenticity and highlighting weaknesses in good governance. This made them a strong entity, in the eyes of the independent Maltese, English-speaking media.

The news media was effective in making Maltese society think about the lack of good governance, but failed to produce a consensus on the PN point of view. The scale of the PL victory makes it reasonable to assume that the negative press campaign, a style of journalism typically associated with American news media and electioneering, boomeranged against the opposition and created a wall of cognitive dissonance. The message of good governance – or the lack of it, was lost on the general population; yet, the textual analysis shows that it became the main focus of some journalists and editors at *Malta Today*. This spread to the very roots of journalism in *Malta Today* and the English-language newspapers in Malta.

However, this also indicates that, within this organisation, we cannot really detect the presence of a singular bias because, as a whole, it has an internal system of checks and balances, and has framed each story around the personal belief of the journalist who wrote it. Very much like the news media in the Liberal American context, *Malta Today* was its own watchdog. In a very real sense, we can see Entman's cascade activation theory in action, with the political elite setting the agenda in the English-language press. The knowledge nodes of the English-language news workers were being activated. But the cascade did not have its intended impact.

4.4.4 Cultural framing

During the interviews, the point is made that a certain type of classism exists within Maltese journalism that finds a need to 'trash' what is seen to belong to a lower, uneducated cohort. The word *hamali* is used, a pejorative term referring to individuals or groups of a lower social class which the speaker considers lacking in cultural capital: "'fat people'; *hamili*; 'the working class that just votes for Labour'. Why do these prejudices find a home in the English-language newspapers? Because they do find a home. I am sure it's not something ingrained. Why? One reason is that the [...] people that go into journalism tend to be more middle class" (senior journalist at *Malta Today*).

Unknowingly, the journalists and editors at *Malta Today* are asking hard questions of themselves about how their own background has influenced what stories are pursued, and how they mirror the political and economic elite. The middle-class dominance of the journalistic profession in Malta guarantees their loyalty to the system. Deeply embedded in the psyche of the English-language newspaper is a historical stereotype of what it means to be a labour supporter or politician; according to it, the supporter does not speak English. This cultural contextualisation of language, apparent in Malta, forms a backdrop to all three case studies but

is absent from the comparative literature previously reviewed. Its relevance lies in the consideration of how the international press acquires its information about Malta.

As established in chapter three, language has always been inherent in the political identity of the Maltese. It could be said that this tainted the reporting at *Malta Today* and soured relations within the organisation, as the issue of social class came into play from two different angles. Firstly, it is noted that most of the newspaper's journalists and editors have attended independent or catholic schools, historically the preserve of the middle-class. Secondly, the readership of the country's English-language newspapers is primarily middle class. The implication is that journalists at *Malta Today* write for members of their own class, in the public and among their own colleagues. They echoed the way their counterparts at other publications wrote about Labour because they had an embedded view of what it meant to support that party. This key element is also covered in the literature reviewed.

Social science research is unequivocal in stating that journalists themselves, of their own volition, limit the range of perspectives presented in the news. Part of the reason for this is that journalists operate within conventional parameters of opinion, and theirs are most commonly held by the university-educated middle class. The interviews show that the staff at *Malta Today* has an apparent social conscience, and it therefore does not sit comfortably with them that they could relate to this suggestion of bias. This contributed to tensions within the organisation and influenced how its news was constructed. On the one hand, *Malta Today* recognised its duty to elucidate the problems that matter to the margins of Maltese society; on the other, some continued to want to distance themselves from their perception of what it means to be a Labour supporter.

A social conscience does exist in this organisation and a culture of top-down loyalty also prevailed at *Malta Today* – unusual in a news industry under economic pressure:

My other strength is running an organisation where people are hands on. Trying to monetise every single minute that there is. If I have a sales executive that does not sell, I don't kick her out, I see if she can move into another place. So, one sales executive could not sell, so now she is designing. She has a degree. She is writing for the supplements. She is doing some sponsored content for online (Balzan, owner and Managing Editor, *Malta Today*).

This highlights that finances are not the sole reason for determining whether a member of staff is retained or not. Within a small state, a limitation of resources does not always allow for a termination of employment based on organisational needs; this make-do mentality establishes itself, simply because there is no alternative. This also shows us that *Malta Today's* organisational culture includes a strong work ethic and a willingness to acquire new skills. It comes across as a place where the news workers are prepared to fulfil different roles as the need arises, with multitasking, in some cases, even taken to an extreme. "Sometimes I will write a story here and there. I coordinate the sport. But my main job is design. Taking care of the magazines and the newspapers. I used to take care of IT, but we expanded so much that we had to hire someone permanent. I had started working with the website in the beginning" (news worker at *Malta Today*). The conditions of size and multitasking in a small-state news organisation arose on a number of occasions in these case studies; it is a vital component in understanding the way news is constructed in a country like Malta. We shall return to this later in the chapter.

4.5 External pressures

In common with what we would find in American news organisations, the issue of commercial pressure on editorial content does exist at *Malta Today*, and there is acknowledgment that some reporting could impact the organisation negatively. However, at no

point was commercial pressure positioned as a central issue in determining what it publishes. It is clear that news construction at *Malta Today* is not curtailed to appease its commercial partners.

4.5.1 Commercial pressure

The pressures divulged in the interviews were varied in nature. Among them are changing technology and the economics of online news, which undermine the separation of editorial and business functions. The commercial interests of Maltese news organisations are intensified because of issues, again, arising from size. Not only do they scabble for an ever-decreasing source of revenue, in common with other news organisations globally, but they also have to compete in a small market and with limited resources. It is within this framework, too, that we should consider the digitisation of news within *Malta Today* and the imperative to ensure website traffic does result in the need to upload and update stories. We also sense, in textual analysis, a more robust, edgy style of reporting popular in digital domains. We shall come to this later.

At a strategic level, there is some disagreement with management about the way sales are handled in *Malta Today*. The feeling, expressed by editorial staff, is that sales should be led by a manager who liaises with the editorial team, and who jointly understands the purpose of news and sales. The argument is made that native content gives value to the reader, as well as its sponsor. A comparison is made to strategies adopted by companies like *The Economist*, where commercial copy is written in-house for its advertisers. In this way, high-quality content is produced for the benefit of both reader and sponsor. “Why not? I think it is something newspapers have to do. I do not see any ideological difficulties there. It has to be done the right way” (senior journalist at *Malta Today*). This idea has been mooted but not implemented.

The issue of advertising influence is brought to the fore on a number of occasions, as in this case:

In Malta, there are two or three papers where you can write [...] the journalist may write something, not here [*Malta Today*], and the director might get a phone call. You may have a fantastic story [about] a company and that company is one of your biggest advertisers. I think that should be separate. Obviously, if a person is going to cut our funds you have to listen to him (news worker at *Malta Today*).

Here, the news worker implies that a form of commercial pressure can be exerted on news organisation directors – but not at *Malta Today*. Among the sales team, throughout their interviews there is a sense of unease regarding the necessary distinction between the editorial and commercial branches of the organisation. “With regards to stories, it is a problem, because the journalists could not care less who the clients are. If there is a story that they need to come out with, no matter how good the client is, no matter how the client supports the company, they will just do it. They couldn't care less” (senior sales executive at *Malta Today*). The sales team asserts that they have no awareness of stories the newsroom is running before they are published. Nor is there any evidence of attempts to intervene in the editorial process, notwithstanding the effect a story may have on sales revenue. “I feel very angry, because they are my clients and I have a relationship with my clients. So, I feel offended myself, in a way, for them to interfere with my clients. Then again, it is a newspaper; it's a medium; it is an investigative newspaper; I cannot stop the journalists coming out with any story” (senior sales executive at *Malta Today*). While commercial pressures are accepted as the nature of the business, particularly as advertising sales become increasingly difficult to secure in the

newspaper industry, it can also be argued that those interviewed are not influenced by the business demands placed on journalism in liberal systems.

On this issue, all three Maltese news organisations were consistent: a clear line is drawn between commercial and editorial opinion. The latter was unsympathetic: “editorial and sales were kept quite separate as much as possible. There were clashes. The journalist would not even know if what they are writing is going to impact a salesperson [...] He would not run it past sales, he would not ask if this was stepping on someone’s toes. There were clashes” (senior journalist at *Malta Today*). The organisation enabled this dynamic (or lack thereof), despite the financial pressures being exerted on it externally, as well as internally. We can thus conclude that the news was not being constructed to facilitate commercial interests, even though, as noted, unlike other Southern European/Polarised Pluralist states Maltese news organisations receive no state subsidy or allowance. This form of state influence does not exist, and nor do the funds that could emanate from it.

The frustration of the newspapers’ sales departments regarding their lack of influence when a news story could impede sales is palpable. It seems that Maltese news organisations differ from other more liberal media systems, in that journalists and editors still feel removed from the commercial necessities of the running of the organisation. This signifies where their priorities lie. The focus is on the news and the drive to advocate their individual causes. What particularly stands out as abnormal, however, is a sense that, over the years, there has existed a rising political pressure which could also impact advertising sales.

4.5.2 Political pressure

Malta Today has come to terms with the need to be inventive in the way it goes about securing its livelihood. The organisation sees the value of distinguishing between the need to sell and the need to tell ‘the real story’. However, the most powerful and disheartening element disclosed in the interviews is present in instances where pressure of a political nature, which

seems to prevail in Maltese journalistic culture, spills over into the commercial domain. Balzan makes note of a point in history when *Malta Today* was very pro-PN, especially during the referendum to join the European Union, which took place in March 2003. Subsequent to this, he made the decision to support one of the PN candidates, John Dalli, during a party leadership contest. Dalli lost, and both Balzan and *Malta Today* were ostracised by the PN, the very party he had been supporting. There was a backlash that affected advertising and resulted, to his mind, in politically motivated libel:

Advertising [...] were badly hit. We had to remove a certain amount of staff. There is a history to all this. So, I am very much conscious of the fact. No television programmes [from Public Broadcasting under a PN government]. They were removed. This all affected our revenue stream. This did have an effect on the way I think but I do not think it had an effect on the principle motive of the media organisation that ‘content was king’ and if there was a story, there was a story (Balzan, owner and Managing Editor, *Malta Today*).

Balzan suggests the presence of political vindictiveness directed toward news organisations, which is amplified due to the size and scale of state advertising spending, relative to the country’s size. This amount of political pressure exposes an extreme which is unusual and certainly adds another dimension to the country’s media system. Here we find an example of how Malta falls in line with what would be expected from a Polarised Pluralist system.

This political pressure, in the form of polarisation, grew in 2013 with the election victory of the PL, led by Joseph Muscat, after twenty-two years of Nationalist (PN) rule. The opposition was in no mood to give any quarter to a new government:

As a member of the press, I watched the opposition take umbrage if we questioned them. They would be annoyed. The opposition leader (Simon Busuttil) would say ‘why are you asking me this question? You should ask the Prime Minister; I am the opposition leader.’ But there were stories about the PN that had to be written. Every time we wrote them, we would be attacked for diverting attention from something else. My Beppe Fenech Adami [Deputy leader of the opposition] story, which came from an external source to Malta, was accused as a foil to divert attention [from] the LNG [liquified natural gas] tanker [that] was coming into Malta that Sunday (Vella, Executive Editor, *Malta Today*).

The newspaper’s leadership is acutely aware of the political tightrope that has to be traversed. It needs revenue and has experienced the challenge of a government trying to stifle it. Yet the distinction between its commercial and editorial arms still exist, as you would expect it to in an objective, balanced and credible news organisation based on the historic Liberal American media model. This is an organisation whose proprietor is also Managing Editor, a type of owner-editor, but who apparently continues to prioritise editorial integrity. We shall argue that *Malta Today* is unusual because journalists are allowed their own brand of advocacy. These journalists want to be independent, not because of professional reasons but for ideological ones. This independence allows them to pursue their ideological aims.

We have found that the Managing Editor, owner and controller, Saviour Balzan, allows the shift because it empowers the journalists and editorial staff; and, in this way, he is able to create a form of balance. This, in turn, makes sense from a commercial, political and journalistic point of view. Having constructed a dominant organisation which has had internal conflict, he has conceded to his journalists the freedom to frame their own agendas. A key question emanates from this: why did the media owner(s) decide to delegate control to

journalists and allow them to follow the party of their choice? The answer to this is that internal pluralism, by allowing different perspectives to be reported in his paper, is a device for coping with a polarised country. In the United States, the standard position has been one of neutrality. Contrasting views of readers are catered to through the use of a neutral tone. This is a different road from *Malta Today's* response to a more polarised society. Its Managing Editor has facilitated an internal pluralism to keep readers of all political inclinations happy. While this marketing strategy could make good business sense because, in this way, the newspaper can appeal to diverse audiences, it is primarily more likely to be a balancing act through which he satisfies his own ethical beliefs. It would seem commercial considerations do not override his belief in the public service of journalism. We shall now establish whether this, and other issues, is what the textual analysis elucidates.

4.6 *Malta Today* coverage of the 2017 electoral campaign

4.6.1 The narratives

The crucial element present in the textual analysis is the way different journalists at *Malta Today* present events to align with their own belief system. This occurs in the way the news is framed, the way it is filmed, and as a result of their relationship with the source. The text shows that its advocacy is very different from that which exists in the British or American media systems; it is not directed by editorial or ownership policy, nor is it led by objectivity. Yet, the text does show there is intention to create a form of balance.

Malta Today's coverage of the 2017 election is framed in ways that represent distinct and opposed views of the same events. Curran et al. (2017) completed their analysis using a qualitative approach, which entailed reading, summarising, rereading and analysing patterns of

meaning. In the present case study, three common narratives are identified which collectively summarise how the news is covered by *Malta Today*. The first among these narratives is defined by a choice between ‘good’ and ‘bad’, the ‘holy versus evil’; the second recognises Malta as a high-performing country and introduces what can be referred to as a ‘don’t upset the applecart’ storyline; the third revolves around Malta’s image at home and abroad. This final theme is often used as an instrument of verification: if a foreigner says it, it must be true. In this way more weight is given to the foreign interpretation.

Throughout the articles analysed, the frames vary based on who is writing them. While the narratives fluctuate throughout the campaign, the framing changes depending on the journalist. One of the primary causes is the tendency at *Malta Today* to assign political events to journalists who are sympathetic to the party hosting them. A similar pattern exists at *TVM*, but is not necessarily replicated at *Times of Malta*. This reveals two issues, one internal and the other external to the organisation. The first is that the routines of the organisation allow for this format to be followed. This means the daily editorial meetings and the capacity of the Executive Editor to choose who covers each event are in no way hindered by other journalists – the selection process is treated as the norm.

The second issue is that the journalists interviewed think it obvious that whoever attends these political, sometimes highly charged events should be sympathetic to the party being covered. This is because of the character of the events which, on occasion, have proved antagonistic to an unsupportive media presence. In a small state, proximity means that the political orientation of individuals is often known. Journalists of different political persuasions are assigned to a party to which they have an affinity. As a result, the textual analysis confirms that the narratives were framed to suit the personal politics of the journalist covering the event.

4.6.2 Balanced advocacy

The pattern that was to dominate the newspaper's coverage of the electoral campaign emerged on the very first day. *Malta Today* covered the first speeches delivered by Prime Minister Joseph Muscat and Leader of the Opposition Simon Busuttil in a way that reflected the polar perspectives of the campaign. The general narrative of a choice between 'good' and 'evil' is immediately forged when the election is announced on the 1st May 2017, and this allows journalists to present polar texts representing what is reported.

Pace's (2017) story carries three separate sympathetic videos. One is prepared and presented by the PN, which seems an odd choice since *Malta Today* had its own cameras present. The text does not reveal whether questions are asked and there appears to be no engagement with any of the journalists. The emphasis in this article is that the campaign is not a choice between Prime Minister Joseph Muscat and Simon Busuttil, but a choice between the Prime Minister or forces for good: "It is a question of Joseph Muscat on the one hand, and Simon Busuttil, and many others who are saying the same thing, on the other" (Pace, *Malta Today*, 2017). This frame suits the PN well and immediately signals that Pace's stance is favourable towards the opposition. This is amplified by the fact that he embraces a PN narrative by underlining that the Prime Minister is under criminal investigation for money laundering. On a technical point, Muscat was, in fact, not under criminal investigation; he had requested a Magisterial Enquiry, which is an instrument used to decide whether a criminal investigation is merited. The omission of this detail in Pace's article plays into the overriding narrative of 'good versus evil', which was advanced by the opposition. Pace develops this frame and asserts this point of view.

We can contrast this with Miriam Dalli's (2017) report of Muscat's event that very same day, which offers a contrary perspective. The piece contains an edited video of the Prime Minister's speech, which cuts from him to the audience to emphasise the emotion and vastness of the crowd. There is also an image slideshow of the event. No comment is included, but the

attempt to capture the euphoria is clear: “to chants of “Joseph! Joseph!””, Muscat delivered a fiery speech in which he prepared his supporters for the snap elections.” While the Leader of the Opposition in Pace’s piece describes a contest between the whole country and the then Prime Minister, Dalli writes that it is simply a choice between Muscat and Busuttil, quoting Muscat as saying, “this is the Maltese dream. I am once again asking you to trust me as the Prime Minister to move forward to the best time of our country.” In this way, Dalli follows the PL line, and apparent strategic aim, of portraying the election as a presidential contest.

Tellingly, Dalli’s text mentions the Prime Minister’s ‘wife by his side’, in contrast to Busuttil, who is divorced. This is relevant to Malta’s cultural context, in which divorce is controversial, it having only been legalised in October 2011, and by a tight margin of 7%. Again, when quoting Muscat, she is upbeat: “our country deserves to keep on moving forward and there is so much to be done for our economy and country”. Her initial frame focuses on the humanisation of Muscat, using sympathetic footage, and distances itself from the Busuttil narrative of Pace’s article. Her passing reference to the Egrant inquiry into money laundering belies the fact that this was to become pivotal in Simon Busuttil’s electoral campaign.

Thus, on the first day of coverage we meet two journalists from the same organisation presenting events in diametrically opposed frames. Dalli positions the coming electoral campaign precisely as the PL would have wished: a contest between Joseph Muscat and Simon Busuttil. For Pace, it is a choice between Joseph Muscat and the people.

The journalists’ editorial choices frame the events according to their personal ideology and in order to fulfil their own particular needs, not those that would ostensibly suit the organisation. This is unlike the American liberal news organisation, which would adopt a balanced and objective style. Here the articles are doing something different. The difference lies in the fact that the source on each occasion is the protagonist, and there is no intention of

investigating or questioning the news itself. It seems that the goal of both journalists is to portray their event positively.

This pattern prevails with other events. Pace (Pace, First-hand account the best form of evidence on Egrant enquiry, PN deputy leader argues, 2017) covers another PN activity early the following morning, limiting his sources to the Deputy Leader of the Opposition. The text emphasises the damage ('evil') that the government is causing the country's financial reserves. By 1pm the same day, another article is posted, countering the drive of Pace's article (Cocks, 2017). It outlines in detail the issues in the Egrant enquiry mentioned above, and goes some way to rebut Pace's article. It refers to unnamed, informed sources, but it is unclear whether we are dealing with one or multiple. Crucially, the articles again present contrasting points of view, not in the name of objectivity but for the sake of personal advocacy.

This continues throughout the campaign. On 11th May, Dalli (Dalli, Muscat: Busuttil's 'economic errors will drive country to the wall', 2017) posts a story framing a strong PL message; within minutes, Tim Diacono (Diacono, Busuttil: 'We don't live in a normal country, but I will be your voice', 2017) posts another news item, framing a positive PN message. In the final week of the electoral campaign, the contrasting positions of different journalists are still pervasive. Dalli (Dalli, [WATCH] Prime Minister warns of 'constitutional crisis if PN is elected on a lie', 2017) publishes a text which strongly humanises the Prime Minister. This contrasts Diacono's concurrent piece (Diacono, Busuttil accuses Muscat of threatening magistrate: 'He thought Bugeja was his puppet', 2017), which presents the Leader of the Opposition forcefully challenging the Prime Minister.

These seem to exemplify an advocacy-based form of journalism. The difficulty arises in instances when the journalist is engaging directly with the entity she is supporting. *Malta Today* runs two one-to-one interviews, one with the Prime Minister and one with the Leader of the Opposition. The text establishes that the Executive Editor maintained a neutral position

throughout the electoral campaign. In his interview with the Prime Minister (Vella, Change does not scare me | Joseph Muscat, 2017), Vella is assertive in his questioning and follows up on the Prime Minister's answers. He is rigorous and probing. In the case of the interview with the leader of the opposition, conducted by Jurgen Balzan, this is not necessarily the case. Balzan (Balzan, Choosing Malta | Simon Busuttil, 2017) is not as incisive as would be expected. One clear indication of this is at the end of the interview, when he asks the Leader of the Opposition if he will resign if he loses the election. The absence of an answer to this question signifies an unwillingness on the part of the journalist to engage deeply and assertively with the subject. This tells us that the journalist-source dynamic within this polarised society is complex. Maltese news does not accommodate source relationships as they are present in other media systems, where the typical procedure is to follow credited sources and a fixed hierarchy, as described by Entman (2012). The relationship with the source is a reflection of the advocacy propagated by the journalist, who will weigh in or step back depending on her own personal belief system. Advocacy was present, regardless of the narrative that ran through the electoral campaign.

The 'don't upset the applecart' narrative, again, allows different journalists to create their own advocative agendas. In one article (Diacono, 'PL victory will give death knell to financial and construction sectors' - Busuttil, 2017), *Malta Today* features its own video clip, lasting 1 minute and 7 seconds. It is edited to include uplifting images and resembles a party-political advert more than the news. The photos used are intended to present Simon Busuttil in the best possible light, and the text does not contain anything to suggest that the journalist questioned him. The presentation of the article is such that it leaves little doubt as to the journalist's frame, which is designed to complement his form of advocacy. The accompanying *Malta Today* AV employs euphoric background music (*What We Started*, Don Diabolo & Steve Aoki) and highly selective quotes to portray the opposition's argument. These quotations direct

readers to key messages from the electoral campaign, specifically, in this case: ‘do not upset the applectart; you can only trust us’. The very presence of this text shows that ultimate control of the news item rests in the journalist’s agency to present the news in a way he sees fit. This indicates that the routines in Malta work in a very different manner to other media systems, and do not exclude the journalists’ own interpretation. The cause for this is that resources are limited both in such a small news organisation in a small state. In this context, we begin to comprehend why this behaviour is normalised and accepted.

On the same day, Miriam Dalli brings in the PL perspective (Dalli, Muscat: Busuttil’s ‘economic errors will drive country to the wall’, 2017). The article is sympathetic to Muscat, and she emphasises derogatory remarks regarding the Leader of the Opposition. There is no comment or rebuttal from the PN about the criticism and she notes that, “urging them [the Maltese] to help get the PL re-elected for a second term, Muscat asked the party faithful and ‘people of goodwill’ to help deliver the message that the country should continue moving forward”.

4.6.3 The relevance of the outsider

The final narrative present in the analysed text concerns the way Malta is portrayed. In a Maltese context, as indicated in chapter four, what the outsider (that is, the foreigner) thinks of Malta is relevant and has traction. This is based on the premise that Malta, similar to other Southern European states, has been independent of colonial domination for fewer than sixty years. A number of *Malta Today*’s stories revolve around this particular narrative and, again, its journalists frame it with their own political affinity. Diacono frames it in the following way:

Most crucially, the PN leader repeatedly stressed that he will seek to rebuild Malta’s international reputation – which he said has taken a severe knock due to corruption at

the heart of the Labour government. ‘Joseph Muscat has wasted the opportunity presented to him by Malta’s EU presidency. The world’s eyes aren’t on us because of the presidency, but because we are in the middle of an election campaign, which is very rare for a country with the presidency (Diacono, PN pledges 30,000 new jobs, annual surplus, 2017).

PN footage, as well as sympathetic photos, are used to present this event. The framing of Malta being shamed appears on a number of occasions in the text.

The framing of this narrative takes a new direction towards the end of the electoral campaign, when Prime Minister Joseph Muscat was asked by journalists about a report on a foreign website which claimed that there was Russian meddling in Maltese politics (Doward, 2017). Muscat responded by saying he was aware of the possibility of Russian interference from foreign intelligence services. “All I know is that we were told to expect retribution for our role in hastening the visa waiver programme for Ukraine, and after we stopped the refuelling of a Russian warship on the way to Syria (Pace, Good governance, Russian meddling dominate BA press conference, 2017).

This story is framed differently when Cocks reports that Simon Busuttil ridicules 'suggestions' that Russian President Vladimir Putin could be so concerned about the outcome of the Maltese election as to plant undercover agents to undermine the Prime Minister (Cocks, 2017). Party political footage is used interspersed with quotes emphasising Busuttil’s position. Cocks writes that Busuttil reiterated his criticism of claims made by “Muscat, who said that foreign allies' security services had warned Malta that a Russian whistle-blower, who claimed to have seen proof that secret Panama company Egrant belonged to Muscat or his wife, was in fact planted by the Russian security service” (ibid.).

On the very same day, Dalli's story repositions the newspaper's stance (Dalli, PM won't speculate on Russian link, insists he received 'specific' information on meddling, 2017). It replies to the above story in *Malta Today*. She places it in context: "24 hours after a French specialist website claimed that Russia may have an interest in meddling with Malta's elections, Prime Minister Joseph Muscat has reiterated that the government had already received 'a warning' to expect retribution from Russia on a number of foreign policy decisions". She then writes about Muscat's position and how he was repeatedly asked whether he believed that the whistle blower could be a spy. She notes that he maintained the same reply: "I am a Prime Minister: I don't play around with issues". The Prime Minister is framed as the statesman. This same story takes a number of twists and turns through the publication, with polar views presented, depending on who is writing. These stories are contrasting representations of the same event, published on the same day.

The final frame of this particular narrative comes across on the last weekend of the election. At 6:38pm, on 28th May, Diacono weighed in with an article referring to a speech given by MEP Max Weber, Chairman of the European People's Party (EPP). The text presents a strong endorsement of the PN, underlining the issue of governance and corruption, in line with the political narrative present throughout the campaign: "Your vote isn't only for the future of Malta, but for the future of Europe" (Diacono, German MEP at PN mass meeting: 'Malta needs change, it needs Simon Busuttil', 2017). At 6:57pm on the same day, a story is posted containing two personal endorsements of Joseph Muscat. "Beyond politics there are loyalty and friendship [...] Joseph Muscat is a friend and I believe that he will be the one to lead Malta into the future" (Dalli, From Matteo Renzi to Tony Blair, Joseph Muscat endorsed by former prime ministers, 2017). Matteo Renzi, the former Italian Prime Minister, speaks this in Italian. This is followed by AV footage of Tony Blair, in which the former Labour Prime Minister describes Muscat as "a great example of what progressive politicians could do in

power” (ibid.). Their inclusion in a Maltese political event is never questioned, nor is it contextualised by any of the *Malta Today* journalists. From a campaigning point of view, it is a master stroke which reaches out to another historical and cultural divide prevalent in Malta: the Anglophile versus the Latin. Here, the frame is simple, implying, ‘if he [Muscat] is good enough for them, he is good enough for us.’ The text is a reflection of this message.

4.6.5 Investigative reporting

The textual analysis shows a dearth of investigative work or in-depth reporting during the period studied. On this point, some consideration to the research surveys conducted by *Malta Today* must be given. In one of the initial surveys, the journalist points out all changes are within the margin of error. Rather than underlining the strength of his methodology, he throws doubt into his own work. “The survey has a margin of error of +/-3.6 points. This means that the difference between the two parties still lies within this margin, even if Labour’s margin has been confirmed in the past three successive surveys” (Debono, *Malta Today Survey: Muscat retains trust lead, parties four points apart*, 2017).

This interpretation is present in all the election surveys run by *Malta Today* (Debono, *43.3% of floating voters undecided*, 2017; Debono, *Malta Today Survey | PL still leads by four points, Muscat trust by five*, 2017). Debono is still interpreting this as being a possible victory for PN because of the margin of error, even though this is a longitudinal study showing a greater than 5% margin between both parties. In the final survey before the election, he concludes that “the fact that the PL slightly widened its lead amidst an increase in no replies could be an indication that this category is more PN-leaning. As things stand, the election’s outcome will be determined by undecided respondents, as their numbers could sway the election either way” (Debono, *Saturday election outcome hinges on the ‘undecided’*, 2017). He does point out that,

historically, his surveys have shown that undecided voters have usually split evenly between the two parties. This is exactly what subsequently happened.

While survey errors are not unusual, his insistence that the result was wide open does not really reflect what his own surveys had been consistently suggesting in the year leading up to the election campaign, nor is it an accurate representation of what his data actually revealed. This final point was mentioned during the interviews. The interviews do indicate that Debono was uncomfortable with the position taken by *Malta Today*, and was in favour of a more robust anti-government position. His personal position of advocacy was more militant than that of his colleagues. As noted, within three months of the election, he had handed in his resignation, joining a start-up investigative news website, only to return to *Malta Today* six months later. Of all the stories presented by *Malta Today* during the 2017 electoral campaign, Debono's surveys demonstrate the extent to which journalists were allowed to follow their form of advocacy journalism. He presented the results and interpreted them, notwithstanding the concern of the other journalists, which is also raised during the interviews.

Interestingly, we shall note that a similar issue arose within *Times of Malta*, where some journalists queried the way their surveys were being handled. In both instances, the surveys were questioned regarding the non-response rate, which were presented as a possible sign of a PN reversal of fortunes, without referring to the historic tendency of the 'undecided' to eventually reflect the overall trend. The poll findings reported by the *Times of Malta* align themselves with the linear form of advocacy the news organisation was advancing. In sharp relief to this was the complete absence of polling on *TVM*. In this case, we shall show that this is a result of it being a risk-averse news organisation.

This is contrasted with Matthew Vella's articles during the election campaign, which take a different stance. A series of investigative articles cover issues of tax avoidance in Malta and are conducted by the European Investigative Collaborations (EIC), of which *Malta Today*

forms part. This is one of the few instances of investigative journalism that took place during the campaign and aligns to one of the author's stated pet peeves: tax avoidance schemes. He notes, "various reports in the EIC uncovered the interests of countless Brazilian, Portuguese, Italian, German, French and Turkish nationals, respectively published in The Intercept, Expresso, L'Espresso, Der Spiegel, Mediapart and Le Soir, and BlackSea.eu, who are paying taxes in Malta to benefit from the unique imputation system, which grants a rebate of some 85% on taxes paid on foreign income" (Vella, Executive Editor: Global press tracks down taxpayers abroad, but FinServ institute says 'no secrets in Malta Files', 2017).

It should be possible to identify a slant taken by this series of articles, in order to suit political advocacy; yet, none is present in his writing. No political mileage was accorded, and the story questions the country's tax structure as a whole, without allocating blame or collusion to any political party. Thus, Vella sends a clear message that he is not advocating for either party. This in itself offers an insight into the mindset of the editorial leadership of *Malta Today* in the 2017 general election. During the interviews, Vella also stated that he had misgivings about the country's tax system.

These two reports demonstrate the divergent spectrum of news reporting present at *Malta Today*, symptomatic throughout the textual analysis, and bring into focus the rationale behind the position to delegate control of the news to the journalists and allow them to follow the party of their choice.

This shifts our attention to the degree of investigative reporting completed at *Malta Today*. It is limited for a number of reasons. One primary reason is the limitation of resources in a small state, where challenges arise from a lack of news sources, as well as lack of resources. While this does happen in larger states and media houses, the diminishing resources available in newsrooms in Malta is amplified because of its relative scale. It is clear from the text that the number of journalists covering investigative work is low. Vella does most of this work and

is consistent in that he does not advocate for either of the main political parties. His story on party financing is a further example of this (Vella, Executive Editor, *Malta Today*, 2017). His sources fed him particular concerns with regards to the construction industry, in effect highlighting that most of the donations to the political parties were coming from construction developers.

In an electoral campaign that monopolised the news, Vella covers a number of different issues and avoids political hyperbole. His story about Swedish gaming legislation could easily be used to score political points, but the story does not go down this path (Vella, A shot across the bow? Malta gaming leaders unfazed by Swedish incursion, 2017).

His sources are named industry leaders. This pattern is present in other investigative stories, where he uses numerous named sources, both local and foreign, demonstrating a capacity to produce in-depth and revealing news (Vella, OLAF linked Dalli to Ponzi scheme in 2016, Dalli says leak coincides with Kessler defamation case, 2017). In effect this strengthens the deduction that journalists rigorously pursue their own agendas. They pursue their own agendas; not those of owners or political parties. In Vella's stories, there are two important elements. On the one hand, he demonstrates that, at the most senior level, the editorial policy is to not make political mileage out of a story. On the other, his stories were also a way for him to advocate his personal mission, which revolves around tax compliance and evidence. This indicates that the dominant paradigm within *Malta Today* is journalists' advocacy, as opposed to political partisanship.

4.7 Conclusions

The choices made in *Malta Today* demonstrate that it is averse to taking a clear position of favour for any political party. The decision to allow journalists to cover events that appeal

to their own political belief systems attests to this, and the textual analysis underlines it. We have found it allows advocacy to dominate the way news is positioned, with its journalists presenting polar views. This is a form of balance, though it is very different from the balance we would expect in an American Liberal media system. At *Malta Today*, its coverage is not neutral and does not attempt to be so; it is demonstrating to its readers and viewers that it is able to cover both sides of the political spectrum.

The journalists at *Malta Today* have a considerable degree of autonomy and are not constrained by conventions of objectivity. The result is an internally pluralistic form of advocacy journalism geared to a polarised society. This aids our understanding of our main research question, “what drives the construction of news in a small polarised state?” The findings indicate that journalists at *Malta Today* define its news, under strong leadership that allows and facilitates this. With this in hand, we are able to consolidate our findings in the context of our three subsidiary areas of exploration: the role of proximity in a small state, the role of journalists’ agency, and the type of advocacy that is being practiced within this organisation.

4.7.1 Proximity and the small state

The priming of the text elucidates that this news organisation does have an agenda, and the textual analysis shows it is to deal with each event as sympathetically as possible, irrespective of the political party being covered. We have noted this is achieved by sending journalists to cover events run by the political party they sympathise with. This is an important issue as it highlights that the political slant of the journalist is known to the audience and to the party being covered. This is not surprising in the context of Malta being a small state. The proximity of the relationships between all parties – the audience, other journalists, the sources and politicians – allows this knowledge to be widely shared.

We found that, while one would expect the different operational processes to have a dulling effect on a journalist's slant, multitasking is the norm, and allows the figurative signature of the individual journalist to be left on their finished work. This is possible because the journalist is involved in all stages of the creation of news, which is a direct result of the small size of the market, the state and the organisation itself. It is also a clear signifier of the consequences of limited resources, as described in the literature. The routines of the organisations must be understood in the context of scale and proximity. We showed that the journalists studied perform multiple roles, which would not be the case in larger states. At *Malta Today*, this is the norm, and the result is that each story has the indelible mark of the author.

4.7.2 Journalists' agency

We noted this organisation's editorial positioning created tension within the newsroom, with a number of journalists suggesting *Malta Today* should have taken a position against the government of the day and mirrored *Times of Malta*. This tension is a manifestation of the freedom given to the organisation's journalists to present what *they* believe is news. The very fact that this internal debate was so intense confirms that news workers within the organisation were able to introduce different dimensions and ways of expressing the issues facing their country. While this internal debate could have been destructive, in effect it helped enhance the credibility of this news organisation. This was heightened by an overriding concern at ownership and editorial level to give free rein to the journalists in their political coverage, allowing them to frame their own stories, but editorially avoiding hyperbole. As well as appeasing the owners' moral concerns, this strategy also makes business sense.

This news organisation does not fit the Polarised Pluralist model presented by Hallin and Mancini (2004); the lack of editorial interference is reflected in the interviews with *Malta*

Today journalists. The detail that does stand out, however, is that no effort was made to mask the role played by the owners of this organisation, yet further analysis revealed it is the journalists at *Malta Today* who control the framing of their organisation's news. Their commitment and agency is the determining element. It is clear that, at some level, ownership is directly involved in the creation of content, but they have come to realise that moulding and restricting their journalists' output is counter-productive.

4.7.3 Advocacy

Here lies the crucial characteristic of this organisation. We have identified that advocacy exists within this organisation, and there is no effort from the owners to influence the political framing that each journalist provides. We have shown that the frames in the text represent different ends of the political spectrum, representing both sides in this polarised state. Malta's high level of politicisation is reflected in the newsroom of *Malta Today* and its routines, which allow for both views to flourish. This has implications for understanding of the role of the individual journalist and divergent advocacy agendas within the same newsroom.

We have demonstrated the presence of a type of bi-polar advocacy and noted that, for it to exist, two things must be present: firstly and clearly, an ownership and routine system which allows for this system to manifest itself must be present; secondly, it requires a type of journalist who is ready to put their belief system front and centre in their work. It is apparent that in this organisation internal pluralism is a tool to deal with a polarised market. This is a pluralistic form of advocacy journalism, geared toward a polarised Maltese society. This is different from what is present in other Polarised Pluralist states, and from an American Liberal media system; indeed, this thesis submits that this is a crucial component of Maltese journalism which is entirely distinct from other countries.

We begin to realise that the role of journalism in this country goes beyond fulfilling the watchdog function; the significant level of advocacy in Maltese news characterises it as

influential or even interventionist. The personal agency of these journalists also allows them to determine the level of advocacy embedded in their work, which suggests they are able to monitor the tone of the newspaper overall. Is this present in the other case studies? If so, Malta could perhaps be considered an aggressive form of monitory democracy.

While this may be considered a positive approach, there is a consequence to it. The news covering the five-week electoral campaign contains very little investigative reporting, interpretation or analysis on any areas outside the campaign. Part of the reason behind this is the limitation of resources, one of the prominent issues featured in the literature on small states. Most of the analysis was conducted by Matthew Vella, the Executive Editor, and James Debono, the Senior Journalist. The reliance on two individuals for this investigative work exposes a heavy demand on the capacity of the individuals and brings into question the influence the owners may have on them. While there was nothing to indicate that any form of influence is exercised on the investigative reporting by management, this possibility cannot be excluded. Ultimately, this is the reality of news organisations in a small state. The impact of size is difficult to understand outside the organisation and country. The understanding of news construction must be contextualised regionally and nationally, and from the perspective of size, which is crucial in grasping the construction of news in a small state.

We now move on to investigate another organisation with a dramatically different environment. *TVM* is a wholly state-owned organisation and considerably different from *Malta Today* in its ownership, routines, culture and scale. Yet, we shall discover that while there are significant contrasts between the two organisations, there are also important similarities.

Chapter Five

TVM, the public's news service

5.1 Introduction

TVM forms part of the state-owned Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and, as a consequence, we would expect the majority of news constructed to present a one-sided position, akin to that of a Polarised Pluralist system. Yet, as we shall show, what we find is a broadcaster which has 'neutered' its position, in order to avoid controversy and create balance. We shall find the reasons behind this are not the same as in an American Liberal media system and, in effect, *TVM* has chosen to neuter itself as a form of self-preservation to circumvent crossing political, social and cultural boundaries.

The literature has outlined the importance of the state in shaping the construction of news in different media systems and, being wholly owned by the Government of Malta, *TVM*'s senior staff, including the Board of Directors and Editorial Board, is appointed by the state. This means that the government of the day chooses the publication's Head of News and, as a result, can potentially influence the way news is constructed. This process is repeated with every new political administration. Regardless of this, we shall find the Head of News creates balance in a very different way from *Malta Today*, employing its own mechanism to avoid controversy.

In this environment, news workers are aware of what is expected of them from the moment they are employed, as a consequence of their political affiliation. Yet, its internal socialisation also seems to engender a risk-averse mentality. Understanding the way this

organisation functions is crucial to our general conception of how news is constructed in Malta, and so for answering our main research question: “what drives the construction of news in a small polarised state?”

We shall question balance within this organisation and whether its new workers represent both sides of the political spectrum. Perhaps its unique mechanism for balance is a response to pressure from the political class, as well as the workplace's social culture. This could be another coping mechanism, such as that we witnessed at *Malta Today*, created to adapt to a polarised environment. We shall also explore if this is an organisation which is market-driven. It receives a limited form of state subsidy, yet there is a drive to see audience growth and the successful performance of its programming for commercial reasons.

We shall consider how this case study showcases an organisation where routines conspire to limit interpretation, analysis and investigation in the newsroom, with checks and balances aimed at averting controversy. This is a public broadcaster in a Mediterranean region facing the realities of a polarised media system; it has had to invent different ways to confront issues of proximity in a small state. In this arena, the members of this organisation have also to face what is, in effect, a potential change in ownership with every electoral cycle, which demands a flexible attitude and approach. Notwithstanding, even here we shall find a form of advocative journalism.

5.2 Ownership and historical positioning

5.2.1 Introduction of broadcasting and pluralism and terms of reference

The roots of public broadcasting in Malta go back to 1935, when the British Government set out to counter fascist propaganda on Italian radio stations. *Rediffusion*, a

London-based independent broadcaster, was chosen to fulfil this task with a financial model of subscription fees and, later, advertising. This changed in 1960 when the British government, preparing for a return to self-government in Malta, re-modelled broadcasting structures and regulations. At the time, the new Broadcasting Ordinance created a regulator, Malta Broadcasting Authority (MBA), and made it responsible for keeping balance and impartiality in matters of politics and industrial controversy. Following the election in 1971, the governing party, Malta Labour Party, committed to ending the presence of *Rediffusion* in Malta and in 1975 changed the media structure, creating a major shift in focus within nationalised broadcasting (Borg, 2009).

By 1975, the establishment of a competing Maltese station run by the MBA forced *Rediffusion* out. That same year, the Maltese government took over all broadcasting, absorbing them into the Telemalta Corporation and launching Broadcasting Malta (*Xandir Malta*) as the state broadcaster, with the stated mission of building a socialist generation (Borg, 2009). Consequently, Malta went from having a commercial company with a public-service broadcasting ethos, which would have situated itself in a Liberal American/ North Atlantic media system, to possessing a state-owned and -controlled organisation that fits squarely into a Polarised Pluralist model. This is an example of the instrumentalisation of news at a broadcasting level, which follows the historical trends as described in the literature and, as stated, aligns with what would be expected in a Polarised Pluralist system. In this, Malta, as a young democracy, resembles other states in the region.

This situation changed in 1987. The election of a new PN government directly resulted in a process of liberalisation of radio broadcasting and the partial liberalisation of TV. The PBS replaced *Xandir Malta* and two new radio stations, owned by the two main political parties, *Super One Radio* and *Radio 101*, were set up. More privately-owned stations came into being in 1992. By 1993, the Broadcasting Act had been amended to fully liberalise the TV sector.

By establishing their own TV stations, the two main political parties created an anomaly in the Maltese media system: they reinforced the presence of political parties in the construction of news, making themselves the largest media owners in the country. This meant that, in broadcasting, news was defined by the polarisation that had existed in different forms for decades; only, now, it was much more apparent. This created a situation that was more akin to what was happening in Italy, with its system of *lottizzazione*, and distant from what we would expect from a more liberal, balanced media system.

As it strove for greater fiscal efficiency, by 2004, the government made clear that it was unwilling to carry on subsidising PBS losses. This, notwithstanding the annual licence fee contributions collected from the general public. It would henceforth be directed by a commercial and financial rationale, with the state intending to downsize PBS, introduce new working practices and design a fresh financial model. As a consequence, a National Broadcasting Policy (NBP), which stated the mission, objectives, editorial policy, and the structures and stations which would constitute PBS Ltd was formulated. This included the establishment of an independent Editorial Board, a programme acquisition policy and a distinction between commercial and public-service obligation programmes. This could be regarded as an attempt to move towards a Liberal media model, allowing the market to determine the optimal way forward, and the beginning of a move away from the type of Public Broadcaster we would anticipate in a Polarised Pluralist system.

The NBP was structured to ensure PBS was financially healthy and viable, while also being the market leader, and aimed to have the largest share of the Maltese Audience (National Broadcasting Policy, 2004, p. 4). Although the emphasis on financial aspects of the policy stands out, there is enough reference to the editorial and public-service ethos to underline that its vision of broadcasting was not purely commercial. Although PBS had to be cognisant of its viability, it seems that it could not be run purely as a business. This indicates that the public-

service obligation was essential to the PBS ethos. At the very roots of the reorganisation was PBS' aim to cut back most forms of government subsidies, while recognising its public service obligation. This is a departure from what is typically found in Southern Europe.

The NBP created a Public Service Obligation (PSO), which resulted in a funding injection of €1.16 million, amounting to one-fourth of the revenue needed to run PBS at the time. The remainder of its income was to be commercial revenue, including from advertising and the selling of airtime. In this way, as far as news production is concerned, *TVM* found itself competing directly with other media organisations, especially *Malta Today* and *Times of Malta*. By 2009, the directors and management of PBS were actively promoting the sales of airtime as it provided a more stable form of revenue. This approach continued in subsequent years and is crucial to understand, as it indicates that, technically, the government removed itself from the influence they might exert through state subsidy, and imposed a requirement to place editorial responsibility with the editorial staff of the organisation. In this way, we can observe that PBS is not quite the subsidised body represented in the Polarised Pluralist literature. We shall further examine how this works.

5.2.2 Programming choices and policy

Unlike some public broadcasters in other Polarised Pluralist states, PBS depends on commercial income. This created an adverse effect, to the extent that, as far back as 2005, the Editorial Board noted that a mentality was arising which was a threat to the public-service ethos of the company (Borg, 2009). But commercial influence is vehemently denied by *TVM*'s top editorial staff when it comes to news production; "I have a wall with the advertising department. We talk but they do not influence me. In the sense that [...] there is nothing in the news that has an advertising element. To start off with, the law does not allow us" (Bugeja, Head of News at *TVM*).

The NBP policy, strongly favouring outsourcing, states that, while its news bulletins should be produced in-house, all other programmes should be produced independently. This tells us that the news is one of the key elements controlled entirely by *TVM*. As far as other content is concerned, three months before the PBS schedule is launched, a programme statement of intent is put forward outlining its programming requirements, as well as its outsourcing and evaluation criteria. The Editorial Board assesses this and reverts to the board of directors. One managerial executive describes the process thus:

This draft schedule is presented to the board of directors [...] They have the authority to send it back to the drawing board if they do not like it for commercial reasons. It is a back and forth (process) until the schedule is approved [...] You have the Editorial Board, you have the executive, and you have the approval or not of the board of directors, and it is then executed (senior managerial executive at *TVM*).

This raises a key issue. The board of directors does have the authority to send back programmes for re-evaluation. Timeliness is important at any media organisation and this delay can effectively result in an unofficial veto. It transpires that there have been instances where a programme was stalled for no apparent reason, save that it may compete commercially with *TVM's* own productions. This is a potential area where the Board of Directors could impinge on editorial integrity, in that the Editorial Board believes that a programme submission has value, from a content quality point of view, while the Board of Directors' primary concern may be that a particular programme could give a competitive, commercial advantage to another media organisation.

The NBP states that "the public broadcasting services should remain independent of Government editorially" and that "an independent public broadcasting is essential to a

democracy” (National Broadcasting Policy, 2004, p. 38). The government confirmed this conviction by upholding that “it is not the role of Government to interfere in editorial policy and decision” (National Broadcasting Policy, 2004, p. 2). In this way, it allows *TVM* to evolve and acquire more independence. This tells us that, as far as ownership is concerned, *TVM* operates within a structure that enables it to be run independent of the state and free from its financial influence. This demonstrates that the intention was to have a PBS that resonates with the Liberal American media model, including limited state funding and a greater reliance on commercial revenue. It tells us that the basic terms of reference of the NBP and, as also demonstrated in chapter three, the BA is to guarantee impartiality. At a regulatory level, *TVM* is set up to take a balanced stance. But does its independence really exist today?

5.3 Organisation structure and routines

5.3.1 Organisational structure: A complicated relationship with government

The Board of Directors is appointed by the controlling shareholder which is, as noted, the Government of Malta. While executive power rests with the Board of Directors, it is made clear during the interviews that there is very little interaction between the Board and journalists, as far as news is concerned. “We have little or no contact with the board of directors. [...] Beyond that, no, the Board of Directors, maybe I cannot say they are irrelevant, but...” (senior editorial executive at *TVM*). In the case of *Malta Today*, while Managing Editor/Director and owner, Balzan, does acknowledge that he is involved in the day-to-day running of the organisation, interviews with the publication’s journalists show that they are entitled to construct news and advocate for specific causes as they see fit. Therefore, in this regard, we shall discover similarities between *TVM* and *Times of Malta*, in that the interviews clearly indicate that the Board of Directors does not contribute to news construction.

This is pertinent because it contrasts with other Polarised Pluralist states in Southern Europe. The NBP makes it clear that the Editorial Board is wholly responsible for producing news content at *TVM*, and it is designed to be independent from the government and the company's Board of Directors and management. It is the Editorial Board, which is made up of three voting members appointed by government and three non-voting members from *TVM*'s management, that must ensure that news is presented in an impartial manner. This Board is appointed for an indefinite period of time and therefore each position has security of tenure. This sets *TVM* apart from the other organisations included in this study, in that it is the only one that states clearly and structurally where editorial responsibility should lie: with the Editorial Board.

Evidence from interviews with *TVM* staff suggests that the authority and independence of the Editorial Board is respected; a significant observation, given that neither of the other news organisations studied has this editorial structure. There is no indication that the Editorial Board has any complaints about interference from the government in the construction of its news bulletins. But we can equally argue that this stands to reason, since members of this board are appointed by the government itself, and it would be highly unusual – particularly in a Maltese context – for board members to complain to the very people who appointed them.

Ironically, complaints are frequently raised by all of Malta's political parties and referred to the Broadcasting Authority. This hazard of working at *TVM* seems to be par for the course, as noted by one *TVM* journalist:

Somehow it is a hard, balancing act. It is not black and white. You have to compromise, like everything in life [...] It was the same when the PN was in government, mind you. I remember on two separate occasions I asked hard questions of Tonio Fenech (Minister for Finance) and Simon Busuttil, who was a member of the European Parliament

(MEP). Just because they were ingrained in a system where they thought that someone from the PBS would not ask hard questions. They filed a complaint... (senior journalist at *TVM*).

The journalist suggests compromise is a remedy for political pressure. This points to where the real strains on *TVM* come from – the political elite. This conclusion is supported by the repeated mention of a ‘need for balance and compromise’ throughout interviews with its editorial staff, as well as their general acceptance that this sort of pressure is prevalent in this business of news construction. The complexity of *TVM*’s relationship with Malta’s government and the political class is clear. The government of the day, ultimately, appoints the Head of News, yet he, in turn, endeavours not to become the government’s mouthpiece. It seems that what we have here is a half-way house, in which this organisation avoids representing the government’s interests, but is simultaneously terrified of aggravating it.

We would expect the Editorial Board to act as a defence line for journalists and there have, indeed, been instances where the Editorial Board has criticised both the government and PBS, for example, objecting when restructuring was adversely affecting editorial content. It has also criticised the Board of Directors for their interpretation of NBP. Yet, it transpires that the true level of control held by the Editorial Board is actually quite limited. As an ex-CEO of PBS pointed out,

There is a bit of an anomaly whereby the Head of News answers to the Editorial Board and the head of Editorial Board can give direction to the Head of News, who is the registered editor. Responsibility lies with the Head of News. So, although he answers to the Editorial Board, he bears ultimate responsibility. So, technically, if they give him

an instruction and he does not agree with it he can decide no, because I'm the person that is actually liable for this (ex-CEO of PBS Ltd).

This indicates that the Editorial Board is consultative and, in reality, the final say rests with the Head of News, a position which is protected by law, as he is the registered editor. The present Head of News, Reno Bugeja, points out:

I attend the Editorial Board as an ex-officio [non-voting] official. The Editorial Board is made up of a person that is an ex-[political] candidate that has pro PN leanings, one who has pro PL leanings and a chairman – let me be honest, who does lean towards PL. But he has integrity, serious, in a small country everyone has something. He never waved a political flag. He worked at the Broadcasting Authority, Caritas, Air Malta. We talk. There are times when we disagree. Very often it is not about politics that we disagree (Bugeja, Head of News, *TVM*).

Again, the issue of proximity is mentioned: “in a small country, everyone has something.” Political and family relationships are known and factored into any equation. In this quote, Bugeja explains that, in Malta, it is acceptable to have a known political allegiance and news workers are employed within this context. The point is the CEO at *TVM* is not responsible for its news production and that the only remedy available for a non-compliant Head of News is to fire him. This is not what the literature explains one would find in a Polarised Pluralist system. Technically, the organisational structure is robust and a solid wall protects content and news; yet, there is another concern.

The danger is that *TVM*'s editorial integrity relies on one person; the structure for choosing news content is primarily in the hands of the Head of News (appointed by the board

of directors) and, to a limited extent, the daily News Coordinators. It is not in the hands of the state-appointed Editorial Board. On the other hand, the News Coordinators (of which there are two) answer to the Head of News and act as a go-between for him and the news workers. The coordinators each have a team of five journalists and three editors who put the programmes and film together. Each team is supported by four cameramen. The coordinators work alternate days, with a senior journalist stepping in if neither are available. This system applies to all formats, be it radio, television or web. Although there is a dedicated digital team, their primary responsibility is technical, uploading news rather than generating content. The website is part of the overall system and receives information from the same centralised source. This system is mirrored at *Malta Today* but not at *Times of Malta*, where the resources available allow the newsroom to deploy news workers uniquely on their news portal.

5.3.2 Routines to neuter and avoid partisanship

We begin to understand the dominant position of the Head of News. White (1955) would have recognised Bugeja as being representative of his observations of the gatekeeper role. The Head of News, as the central figure in news construction at *TVM*, consequently defines the way the news is constructed. By his own admission, he wants reporting and not interpretation. He does not want the news to be evaluative; it is his aim to present balance and impartiality, and there is seemingly a desire to avoid controversy.

We can contrast this with *Times of Malta*, where the lack of a strong central figure has allowed journalists' agency to hold sway and determine the way news is constructed. *Malta Today* introduces an additional dimension, in that its strong leadership inspires confidence at all organisational levels – directorial, managerial and editorial. This allows for diverse views to prevail. This has significant repercussions on the way internal pluralism manifests itself in these two news organisations, which, as we have demonstrated, has a strong presence at *Malta*

Today and which, as we shall see, is less prevalent at *Times of Malta*. Do organisational routines mitigate internal pluralism at *TVM*?

A daily meeting is held between the Head of News and the News Coordinator to go through a list of events prepared by the previous night's News Coordinator (whoever covers the late shift compiles the list of news events for the next day). This includes all the appointments in the newsroom diary, booked interviews in off-diary stories, as well as all the events by government appointment through the state Department of Information (DOI). It is the News Coordinator's role, in consultation with Bugeja, to decide who covers the news and how, a task which is completed at *Times of Malta* and *Malta Today* by the News Editor and Executive Editor, respectively.

It emerges that there are no daily newsroom briefings at *TVM*, which means that news agendas and who works on them are decided by two people: one of the News Coordinators and Bugeja. Given that no daily newsroom meetings are held, we can reason that there is little room for feedback from journalists and limited discussion of what angles to cover or how to frame a story. This was confirmed to be the case on three separate occasions by journalists in interview. This reinforces our premise that the Head of News occupies a gatekeeping role and, while there are clear indications through all of the interviews that his judgement is considered beyond reproach, this is a structural problem. "It is not because Reno [Bugeja, Head of News] does not trust [us], but he is the type of person who will read all the stories before they go out if he can. All of them. Even when he is abroad, he has access to the system that allows him to see the stories before they go out" (journalist at *TVM*). This comment tells us that if Bugeja wishes to elude controversy, *TVM* will, too.

This is an important area where *TVM* differs from *Malta Today*. The daily newsroom meetings are used at *Malta Today* as a field where journalists can contest ideas and debate. There is no routine in place for this at *TVM* nor, as we shall see, at *Times of Malta* for different

reasons. At *TVM* the lack of daily newsroom meetings appears to be related to routines elsewhere in the organisational structure; at *Times of Malta*, a routine that had offered an effective space for debate, and which had been in existence for many years, has, in fact, been eliminated. This seems odd, as *Times of Malta* once had a regimen of daily meetings at different levels of the organisation. The abandonment of this routine and the consequent transition to a linear advocacy has clear implications for the organisation's internal pluralism, too. This will be explored further.

For years, at *TVM*, a mechanical system has been in place which expedites the process of news production, but does not embrace open debate about the way news should be constructed. In the context of an organisation that wants to keep out of the political firing line this lack of newsroom meetings can be rationalised. It must thus fall to senior editors to ensure the organisation is non-partisan and remains impartial. Although the need to avoid controversy overrides all, there are other circumstances that may be impacted by this routine. This is important because it brings into question the level of internal pluralism that exists at *TVM*.

The literature is clear that routines of production influence the way news is structured. *TVM*'s routines centre around the daily editorial encounters between Bugeja and the News Coordinator. When probed about who builds news segments, whether journalists or anyone else, one News Coordinator replied:

The journalist comes back to the office. She writes the script. She includes in it the comments she gets from the interview she did and her transcript... I have a look at it or Reno [Bugeja, Head of News], too... Reno sees everything. I like to see as much as possible. Sometimes Reno and I need to discuss certain points. The voice over is done. The journalist then goes near the [production] editor. They put pictures on voice, and it

is edited as a whole package. I prefer the journalist to be present during the editing. Why? She was out there (News Coordinator at *TVM*).

This indicates that, in general, interview questions and script are curated by the journalist. On the other hand, we are likewise told that the thinking process behind the choice of stories is limited to in-person discussions between Bugeja and the News Coordinator, with the former serving as a linchpin. The comment above establishes that the News Coordinator oversees the whole process; any potential framing appears to emanate from Bugeja.

The routines at *TVM* also position the Head of News as the connection between staff and the Board of Directors. “Ever since Reno has been here, I think I have met the board once. But obviously he gives feedback to us stating what the Board of Directors have stated. I think that Reno carries the brunt. From an editorial point of view, he carries a lot of pressure” (journalist at *TVM*). The crucial point is that *TVM*’s structure stokes an underlying notion that it is wise to adhere to it to avoid engagement in political issues. The result is that certain political stories are covered directly by Bugeja. As expressed above, he ‘carries the brunt’. This is further evidence that the goal, in relying on Bugeja, is to avoid controversy, as confirmed by another journalist: “so, the hard, political news, no one is working on them specifically. It’s just that most of the time, in politics, it’s Reno who is doing it.” While editorial autonomy is stressed in *TVM*’s unwritten corporate ideology, individual decision-making is restricted by the need to refer upwards when doubt arises.

5.3.3 Routines in the news portal

Routinisation allows for speed in bulletin or online production, motivated by a need to produce news for its market on a daily basis. “We are better when we have planned events. Because this rarely happens and because we are not a news channel, we have this situation

going on all the time, we perform better in planned events...” (journalist at *TVM*). This comment tells us that the need for expedient coverage is related to producing a high volume of news and the necessity to get things done, as opposed to the time pressures linked to breaking news. The issue of deadline pressure is unusual here, because the dominant position of *TVM* gives it the capacity to cover a broad spectrum of events, as opposed to emphasising breaking news. In this way, Maltese news organisations foster a different type of pressure than typically found at American premier news organisations. In Malta, the need for speed stems from limited resources and, therefore, an imperative to maximise staff’s time in order to get the job done. This is at odds with what Usher (2014) describes as the obligation to break the news swiftly for commercially driven premier American news organisations.

Issues of speed and structure are amplified among the team handling the news portal. *TVM* has realised that part of its strength and the reason for its online growth lies in its capacity to build on audio visual (AV) material. This experience in AV gives *TVM* an edge over *Malta Today* and *Times of Malta*. Its success is showcased by the high engagement reported on the website’s Google Analytics, especially when an incident with AV is uploaded and *TVM* runs with the event in a timely fashion. “We are increasing the amount of visual content and not putting a large amount of text” (member of portal team at *TVM*). It is highlighted that even a small event can generate traffic; a particular example referenced was an incident of a woman being run over while crossing a street. The minute the feature was uploaded, we are told the story ‘exploded’: “to a certain extent, it is gossip. Gossip in a very moderate way. Not in a speculative way [...] Or sensational. I am very careful about these things” (member of the portal team at *TVM*).

This attitude is not replicated by some of the other journalists, who foregrounded the sensationalist element. It was noted that *tvm.com.mt* does not have the same restrictions that *TVM* has through the BA. Notwithstanding this, the feeling was that, ultimately, the brand is

TVM and this brand, in the eyes of *TVM* journalists, is associated with impartiality, balance and certain responsibilities. “We can say what we wish because there are no restrictions or regulations online; yet, I do not feel we can write whatever we wish carelessly” (journalist at *TVM*). Clearly, this comment is indicative that the need to avoid controversy is also present in publishing on the online news portal.

As noted in chapter three, *TVM* attracts a significant audience; this is confirmed by research conducted by the BA and reflected in their online following. The determination to yield results is mirrored by the website team, which continuously explores what constitutes a strong online story and adopts practices that are believed to generate more traffic. “When we toned it [the use of soft news] down, that is where I saw the most results. Before we would look for lighter stories because sex sells, for example. It sells but it affects our credibility. I think that made a difference” (member of portal team at *TVM*). This means that, in the team’s opinion, a credible story will increase traffic. Tied to this is an understanding of the need to offer their news stories on different platforms, while recognising that access to them will also be determined by the time a story breaks:

During the live broadcast of [the] Daphne Caruana Galizia [story], we noted more people were accessing through the website not the live transmission. The website has on-demand and live as well as the news. [...] That day we placed a [live] transmission [feed] in a story. The story was disseminated through Facebook or Twitter. The public was sharing it. We can tell that the smartphones and tablets were being used and we noted that that story was stronger than the live [TV] stream (member of portal team at *TVM*).

This analysis demonstrates an alertness to *TVM*'s presence on different platforms. Social media is also used as a traffic-generating tool. *Facebook* was mentioned as a channel of particular importance, with its number of followers growing significantly as a result of a drive to use social media. At *TVM* there is an awareness of the need to nurture a wide audience for commercial reasons, as well as to fulfil a public-service obligation. You would also expect to find this level of commercial drive in an American Liberal media system.

5.3.4 A Clear sign of neutered news

Features that relate to the avoidance of controversy, presented thus far in the chapter, do not show a significant impact on the capacity of the organisation to effectively construct news. We have shown the complicated relationship between government and *TVM* results in an organisation that strives to have an independent voice, remain neutral and is controversy averse. We find the terms of reference of the BA aim to create impartiality, and it is clear that the senior editorial staff try to ensure their organisation is not partisan. However, the notable absence of a comments section on the *TVM* website (both *Malta Today* and *Times of Malta* enable comments on their websites) demonstrates a disturbing capacity for the organisation to neuter itself. Disabling comments is to forgo a potent means of creating internal pluralism, and to permit them would increase the stickiness of their online news. Despite these benefits, *TVM* has adopted this policy for two central reasons.

The first is that the comments may be interpreted as eroding the perceived impartiality and balance of the organisation. The second is that it would entail a considerable amount of monitoring and, as a result, significant expense. Nonetheless, comments are an effective method of increasing external pluralism, and their omission detracts from the functionality of *TVM* and its website. In a polarised state, the creation of platforms to allow deliberation and discussion enhances an atmosphere of transparency and engagement, if managed correctly. We

can appreciate why avoiding controversy in a small state has its benefits in nurturing balance and, to a certain extent, objectivity; but the lack of a comments section severely limits its capacity to disseminate the public's point of view, which, for a public broadcasting service, should be crucial.

The reasons for not having a comments section do have merit, but it would seem that the underlying reason behind the decision is also likely to be concern about the type of comments that would be moderated and the obligation to disclose why some comments are uploaded and others not. Thus, we see that *TVM* is taking the path of least resistance, bypassing the possibility of its website being used as a tool for advocacy. A comments section on the *TVM* website would possibly elevate it to the top web ranking in the country, so it is difficult to grasp their reluctance to spend the money needed to achieve this. The probable reality is that the rationale for not enabling comments is likely to also revolve around the implications of inviting political commentary on the *TVM* website and the potential fallout from it. This is indicative of a risk-averse culture.

5.4 Culture and boundaries

5.4.1 A culture of impartiality

The existence of policies within each news organisation helps construct news in identifiable ways, such as managing story selection and mode of presentation. At *TVM*, the term ‘policy’ is rarely used; ‘guidance’ is considered more appropriate. Indeed, in none of the case studies is there a description of a clear editorial policy or any use of the term. This being said, various features of the *TVM* editorial system act routinely to ensure conformity across the selection of news. The stated central tenet of the *TVM* news division is impartiality and it is said to be the linchpin of its internal ideology, with the news held up to represent all interests and points of view without evaluative comment. This mission summarises the cultural, practical and cognitive limits that *TVM* personnel face in producing news.

The journalists state that they are supposed to be value-free and free from the potential influence of their sources. This has led to an understanding of impartiality being equated with reporting, specifically reporting without comment. Bugeja makes this clear: “to be honest I, maybe, I take the conservative line. You may say that I have reduced this station to a reporting station rather than an investigative station” (Bugeja, Head of News, *TVM*). Impartiality and balance are implemented when it comes to coverage of the political parties, when a number of journalists state they report without comment or analysis: “in the news bulletin, if you have a press conference of a political party, we are going to report it as it is. We would be ready to contest questions in a press conference. But we will not comment in the reporting of it” (ibid.). Thus, there will be no analysis.

The issue is not simply the refusal to comment on the news. The textual analysis will show that the avoidance of controversy goes so far as to even prevent coverage of controversial news, an avoidance that crosses party lines. In this arena, impartiality means reporting as it is,

in a form of non-contestation; non-evaluation. It can also be interpreted as a lack of will to engage with the political class, which is an indication of an organisation that is constrained by its adherence to the conventions of balance and objectivity. In the drive to create impartiality and balance, the journalists at *TVM* avoid controversy. It is worth exploring the reasons behind this.

This unwillingness to engage comes across in the way some of the news workers prefer to refer to themselves as ‘reporters’, as opposed to ‘journalists’. The sentiment is sustained by Bugeja: “when it is intrinsically news, I am very demanding, and I demand that we are a reporting station. If a scandal occurs, I will report the scandal, but I will not investigate the scandal” (ibid). His dedication to a neutral tone can relate to a Liberal American media model.

The commitment to avoid investigative journalism is another tool used to avoid controversy. There is a recognition that *TVM* represents the national broadcaster, and, to the journalists, this means they cannot act autonomously: “this does not mean we do not have liberty. We have liberty, but if I have a version of a story, we must verify it and balance it and if there is more than one opinion on this subject, we must cover them” (senior journalist at *TVM*). The focus is on the reporting of all points of view, as opposed to the news value and relevance of those views. No mention is made of the credibility of the news sources, the feeling being that if there is an alternative perspective it should be published. This contrasts with the position taken by the journalists in the other case studies, who consider the choice of frame for each news story fundamental to it. The belief at *Malta Today* is that they are able to advocate; not so at *TVM*.

This issue of impartiality, balance and reporting is explained as something which is ingrained in the journalists at *TVM*, as soon as they join the organisation. It is pointed out that, when employees join *TVM*, care is taken to inculcate the requirement to be impartial. We begin to recognise that the concept of neutrality at *TVM* is, after all, different from that which we find

in other media systems. We must consider that, in general, the recruitment of the journalist is made within party lines; however, this is not a news organisation which is recruiting politically like-minded individuals, unlike *Times of Malta*. The political cycle at *TVM* determines that this does not happen. Therefore, reticence is a useful tool to retain uniformity among journalists with polar political views. In this way, we can surmise that the routines at *TVM* work to socialise the journalist towards an impartial position.

It is, however, specifically said that no one at *TVM* directly tells journalists to work this way, nor do they monitor and moderate their output. This is supported by the following: “not because there is someone who, strictly speaking, will need to remind you about this every day, it becomes part of you and the way you act, you are conscious of it when you are writing stories” (journalist at *TVM*). The longer a journalist’s career *TVM*, the more neutrality becomes the natural position to adopt. “Our editorial policy, I implement it consciously. No one needs to remind me. Someone else has to remind them [new recruits], ‘if you get a comment from this side you must get a comment from the other side’” (journalist at *TVM*). Over time, this attitude is embedded in the journalists. In this respect, *TVM* journalists are referring to a style of socialisation present in the literature. The socialisation at *TVM* determines they are neutral. But there also exists an underlying concern among staff about what can or cannot be said. There is talk of boundaries.

5.4.2 Self-determined boundaries

Tied to the idea of reporting and not evaluating is the mention of boundaries and the existence of boundaries that cannot be overcome: “but I know, like, all journalists know their boundaries. They know, like, they cannot investigate [...] They are somehow influenced, unofficially by the behaviour of their superiors and they know their own boundaries. Editorially, although it is not officially communicated, they know they should not...” (senior

journalist at *TVM*). Here the journalist talks about an unspoken and unwritten duty to avoid investigative news.

The issue of boundaries is raised on numerous occasions and presented in a number of ways. Sometimes it is a sigh, or a silence; yet, there is resolve that there are places journalists at *TVM* do not want to go. “I do not feel I can give my line of thought. No. I avoid it. I do not mind voicing my opinion internally. If I had to write it, I do not think it would make it to the eight o’clock news” (journalist at *TVM*). This is key: they did not want to go there. It does not come from a feeling of fear, but rather from an identification of what it means to be part of the public broadcasting system, and an innate knowledge of the cultural environment and expectations. In a sense, this is another way in which *TVM* has neutered itself. One senior journalist has this to say on the subject:

When I trained at [the] BBC five years ago, they were very adamant about it, their integrity should be intact, somehow, and they should be perceived so. There is a very interesting saying, ‘perceptions might not be real, but their consequences are’. It is a constant thought that I get, that I should remain somehow impartial and my integrity intact but given the polarisation [...] given also that everyone knows everyone, and you get to meet these people on a daily basis, it is really hard. When I was at [the] BBC in London and tried to explain how hard it is, they cannot truly understand it. OK, you have this model of being an impartial national broadcaster, but on a daily basis it is really hard to make it work here (senior journalist at *TVM*).

What is being expressed is a frustration at not being understood by the outsider. The pressures placed on journalists, in a Maltese context, and in a small state context, means that, in order to protect their integrity, journalists create their own boundaries. This is integral to *TVM* culture.

In order to avoid these boundaries, to remain impartial, journalists at *TVM* feel the need to evade controversy. This seems to be the way they are able to uphold their neutrality.

The narrative that develops through the interview is that *TVM* experiences little political influence, and yet there is a perceived obligation to follow a particular path which equates to sustaining the institutions of power. To avoid these boundaries, to remain impartial, journalists at *TVM* feel the need to avoid controversy. There is no concerted effort to push any particular agenda at either an organisational, executive or institutional level; rather, the need to adopt a neutral, even neutered approach is ingrained at the level of the individual. What the journalist above is referring to, when discussing the BBC, is the issue of proximity and the influence it has on the news-making process. Although we may initially believe the employment of impartiality and objectivity is similar to that which is present in a Liberal American media system, we can also see that it has another use: as an instrument to protect the journalist from the country's major institutions. We begin to understand why this neutered socialisation is so important, as well as the role proximity plays in all of this.

The influence of proximity in a small state is real and appears in all three case studies. "Given, also, that everyone knows everyone, and you get to meet these people on a daily basis, it is really hard" (journalist at *TVM*). This is the central challenge of proximity and scale. It is real and has consequences. In the journalist's previous quote, she conveys that her issues were not understood at the BBC, which is indicative of a limited global understanding of the challenges faced by journalists in a small state. The literature discusses the limitation of resources within a small state, but does not address the close proximity these journalists are living in with their regular sources. When Maltese journalists talk about the consequences of their work, they are living the consequences they describe within their homes, families and towns. In this way, we recognise that proximity has its influence on the reporter's relationship

with sources and how the news is put together. This issue makes Malta, as a small state, unique from what we see in other systems.

All this helps us understand that boundaries are created by the individual, who decides where her red lines are for which institutions, and which areas of investigation. Bugeja noted, “I can be succinct about this without any problem. I do not see this as an issue of autonomy. It is not the institutional autonomy. It boils down to personalities. How strong you are. When you say yes or no depending on the circumstances you are in” (Bugeja, Head of News, *TVM*). This belief was held by other interviewees: “that boils down to the initiative of the journalist somehow. Journalists come up with their own stories. They bounce them with the news manager, and they take it from there [...] the thing is, you know your boundaries without even asking” (journalist at *TVM*). The reference is to the reporter’s appetite for sparking controversy and the energy required to follow particular stories.

5.4.3 A culture of boundaries

We find this culture of boundaries emanates from different sources and fields, creating three lines that should not be crossed. First, the political boundary, which could also be equated to an institutional boundary and is manifested by a reluctance to confront the political class, as well as the country’s institutions. Second, is the legal boundary: the law that applies to *TVM* does not apply in the case of other news organisations. As a constitutional body, the Broadcasting Authority monitors *TVM* and, technically, broadcasting law applies to all Maltese television stations, including the politically owned ones. Yet, it is not implemented equally. The legal obligation of balance is enforced for the state-owned station with a certain rigorousness from the Broadcasting Authority; it does not do this to the politically owned stations, working from the premise that the political stations balance each other out. At its roots,

this is a fallacious argument, as it presupposes that the recipient, the audience, is best served in this way, which may not be the case.

The third boundary is the cultural environment in which journalists operate, which has a moderating effect. When referring to articles published in the international press regarding the murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia, a senior journalist had this to say:

No, no, they don't have the context. Because the context here is very particular and peculiar. They don't understand. The context is pivotal in understanding how this country works and how media works and how we get to produce stories and news stories. On Daphne's story, the first reaction I got from a colleague of mine at Politico, 'what's happening there? Have you become the new Russia of Europe?'. It's not really like that. No. It's not, it's not, it's not. But the biggest problem I see, and I can sense it here in this building, is political hatred. Put simply, it is those two words. People see you in their eyes not as a respected person who has potential but [only] as a person who might be red. So, like in public speaking, [...] the first thirty seconds are crucial because your attire defines their perception. Here, in Malta, people judge you not on your attire, but politically. That happens here on a daily basis. No matter your ability. It is just political and... [if you question] something, you're screwed, or side-lined (senior journalist at *TVM*).

Here is a comment by a journalist, recruited during a PN administration, recognising the profound role politics plays in this small state; acknowledging how cultural understanding frames the narrative. We begin to get a sense as to why the need to avoid controversy is felt. The very nature of the political and electoral system is that it elevates politics to a level at which it melds with the individual's identity. In this journalist's eyes, the political party one

supports is a defining characteristic of oneself. This, again, brings us to issues of proximity. We find this trait within all three news organisations. Political affiliation forms part of the way journalists identify themselves.

5.4.4 Issues of proximity

The feeling that the Maltese media environment is not understood by the outsider is reflected by the Head of Web Services, Norma Saliba: “in fact, when I spoke to foreign journalists, wearing another hat as chairperson of the IGM [Maltese Journalism Institute], I noticed this. It is difficult to explain to them the scenario under which we work as media. They would not accept that there are certain media that have a hidden agenda” (Saliba, Head of Web Services, *TVM*). It is this level of media intimacy that is rarely understood by those beyond Malta’s cultural bubble. It is what can be understood as proximity, as expressed by Sammut (2007), who noted that agendas are understood in the local context because of historic political, linguistic and family ties, as well as perceptions of these relationships. These elements, as well as the understanding and recognition of them, are filtered by the Maltese audience, but would leave an outside observer blind-sided. The issues of proximity are linked to the understanding of how news is constructed. This is distinct from any other media system.

There exists an acute understanding of this within *TVM*, resulting in some journalists suppressing the hard questions. This is why some journalists at *TVM* insist on referring to themselves as reporters, seeing their role as descriptive rather than evaluative. This adds colour to the reason why, at all levels of the organisation, the aim is to report without comment or analysis when covering the news. Their reasons for retaining the conventions of objectivity and balance diverge from those of a Liberal American media model. There is no commercial drive behind the need to retain balance and objectivity. Through this, we can see that the aversion to ruffling political feathers straddles party lines.

When we recognise this, it becomes clear that the idea of investigative journalism in a tight-knit community is a myth for public consumption, believed by those who propagate it. *TVM*'s official stance seems to be that it practices neutral journalism. Adherence to this model seems to be a condition of employment. To quote one journalist, there are “even professional repercussions. There would definitely be professional repercussions [...] that is the price you have to pay [...] basically, *they* will make your life terrible somehow. Possibly, the first you will suffer will be being side-lined and being under-valued and underrated; that is an emotional price. It's also very psychological and hard to digest” (journalist at *TVM*). Who are “*they*”? The political and institutional elite; the social feed; even family. In a small state these elements come into play in the way news is constructed. Perhaps, this is one reason why it is too simplistic to place Malta into a Polarised Pluralist model. The reasons behind polarisation in this small state extend beyond politics. Research on how media systems within small states operate differently from larger neighbours is dramatically lacking.

Further evidence of these boundaries are delineated. “Definitely. Subconsciously, why do I not take the plunge and push the boundaries? The current invisible boundaries of trying to take the government to task on certain issues. Subconsciously, I know that [long pause]...it will take me nowhere... Am I going to gain something out of it?” (journalist at *TVM*). The capacity to challenge these boundaries boils down to a journalist's level of agency and the energy and courage they may have. With so much resistance surrounding the editorial staff at *TVM*, we can understand this reluctance to promote their own advocacy. The difficulty is that there seems to be no way, at present, to solve this impasse within *TVM*, as there is no political desire to limit this pressure.

Far-reaching changes cannot be generated at a departmental level. Nor is there any likelihood that they will be derived from working journalists themselves. A more politically engaged stance would have to be initiated at the top of *TVM*'s hierarchy. However, this would

elicit intervention at a political level, as the present situation serves both main political parties. Contextualised, it becomes clear that control is not being exercised by the government in power, but by the political class as a whole. As long as the political class sees the news media as an instrument of power this will not change, and a risk-averse culture will remain at *TVM*. This is also a significant way in which it differs from *Malta Today* and *Times of Malta*. The advocacy of the latter organisations is clear and used as a springboard for more vigorous, vociferous journalists. In *TVM*, risk aversion, with the clear intent of creating balance, dominates.

5.5 External pressures (commercial and political)

5.5.1 Political pressure

It is worth reinforcing that news workers at *TVM* do not consider themselves under any direct political influence. The comments of one senior member of staff sheds light on this:

I'd like to make this point clearly. It is absolutely unfair on PBS to say that the PBS is a notice board for the government. There is another point. The station has a mission of public service. Those things that other stations do not cover, or newspapers for that matter, we are obliged to cover them. If you have health or education issues that the public needs to know about in a certain amount of detail, yes those have to be done... But to say that PBS is the servant of government, I do not accept this (senior member of editorial staff at *TVM*).

In a polarised society, the presentation, as news, of information deemed public service announcements can be perceived as misinformation or, worse, government propaganda.

The question of interference is also flagged by the Head of News: “I have never had any interference over here. Absolutely not true. No minister has ever called me and asked me to do this or that, report this or that” (Bugeja, Head of News, *TVM*). Bugeja is clear that, under his watch, *TVM* is never interfered with. However, examples are cited by journalists who worked under different administrations over a period of forty-two years, with specific mention of five ex-Maltese Prime Ministers and their attempts to influence. The feeling is that when governments change, they bring a form of diversity to *TVM*: “there were the times when the state broadcaster was a strong arm for that government. When Labour lost their election in 1987, *TVM* was said to be a strong house for the Labour government. When Lawrence Gonzi [PN] lost [in 2013], it was a very big strong house for Gonzi. Yet he still lost. It was a strong house for Government. It was very clear. They still lost” (Bugeja, Head of News, *TVM*). The implication is that the state broadcaster may not be as powerful as the political class supposes.

This tells us that the governing parties seemed to be labouring under the illusion that, because state broadcasting was on their side, the public would support them. In this way we can see that in previous years the news was being instrumentalised as would befit a Polarised Pluralist system. Referring to occurrences of the past, Bugeja comments, “we would investigate something which the opposition was not comfortable with and I would not investigate government. If you see the decisions of the BA, these were decisions, even in the previous administration, where the BA, chosen by the PN-run government, took decisions against the station that stated that it was biased and unbalanced. That never happened under my watch” (Bugeja, Head of News, *TVM*). However, there are other ways in which politicisation occurs and the political parties can exert influence on staff at *TVM*. “Honestly, everyone is trying, even though there is pressure. We are trying to get there. In the last election the PN said they would remove PBS from government control. I don’t think that is ever going to happen. It would be very hard. The main appointments are totally political” (journalist at *TVM*). It is

difficult to put this any other way, save by stating that this is the sort of intimidatory pressure that journalists at *TVM* face.

Tied to intimidation is the prospect of complaints filed by the political parties. In the interviews it emerges that, in the vast majority of cases, the BA turns down these complaints. Their sheer number makes clear that the motive, especially during election time, is to manipulate and regulate *TVM*. Journalists tend to react in the same vein: “so, you avoid asking the question”; “that’s how it is. So, since then, I’ll leave it. I’ll try and focus my energies on stories which are interesting for the people”; “I’ll leave it” – I will avoid controversy. Detailed examples are referenced.

They filed a complaint with the Broadcasting Authority just because I produced a news feature, like, on migration. Simon Busuttil [then, PN MEP] alleged that I was not giving due credit to his work in [the European Parliament] on the issue. This was seven or eight years ago. Mind you, although he reported me to the Broadcasting Authority no action was taken. This puts into perspective what the situation is (senior journalist at *TVM*).

Covert pressure applied through the BA is also described thus: “from everywhere? The fact that a political party appeals to the BA is that not pressure? There would be some pressure from friends and family. There is more pressure on the editor. You must be capable of handling it” (journalist at *TVM*). This could be considered an effort by both political parties to make the journalists’ task that little bit more complicated, and relates to what the Head of News said above about the will to follow individual stories; that is, the agency required by individuals to push the boundaries.

There is clear evidence that the political parties look to find ways of exerting influence, but the journalists interviewed are assertive in their insistence that, at present, the attempts are futile. This conviction is non-partisan and expressed by the journalists themselves. So, while we have clear efforts by the political parties to instrumentalise *TVM*'s output, as in a Polarised Pluralist system, the editorial team is assertive in its resistance to both parties. This is not what you would expect from a state-owned media organisation working in a Polarised Pluralist system, and evinces why *TVM*'s published news is politically innocuous. The consequence is that *TVM*'s output news comes across as neutered: it is a defence mechanism. This underlines the fear of a confrontation with the political class, resulting in a detached style of reporting.

On a personal level, the *TVM* journalists have no difficulty in expressing their own political positions. It is interesting to note that, when introducing themselves, they could not help but smile when stating how long they had worked for *TVM* and what year they joined. While this may seem unremarkable to an outsider, seen through the lens of Maltese culture and its small-state political backdrop, this makes perfect sense. By knowing the years of their employment, it is possible to work out what party was in government at the time of their hire. This leads to an acknowledgment of the journalist's political stance and underlines the depth of Malta's political polarisation. In this context, a senior journalist, recruited during a PN administration, having worked for the PN media, noted:

You fulfil your role as a journalist. There will be those who try to influence you. Not only politicians. There were those who wrote against me from both sides. You get used to it. If someone writes about me, it affects you at that time, but you keep on going. Never has anyone come up to me and said report this in this way and report that like this. While when I was at the other side, [a politically owned media house] naturally the owner is known to you (senior journalist at *TVM*).

As a result, while there is no directly imposed pressure, the conditioning of the news workers at *TVM* takes place through a form of cultural coercion, as well as intimidation, from the political parties, and results in the philosophy of avoidance: “so, you avoid asking the question”. This cultural pressure is formed from what is understood to be the political affiliation of each journalist. It would seem that the fact that the two other predominant TV stations are politically owned could condition the expectations of *TVM* audiences. While the obvious polarisation of the other stations leaves *TVM* with little competition, a form of perceived politicisation is created internally. This has influence on the way news is constructed, in that these journalists are mindful of the problems proximity stimulates in this small state, and they realise this inhibits the advocacy of their own political position, which, of course, exists. Ultimately, it is one of the reasons behind their engagement within *TVM*.

The media organisation has a tight grip on broadcast news and on its dissemination in general, as demonstrated in chapter three, which, in turn, makes it an important political prize. This creates a significant amount of frustration among a number of journalists because there is an expectation of them to be politicised. “Judge me by what I am presenting, by what I am trying to convey, producing. That is very hard, very irritating. I keep on asking myself, why the hell am I doing this” (senior journalist at *TVM*). This interviewee still has the passion for news, notwithstanding the boundaries and despite the thankless situation *TVM* journalists frequently find themselves in. They are perceived as having a political agenda regardless of their intentions. “I stay away. I don’t think that should be the case. But that is how it is unofficially. The biggest problem, as I see it is ‘us’. In the media landscape, it is not probing as it should be. When you probe, you are asking the hard questions to get things right because ultimately there is our [Maltese citizens’] money. Someone should be accountable” (senior journalist at *TVM*). Here is another reporter explaining why he keeps his distance from

contentious topics. For all the good intentions of the journalists at *TVM*, they face an uphill struggle to portray themselves as clinical. Not all of them have the capacity, the agency, to withstand this kind of pressure, and the situation is not improved by the public perception of what the role of the journalist at this organisation.

People see me reading the news and if that which I am reading, reporting, does not sit well with them, they say he is a Nationalist (PN). She is Labour (PL). They do not know the role of the journalist. The journalist is there to see how things line up in front of him. Ask questions. She tries to inform the public about what is happening out there. People do not know this. They know she will report what is happening. But if she gives, if she reports something in particular, because she is reporting from that point of view, immediately she will be labelled. They do it to me. They do it to my colleagues (journalist at *TVM*).

This journalist asserts that she covers the news in an objective way. The problem is that her writing is still interpreted as taking a political position, thus exacerbating the editorial team's preoccupation with neutering the way their news is constructed.

5.5.2 Commercial pressure

Another area of potential conflict emanates from the commercial arena. We have outlined the financial model of the PBS, which affords *TVM* a significant amount of financial independence as a consequence of revenues generated from advertising and the PSO (Public Service Obligation). This is a distinct feature which is different from other Polarised Pluralist states. Bugeja noted, "I have a wall with the advertising department. We talk but they do not influence me" (Bugeja, Head of News, *TVM*). Numerous examples were provided of instances

when the sales team did approach editorial, yet on none of these occasions was any advantage subsequently given to advertisers. “We do not pay much attention to this when we come to take editorial decisions...we are supported by the banks, but we will write about their performance at their end of year review. It is something where many are affected by this, so we will run the story” (journalist at *TVM*).

The clarity with which resistance to commercial needs is articulated is consistent in all three case studies. True, this position is to be expected since it is highly unlikely a journalist would admit to framing a story for financial gain, as this would amount to defrauding the audience. Yet, remains a distinguishing factor, in that the recognition of the limited resources in this small state differs from that which we find in an American Liberal media system. It is not so much the resistance of commercial interest, as a lack of recognition that is an issue. At *TVM*, editorial staff are removed from the commercial demands present in an American Liberal media system.

In instances where commercial complaints do reach the editorial team, the attitude seems to be that both sides of any commercial argument must be heard. On most of the occasions, the sales department passes on feedback after publication of a news item. Again, there is no indication that this sanitises the offending content. “No. We never, but never have the sales department come to us and ask, ‘please do not run with a story?’” (senior journalist at *TVM*). There are also clear legal constraints on covering news items, which prohibit any commercialisation of the news, among which is the compulsory demarcation between news bulletins and advertising on TV. Together with this, the need is felt to avoid the perception that large organisations may try to sway the editorial team:

Obviously in the commercial world things happen. If a soft drinks factory is going to open, we will cover it. When Farsons (the leading Maltese brewery) opened their

factory, I reported it. No problem. Yet we often ran stories which they did not like. Once – it was summer – we interviewed someone on plastic bottles and how it could get contaminated because it was left in the sun. The bottlers were not happy with this. So? They try to put pressure, but you draw a line (Head of News at *TVM*).

The commercial world applies pressure, but it is shrugged off. Notwithstanding, the Head of News has also admitted that he cannot control everything. This is an inevitable consequence of filling a role that could conceivably be carried out by three people. This predicament is prevalent in the literature concerning small states. It also underlines the necessity to multitask, a reality also apparent at *Malta Today* and *Times of Malta*, though not to the same extent. The impact of professional multitasking, specifically, is not explicitly tackled in the literature, and is a way for small states to cope with a lack of resources.

It is clear that, at *TVM*, though it is state-owned, funding insecurity is not disregarded and budgets are limited. “Even if there is an advert. I am responsible. If there is an advert which is vulgar, I have to decide whether it is published or not. For example... they asked me if this programme was acceptable for me. I told them it was not. It was a photo of the Madonna with a phallic symbol behind her” (Head of News at *TVM*). Some decisions are easier to take than others. Beyond this, at no level does it transpire that the editorial team are exposed to the financial workings of the organisation. They are not involved in the budgetary process and are no more aware of the organisation’s financial performance than other Maltese. It is clear that none of the journalists or senior editorial staff at the news organisations studied have any insight into the budgetary process. While, at the time of interviewing, the issue of funding was not of primary importance, we can discern that this is rapidly changing.

Some difficulties are expressed regarding the commercial challenges faced by the organisation, specifically online. The competition from Google Ads and, particularly, from

Facebook have made it difficult for the sales team to engage clients and sell online advertising. The price of advertising on Facebook is extremely low, undercutting *TVM*. The local context poses a further complication, as Google Ads does not recognise the Maltese language and therefore will not allow their ads to be carried on the *TVM*'s Maltese web page. This, in turn, leaves empty advertising slots, which impact the site. This is yet another example of the trials faced by news publishing in a small state. It also prevents *TVM* from earning additional revenue. These problems push the administration and sales team to look for other ways to generate income.

As we come to the conclusion of this section, we see there are five key components which underscore this risk-averse news organisation and explain the decision to be descriptive and not evaluative. We have noted that the terms of reference of *TVM* ensure it should be impartial; we are given to understand the relationship with the political class is a complicated one; we find that senior editorial staff strive to be non-partisan; journalists at *TVM* are socialised to be neutral. We have established that issues of proximity and political pressure combine to encourage a neutral and risk-averse news style. The interviews underline a clear difference between the way journalists and senior editorial staff perceive their role when compared to *Malta Today* and *Times of Malta*. At *TVM*, journalists are resolved to present a balanced portrayal of the news. Unlike journalists at *Malta Today*, the aim at *TVM* is to avoid controversy and advocacy, yet both organisations intend to present a balanced view. We shall see that both news organisations differ from *Times of Malta*, in that the latter does not strive to create balance but, rather, to underscore its editorial agenda. We shall now explore whether the textual analysis complements this narrative at *TVM*, and question its commitment to non-advocative news reporting.

5.6 *TVM* coverage of the 2017 electoral campaign

5.6.1 The narrative: Avoiding controversy

The textual analysis shows that journalists at *TVM* strive to avoid controversy and that effort was made to normalise the news during the electoral campaign. This is unusual when we consider the level of political engagement that Maltese society possesses, as discussed in chapter three. This avoidance results in discrepancies between central elements of particular news stories covered by *TVM*, *Malta Today* and *Times of Malta*. However, the text also confirms this risk-aversion is not related to political party allegiance. Journalists at *TVM* do not consider themselves under any direct political influence, rejecting the accusation that PBS is a government notice board as unfair. The issue seems to be that the journalists feel obliged to publish news that other organisations are not covering. The coverage of the 2017 General Election by *TVM* has to be understood within the context of how the journalists and senior editorial staff perceive their role: simply to inform as a public service. With this in mind, from the start of the electoral campaign, news and information was presented in a way that evades controversy.

We witness this in its first leading stories, relating to gender balance in the political field (Micallef, 2017), and its calls for vote counters and supervisors. The latter includes non-controversial information: “the Electoral Commission announced it will receive applications from eligible persons to serve as Assistant Electoral Commissioners or as counters, supervisors and calculators during the counting of votes at the General Election of Saturday, the 3rd of June” (no byline, 2017). Here we see the text is fact-led and totally devoid of scandal. This is closely followed by an article published about the rehearsal of Malta’s representative at the Eurovision Song Contest, which is accompanied by a thirty-seven second clip (no byline, First rehearsal for Claudia in Kyiv, 2017). There is a follow-up of this particular story later in the day (no byline, Positive reaction from international media, 2017).

This pattern and frame is followed throughout the five-week campaign, covering general stories which, in turn, create the impression that all is normal in a country where politics would usually be central to its way of life. In these frames, stories such as that of the octogenarian who avoided death in the Second World War took centre stage (Pisani, 2017); as did a story on flooding in Canada (no byline, State of emergency following heavy floods in Canada, 2017), and an article on a Britain's Got Talent contestant (no byline, WATCH: Destiny Chukunyere astounds Simon Cowell with performance at Britain's Got Talent, 2017).

At this point in the campaign, the news covered tended to be neutered, with a considerable number of press conferences being covered with nothing contentious reported. It is three days into the campaign before mention of any questions being asked by a journalist materialises (Castillo, 2017), and only on the fourth day does *TVM* broach any of the key electoral issues – in a positively framed article (Muscat, 2017). The only disputatious detail is inserted at the foot of the article: “Questioned by journalists, Dr Muscat said that if enough evidence was found for a criminal investigation against his Chief of Staff Keith Schembri, the latter would have to shoulder his responsibility and resign.” This question concerns the issue of good governance, which was to become a central pillar of the opposition's campaign. At *Malta Today* and *Times of Malta*, this issue is raised from day one and is a key component of the text published by them. This is not the case at *TVM*, and reflects concern around the creation of controversy and the need to maintain a neutral voice.

The pattern of non-contentious news is followed through the majority of the campaign, with stories covering topics such as the inauguration of sport complexes (Muscat, PM inaugurates new Sliema Wanderers sports complex, 2017) and issues of health (no byline, Heart specialist appeals for prudence for a healthier lifestyle, 2017). Together with these is an attempt to try to frame the debate at a different level, trying to elevate it – for example, by

bringing in a neutral economic dimension (no byline, European Commission predicts public finances surplus for the coming 3 years, 2017).

This has consequences. Very often the text is a precise representation of what is said by sources, concentrating information into quotations. In effect, this matches what is expressed in the interviews: firstly, the Head of News highlights that he does not see comment or analysis as part of *TVM*'s mission and this should be relegated to programmes specifically created for in-depth analysis. Secondly, we note there exists a need to skirt controversy. This is what we have observed in the literature, which points to the operational process of how the news is prepared and works to limit the amount of leeway each journalist is given in the reporting of their work. The adoption of a neutral tone can be seen in the text to be an instrument which helps it elude political backlash and align with *TVM*'s editorial direction.

This is dissimilar to what we have noticed at *Malta Today*, where routines do not foster objectivity and balance. In that case it is internal pluralism, at an organisational level and created by a bipolar advocacy, that fashions a form of balance. *TVM*'s text indicates that news construction happens at two levels: the socialisation of the journalist and recognition of the surrounding culture combine to create uniformity of narrative. It can be argued that this is then positioned as objectivity and balance, for very different reasons from those expressed in the literature. Again, this needs to be contextualised by the issues caused by size. In a small state, the presence of this socialisation emanates from within the organisation, as well as from outside it, and is directly linked to issues of proximity. However, in its effort to avoid controversy, *TVM* steers clear of news it believes could be perceived to be politically polarised. Two examples stand out.

In *Malta Today* and *Times of Malta* one of the key electoral events is the University of Malta debate, held on 17th May 2017. It is covered by *TVM*, but the prominence it gives the story is less than that afforded by the other two news organisations (no byline, Debate between

Leaders at University, 2017). The text is factual but lacks depth and the additional information offered by the other two organisations. Importantly, no mention is made of the question posed by the son of PL MP Tonio Mercieca, which is featured prominently by the other titles. Both *Malta Today* and *Times of Malta* acknowledged the political *faux pas* of the Leader of the Opposition, who was perceived to have verbally lashed out at this university student. This is an example of how enforced neutrality works to dilute the impact of an event. We cannot state that the text is advocative. *TVM* presents this event in a way which, while not favouring the government, fails to capture a defining moment from it. In the effort to achieve balance and neutrality, the report has been neutered, consolidating our understanding of *TVM* as a risk-averse news organisation,

A further instance when the organisation takes an uncontroversial line – and a different approach from the two other news organisations in this research – was on the ruling from a court case instituted by PL MP Julia Farrugia, versus Daphne Caruana Galizia on May 19th, 2017 (no byline, Caruana Galizia guilty of defaming Julia Farrugia, 2017). Ms Farrugia won a libel case and its associated appeal, connected to an event which happened in 2011. *Malta Today* and *Times of Malta* gave coverage to the hearing (no byline, Caruana Galizia loses appeal against Julia Farrugia, 2017, and Agius, 2017, respectively), quoting one of the key foundations of the case: when Ms Caruana Galizia published an article in which she called Ms Farrugia a “bitch, a cow and a prostitute” (no byline, Caruana Galizia loses appeal against Julia Farrugia, 2017, and Agius, 2017, respectively). The three lines of text published by *TVM* on the ruling are uninformative and offer no background to the story.

Two important elements from the hearing were picked up by *Malta Today* and *Times of Malta*, but ignored by *TVM*. The first was the Judge’s comment that “the fundamental right of freedom of expression does not translate into a right to harm other people's reputations” (Agius, 2017). The articles also show that the journalist, Daphne Caruana Galizia, was found

liable for the comments made on her blog by third parties, as a result of them being defamatory. These were important condemnations which directly impacted the construction of news in Malta, yet *TVM* ignored them. The organisation's determination to be impartial goes to the extent that some news stories are effectively neutered.

We may also note the trend at *TVM* to assign journalists to cover political events which are hosted by the political party they are sympathetic to; most likely a response to the tense atmosphere that pervades most of these political rallies, and a strategy that is mirrored at *Malta Today*. We know most journalists hired during a particular administration will have a political inclination towards that governing party, and we know that these events are emotionally charged and a mainstay of the electoral campaigns of both of the main political parties. It is not uncommon for as many as eighty to one hundred thousand people to attend. If we also consider the antagonistic attitude both political parties adopt towards *TVM*, who accuse it of political bias (no byline, PN says PBS follows PL propaganda, 2017) and make regular complaints to the BA on numerous issues, it can be understood why *TVM* is cautious. Rather than producing potentially contentious political content, the journalists choose to neuter their reporting instead.

5.6.2 Neutering of politics

Even though the journalist is sympathetic towards the political party she is covering, the framing remains largely neutered, in complete contrast to what we find in *Malta Today* and *Times of Malta*. It is noted in the interviews that there is no directly exerted pressure to report in this way, and the conditioning of journalists at *TVM* happens through a form of cultural pressure. Implicit intimidation from the political parties results in a retreat: "so, you avoid asking the question". An avoidance of crossing boundaries. The political rallies mentioned above contribute to this cultural pressure.

Bringing together the interviews, textual analysis and observations of the way *TVM* covered the 2017 election, there is a sense that *TVM*'s mission is to normalise affairs within the Maltese community, as part of its public service obligation. Within this context, the presence of a number of simple photo opportunities covering ministerial events can be better understood (Pisani, Positive experience for 230 students at new Kirkop school, 2017). These are framed as a regular form of news. "The Minister said that an effort is being made on a national level to attract more popular films and popular actors to be shot in Malta, such as those involving Angelina Jolie, Brad Pitt and Michael Fassbender" (Zammit, 2017). In the middle of an electoral campaign, we have a Minister talking about movie stars. The key narrative here is to establish a form of normality with the frames presented reflect this narrative.

While *TVM* promotes a form of reporting which is conflict-averse and devoid of controversy, their public-service obligation ensures that they give voice, albeit a highly diplomatic one, to a spectrum of interests. Tied to this is the need to offer a platform to all political parties, regardless of their size. *TVM* offered a platform for all, even the most minor parties, during the 2017 Electoral Campaign. There are numerous examples of content representing Alternativa Demokratika (AD) (Cassar, 2017), as well as Alleanza Bidla (no byline, Alleanza Bidla complains on allocated time for political broadcasts by Broadcasting Authority, 2017). The former is one of the first parties to have its politically contentious views covered by *TVM*: "Professor Cassola said it was crucial for the proposals to be activated now, adding that Malta had been taken over by the Panama clique, and the political climate was dirty and tainted" (Cassar, 2017). In this way, it displays its democratic philosophy: to provide information and a platform for all.

This risk-averse *TVM* agenda presents a scenario of normalisation, where it covers events in a non-contentious manner. Its agenda to simply inform and disseminate information is a purpose neglected by other news platforms, yet its own neglect of news that asks hard

questions of its political masters has a constraining effect. As indicated in the interviews, the textual analysis also elucidates that the “master” is not necessarily the ruling political party, and can be broadly identified as the political class. This is a reflection of the organisation’s ownership structure, as well as the polarisation of Maltese culture, which promotes a form of self-censorship at the journalists’ level and is only released at points of heightened emotion. In this respect, *TVM* is different from other state broadcasters in the Polarised Pluralist model; it strives to fulfil its public-service obligation by producing a broad spectrum of coverage. Its internal policing has a neutralising effect. Here, too, the text shows *TVM* is different from *Malta Today* and *Times of Malta*. Although the environment within *Malta Today* is heated, the positioning of the leadership team allows its journalists to carry their own points of view, which results in diverse advocacy. *Times of Malta* positions itself as an organisation with a linear form of advocacy, driven primarily by the rigorousness and agency of individual journalists who are tied to a clear editorial position. The very fact that a contributing factor to the appointment of a journalist at *TVM* is their political outlook has resulted in them cancelling each other’s influence. To survive they will not cross boundaries.

5.6.3 A creeping advocacy

While the start of the 2017 Election is epitomised by a neutered approach to the news covered, towards the end of the campaign a creeping slant reveals itself in *TVM*’s reporting. In this framing both political parties are presented in a positive light, depending on who has covered the event. The trend develops: “Dr Muscat said that just as in the last legislature, a new Labour Government would continue to give a boost to businesses. He said that over the next five years, the Government would continue to be pro-business” (no byline, PM announces five other priorities including free school transport and free exams, 2017). This text conveys a positive policy presented by the Government and tells us how well the economy will perform.

This is followed by a more positive frame for its coverage of the PN press conference: “Dr Busuttill said that this week the PN would continue to show how it would implement measures which confirm its mission to show how politics can be for the people, and not for the service of three people at Castile” (Demicoli, 2017). In this text, the opposition’s key argument is presented optimistically. So, while initially the choice of the journalist to cover each event did not have any impact on the way the event was framed, this eventually changed, allowing for a surreptitious advocacy.

This is in contrast to what we find in the text in the other news publications studied. At *Malta Today*, from the very start of the campaign, the frame is consistently dependent on who covers the event. *Times of Malta* is different, in that, while the aggressiveness of the text is also determined by its journalists, its advocacy is linear in direction and consistent throughout the election, regardless of the author.

TVM’s frames, on the other hand, are not stable. As we move further into the campaign, its coverage becomes framed in a way that favours whichever party is being written about. Having said this, its overall coverage is limited in scope and offers very little analysis of how the election is progressing. The desire to be risk-averse overrides all.

On the day the election results are announced, this subtle advocacy becomes more apparent (no byline, WATCH: PM first reaction from the Counting Hall – appeals for unity, 2017). Here we note the text is somewhat vitriolic and is accompanied by footage filmed from the roof of the PL headquarters of rampant Maltese flag waving (Zammit, Watch: Supporters celebrating near PL headquarters at Hamrun – awaiting Labour leader, 2017).

5.6.4 Issues in translation

As noted, operating in a bilingual state, *TVM* – uniquely among the three organisations studied – has both Maltese and English versions of its website, purportedly mirroring each

other. To a great extent, this is the case, but textual analysis reveals a number of discrepancies between them. On the English version of the site an event is reported as a press conference, with no audio visuals: “Prime Minister and Labour leader Joseph Muscat has stated that Government had inherited a number of problems in the health sector, to which solutions had been found over the past four years” (Saliba, 2017). The Maltese equivalent includes a video, from which the English is a direct translation. It also refers to a libel case the Prime Minister was pursuing against Matthew Caruana Galizia, son of Daphne, who made accusations against him, even though he (Caruana Galizia) admitted he had no proof to support his claims. This reference is included in the text of the Maltese version, but not the English one. This happens again in a report of a PN press conference, this time discussing rent reform (Castillo, 2017). The featured AV ends with a comment, in Maltese, about the head of the Maltese civil service, whom the PN stated would be removed because his appointment was partisan and, as a result, had compromised the civil service. Although the text is otherwise a direct translation into English of the AV, it omits this last comment. The Maltese text version includes the comment, as well as the reaction of the PL. It seems that the routine within *TVM* can be used to push individual advocacy in unusual ways, and potentially explains these omissive translations.

There are numerous occasions where AV, always in Maltese, is published on the Maltese website, as well as on the English one; in some instances, however, it appears only on the Maltese web page. There is no example of an AV featuring only on the English version of the site. Why is this inconsistency happening? One reason could be to present the English article as more palatable to a non-Maltese-speaking audience. If this is the case, this content targets the website’s international audience. The Maltese are comfortably bi-lingual, and the Maltese-language interpreter for the voice-over would not have mistranslated the story.

The other cause could be an unclear operational policy. Most of the videos are clips prepared for the broadcast news and are then utilised on the website. As the campaign

progresses, video begins to appear more loosely edited, which would not have been used for broadcast purposes. Towards the end of the campaign, unedited video obtained from mobile devices begins to feature. This indicates an evolving policy for use of AV content.

5.7 Conclusions

The findings in this case study have shed more light on our research question, “what drives the construction of news in a small polarised state?” The overriding idiosyncrasy we have discovered within this organisation is the way its routines, culture and socialisation conspire together to create a risk-averse news organisation. This is a publication that strives to present balance and neutrality, in order to avoid controversy. That *TVM* has elected to omit a comments section from its news portal, a decision believed to impact external pluralism, emphasises this. The findings indicate that the Board of Directors does not interfere in the construction of news, nor does influence appear to stem from commercial interests. In this, we see consistency between all three news organisations, in that the corporate and managerial arms of the organisations do not impose on news construction. This is a striking similarity to what you would expect to find in a Liberal American/North Atlantic media system.

We have revealed that there is an attempt, at an organisational level, to shield *TVM*'s journalists from the political parties. The Head of News, Reno Bugeja, is a member of the Editorial Board and does not have any voting rights, but he is personally responsible, by law, for *TVM*'s news output. He can ignore any direction from the Editorial Board and this has resulted in a layer of insulation around the newsroom to protect it from executive, commercial and political interests. The construction of news is ultimately directed by the Head of News. It is his direction that determines that *TVM* reports and does not comment; an approach that staves off controversy. Here, too, as we found at *Malta Today*, the construction of news is primarily

editorial staff-driven. We detect similarities between *TVM* and *Malta Today*, in that strong leadership guides the way news is constructed. The ultimate aim, in both organisations, is to create a form of balance.

Having said this, on no occasion is Bugeja's integrity questioned; indeed, he is portrayed as extremely meticulous, hardworking and even-handed. But it must be acknowledged that the central role of the Head of News, in all stages of the production process, can be problematic, as it is a pivotal position with limited checks and balances. It is clear that Bugeja's strategy is to report without opinion and exclude analysis, which represents an avoidance of controversy, and is used as a device to deflect the wrath of political parties. We can call this a coping mechanism – to shield the journalists at *TVM*.

We have established that the newsroom lacks a structured arena where the whole team can meet and discuss content. Instead, journalists work directly with the Head of News to prepare a news item. We recognise that this issue exists at *Times of Malta* but not *Malta Today*. It is a concern, given the lack of transparency about what news is covered and how it is constructed, as well as its stifling of internal pluralism at the organisation.

We have highlighted that new recruits undergo a form of socialisation in the *TVM* environment: what it means to be the national broadcaster is emphasised. The feeling that it is crucial to be 'balanced' is expressed, with the definition of this built on the idea of giving equal time and space to the main political parties. This forms an important part of the self-identity of many of *TVM*'s journalists. It is explained that the monitoring of *TVM* by the BA makes it an absolute necessity to ensure this balance, and it is clear that the reporters are resigned to avoid analysis and opinion in the presentation of the news.

The insistence that they report without comment comes across as a source of pride, yet it could be said that this is also tied to a priority of self-preservation. This is not what would be expected in a Polarised Pluralist system; indeed, it can be argued that this is more akin to the

favoured journalistic model of providing information, prevalent in a Liberal or North Atlantic media model. However, we have also argued that the reason behind this commitment to impartiality is somewhat different from that of the latter models. The drive to present a balanced view and to steer away from commentary is an instrument to avoid controversy. And yet we still detect that, during times of heightened political tension, such as general elections, a form of advocacy is present.

Let us now conclude by underlining and reiterating the findings relating to issues of proximity, journalists' agency and advocacy as a path to elucidate the main research question.

5.7.1 Proximity and the small state

We note *TVM* journalists understand where their self-imposed boundaries are and that none of them intend to cross any. These boundaries are tied to an external culture which the journalists believe is prevalent in this small state and can be understood when examined through a lens of proximity. The norm is to be faced with pressure from the political class, which takes the form of streams of complaints to the BA from major parties. With this, and because of political allegiance, journalists apply pressure to themselves to remain neutral, creating a form of internal surveillance.

The main concern expressed through the interviews was the type of pressure brought to bear on them through their core circle of relationships with friends and family, an issue which can only be understood in the context of a small nation. That their role was, as seen from the outside, "obviously" to appease the party in government was almost unanimously denied. The strain from working in a polarised society results in a form of sanitised news. This sanitisation occurs in story selection and how it is reported. The textual analysis clearly identifies this. Very often *TVM's* public-service obligation is used as the justification for their

choice of news. In this way, we can understand why the text shows a dulling normalisation of events during the electoral campaign, which reads as a form of neutered news.

5.7.2 Journalists' agency

Journalists at *TVM* are defined by their position within the PBS and their role is to *not* upset or create upheaval, to the extent that the normalisation of events in the country is seen as part of the public service. Their duty is to report without comment, avoid controversy and, indeed, take a certain amount of pride in doing this. We find no evidence of direct political interference, though there are issues that the journalists knew, almost intuitively, that they should not address. The key barrier that defines the type of news presented is not Government intervention *per se*, but the political class as a whole. These are the politics of a polarised society where political affiliation is known, and should determine the way the news is produced. The concern that any news presented be deemed too politicised generates a neutered style of news.

The journalists at this organisation do have a political affiliation which they restrain for all the reasons expressed above and this is indicated in the textual analysis. In this respect, at *TVM* the role of the journalist is limited, as a direct result of a hierarchical structure within the organisation, as well as political and cultural issues resultant of proximity and prevalent in a small state. *TVM* does not fit into the model presented by Hallin and Mancini (2004) of what would be expected from a state broadcaster in a Polarised Pluralist system. Unlike at *Malta Today*, the journalists at *TVM* largely resist the urge to assert their own political leaning, and they restrain their journalistic agency. They do this for very different reasons from those present in the American Liberal media system. This is a case of self-preservation; a coping mechanism.

5.7.3 Advocacy

The textual analysis shows that, as the campaign progresses, a very limited form of advocacy emerges, appearing at moments of heightened political and social pressure. In this sense, *TVM* demonstrates a second form of advocacy distinct from that present within *Malta Today*. It is a reflection of the political loyalty of the individual journalists and is unobvious in its presence, appearing in the editing, translation and drafting processes of the news construction at *TVM*. This advocacy is not heavily slanted towards either political party and is, therefore, still neutralised. These elements show that, while *TVM* does endeavour to maintain a neutrality-based system akin to an American Liberal media model, it achieves this for contrasting reasons and with different consequences. It transpires that *TVM* will err on the side of caution, producing an advocacy with limitations – a neutered form of advocacy. This is the result of proximity and political pressure sapping the will to contest or frame an argument. This said, control of its news construction still lies firmly with the newsroom, and is led by the Head of News.

The presence within *TVM* of any form of advocacy is important because it positions itself as an organisation in a distinct way from *Malta Today*. At *TVM*, advocacy is subtle, removed from the forthright tone of the other case studies. We can suggest that it stands at a significantly different point from *Malta Today* and we shall see that it is at the other end of a continuum from *Times of Malta*, too. We begin to realise that differing forms of advocacy could be one of the defining factors of Malta's media system. Here, too, we spark the idea that the presence of journalists with divergent political allegiances results in internal moderation. The presence of advocacy makes this possible.

The final case study will endeavour to elucidate the construction of news in an environment which is another departure from what we have seen thus far. This organisation has a distinct ownership structure and a legacy that sets it apart from *Malta Today* and *TVM*.

An organisation with the historical, financial and political clout to stand out in its methods of news construction: *Times of Malta*.

Chapter Six

Times of Malta

6.1 Introduction

Understanding news construction in Malta relies on a clear understanding of the status, structure and operations of *Times of Malta*. It is the masthead of an organisation that has loomed large over news in this small state. Allied Newspapers Limited (ANL), the news organisation's parent company, has been publishing for over eighty-four years, through a period when other titles published by the same company were economically robust and known for holding their own, regardless of political, social and economic pressures. This is a news organisation that is respected by many for its historically continuous drive to provide credible news and content (Sammut, 2007). Its history and origins need to be understood to fully grasp the network of influences that flow around it. In turn, will help us answer our main research question: "what drives the construction of news in a small polarised state?"

ANL has had a defining influence on the nature of news publishing in Malta. It is more complex than other news organisations in the country. This case study will show that, while the construction of news is primarily driven by its editorial staff, this assembly happens for very different reasons from those we witnessed at *Malta Today* and *TVM*. We shall establish that a form of advocacy exists at *Times of Malta* which differs from that of the other two case studies, and that part of the reason behind this lies in the publication's organisational routines and the performance of its central leadership.

While it will be argued that the very creation of *Times of Malta* was the result of political parallelism, it evolved into a news organisation that, during pivotal times, has not shied away from controversy, for which, as we shall see, it has paid the price. For most of its history it was an organisation run and owned by an aristocratic English family who, in later years, passed its ownership to a foundation. We shall show how this ownership structure impacts the way news is constructed, which will lead us to investigate the form of advocacy we are able to identify in its content.

Progress Press was set up by Lord Gerald Strickland, an Anglo-Maltese politician and peer, Prime Minister of Malta, and Governor of New South Wales in Australia, who successively sat in the House of Commons and House of Lords in Britain (Aquilina, 2010). Based in Strada Reale, Valletta, he set up newspapers as a way to solidify the political control of his Progress Party, at the same time as securing allegiance to the colonial power at the time (Aquilina, 2010). Immediately, we see that, at its very inception, the premise behind setting up the organisation was to instrumentalise the news.

In 1931, Progress Press moved to a larger premises to allow for expansion and, in 1939, the publishing mantle was assumed by ANL, which was also fully owned by Strickland. The name of the company, Allied Newspapers Limited, echoed the British roots of the organisation and paid homage to its positioning in the conflict, World War II, the start of which was only months away. In later years, other companies were set up specialising in the publication of magazines and the development of digital products and digital investments. Collectively, these companies are colloquially referred to by the name of its leading masthead: *Times of Malta*. In line with the history of journalism in Malta, this news organisation was political and advocative from its inception.

6.2 Ownership and historical positioning

6.2.1 Historical positioning

Times of Malta was first published as an English-language supplement to a Maltese-language newspaper called *Il Progress*, before later becoming a weekly and daily newspaper in its own right. In a short time, both *Times of Malta* and *The Sunday Times of Malta* established themselves as market leaders and, in the process, earned the distinction of being national institutions (Aquilina, 2010). This is a reputation it retains today, notwithstanding its position among a diverse range of other news services in the country.

Times of Malta's organisational narrative states that, a few years after its birth, it faced a life-and-death struggle as enemy bombs rained on Malta and famine and scarcity disrupted everyday life (Mizzi, 2001). The newspaper's significance during this period can be appreciated if we consider that newsprint was sometimes shipped to Malta by submarine (Aguis, 1995). Despite severe rationing in the country and direct hits to its presses during air raids, the paper survived and never missed an edition.

Its daily appearance served as a morale booster for Malta's military garrison and population. "Strickland House's endurance was an epic story of war and of journalism or, in the words of flying ace Laddie Lucas, one of Malta's wonders" (Aquilina, 2015). Stories like this anchored *Times of Malta* as a news organisation of substance and repute which, at the very least, had to be respected. However, this position made it a political target for its foes. On October 15, 1979, a day that was to become known in Malta as Black Monday, the newspapers' offices and printing presses came under attack and were set alight at the hands of a politically motivated mob. Notwithstanding this, the paper was still published that day by another printing press, thus preserving the tradition of never having missed an issue. However, the attack deepened the rift between *Times of Malta* and the Labour Party (PL), a rift that never seems to

have healed and, as we shall see, appears to have had a defining role in the way the organisation views itself.

Its circulation grew despite the departure, in 1979, of British forces, who constituted a good proportion of its readership. It became – and remained – one of (if not *the*) leading media companies in Malta. Parallel to its reputational growth was its commercial development. Today, *Times of Malta* covers breaking stories, and has become a medium its journalists and editors believe delivers news, rather than simply recording it. A key effort in this development was the creation of the online archive, in 1999; the company recognises the need to create an archive of all its past issues, since, as noted, the originals were burnt in 1979. This is how *Times of Malta* records and protects all previous editions for posterity. It was also one of the very first facilities of its kind in Europe to offer a fully text-searchable engine and return PDF representations of the actual pages.

This is relevant because the main outcome of this project was a change in the mindset of the executive team that created it. It is noted that this became an instrument to introduce skills and work practices that did not exist at the time and which led directly to the creation, in 2000, of *timesofmalta.com*. These projects are also emblematic of an organisation that had considerable resources and scale, notwithstanding its presence in a small state. This also shows us a mindset that was innovative and technologically driven. This is an organisation that demonstrates a structure and purpose beyond what would be expected in a small state, epitomised by the success of its online news portal.

The website quickly became a window through which the organisation could showcase the change it was undergoing, as it shifted focus from that of a newspaper publisher to a more diversified media organisation. It was the first website in Malta to realise the importance of mobile technology, launching its mobile platform in 2003. *timesofmalta.com* was also the first Maltese website to recognise the need for a digital social network, and thus created a feature

enabling users to comment on and engage with articles online. This conversational space, which is said to generate over twelve-hundred comments a day, requires a moderation team. The news workers interviewed describe the comments as a form of news in themselves, and can be seen as providing an important form of external pluralism in a country whose media landscape is dominated by a political duopoly. It is the scale of this comments platform that distinguishes *Times of Malta* from *Malta Today* and *TVM*, the latter of which has sought to avoid controversy and thus does not have a comments facility. This scale also distinguishes *Times of Malta* from news organisations outside the country. The extent of its online engagement underlines the importance of the organisation.

The next stage of the website's development was that of moving towards the generation of specific content for the website which could then feed the newspaper, rather than the other way around. When it received 400,000 unique visitors in a day, as it did when Pope Benedict visited Malta in 2010, it became clear that it was providing a crucial service in the country and had become the most-used news portal on the island. Today, *timesofmalta.com* is the top website visited in Malta, surpassing Facebook, Google and YouTube (Alexa, 2018). This positions the organisation as one with the resources, drive and innovation required to build a significant digital presence, a presence that is unusual in a Polarised Pluralist system which the literature tells us is likely to exhibit low levels of interest in news and newspapers. This helps us recognise the strength of the brand, as well as the importance of news consumption in this small state, as indicated in chapter three.

In effect, until 2017, the organisation appeared to be robust and able to keep up with changes and developments in different spheres of interest through diversification. What's more, it has situated itself as an organisation worthy of respect in the Maltese new media landscape. The organisation's history shows that its roots are political; it is forward-looking and innovative; its competitive market and limited resources have not stopped it developing.

However, this position creates an anomaly. We note that “objectivity and impartiality (are) the hallmarks of its reporting”, with credibility and political independence as its core values (Allied Newspapers, 2018). How does it present itself today, and how does this match the reality? We shall try to answer this question by examining the way news is constructed within the organisation.

6.2.2 Ownership structure

As noted, in the corporate world *Times of Malta* is actually ANL, which, in turn, owns Progress Press Company Ltd and Media Maker Ltd. The control of the company lies in the hands of ANL's board of directors, which has installed the same Managing Director to oversee all three companies. ANL is owned by a separate entity, the Strickland Foundation, and a small number of individual shareholders – the beneficiaries of the late Mabel Strickland O.B.E. In setting up the foundation in 1978, she wanted the foundation “to be of service to the people of Malta by helping in the development of freedom of thought and expression which, through a free press, is essential to the maintenance of democracy and basic for the proper development of the country” (Strickland Foundation, 2019).

In terms of the objectives of The Strickland Foundation, she discussed, among other things, the drive to foster Maltese national interest and to promote democratic principles, the observance of human rights, and the exercise of a free press. Its stated aim is to uphold the European character of Malta and support its continued presence in the Commonwealth, while striving to improve the standard of Maltese journalism by preserving its freedom and independence (Strickland Foundation, 2019). This clearly aligns with the characteristics of a Liberal American media system, which are discussed in the literature (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Here, in the middle of the Mediterranean, is an institution that declares it is removed from the Polarised Pluralist system. We recognise that Mabel Strickland had a very personal

vision of what she believed the role of the press in Malta should be. Balance and objectivity were central; free press meant “freedom to exercise judgement and not liberty to exercise those destructive gifts of distortion and abuse such as certain pressmen in the past placed at the disposal of unscrupulous politicians” (Editorial, 1946).

The uniqueness of the ANL shareholder structure came about as a result of the last will and testament of Ms Strickland, which was written on 10th August 1979, and should be understood within the context of her personal mission. In the second article of her will, she left in legacy to the Strickland Foundation the property known as Villa Parisio (in) Lija (private discussion with shareholder) and, crucially, she left five hundred and eighty-one shares (i.e. seventy-eight per cent of the company) to the Strickland Foundation. When Mabel Strickland passed away on 29th November 1988, this meant that the Strickland Foundation, as the majority shareholder, was able to appoint the full board of directors. If it chooses, it can thus control the direction the company may take. It follows that an introduction to the foundation’s members is necessary to identify any possible underlying agendas the organisation may consequently have.

None of the interviewees indicated that the shareholders interfered in the day-to-day running of the organisations. Yet, as the literature indicates, the choice of directors appointed to run the organisation is a clear reflection of the shareholders’ intent. Until 2010, the shares owned by the Strickland Foundation were effectively controlled by the executors of Mabel Strickland’s will, Professor Joseph Ganado and Professor Guido de Marco. Professor de Marco had been a Nationalist Party (PN) MP, Deputy Leader, Deputy Prime Minister and the sixth President of the Republic of Malta. With the transfer of executive power to the Foundation in 2011, new members were appointed. This included Professor de Marco’s son Mario, who is also a PN Member of Parliament and was Minister of Tourism. When in opposition he was appointed Deputy Leader of the PN, serving between 2013 and 2017. While the method used

to choose council members of the Strickland Foundation is not public knowledge, it can be assumed that new councillors are elected unanimously by all members. In this way, new members could support the political inclination of other council members.

The Foundation is led by Judge Emeritus Giovanni Bonello as Chairman, Dr Mario de Marco (PN MP), Marcel Cassar – CEO of a bank owned by the Catholic Church in Malta (APS), Ronald Aguis – previously Managing Director of *Times of Malta* and an old family friend of the de Marco family, and, finally, Mr Frank Bonello. The politics of most of the members of the Foundation can be presumed to lean towards the PN. While this is not necessarily documented, save in the case of Dr de Marco, their attendance at anti-government and other political events, and the political opinions they have expressed on numerous occasions confirm that they are all likely to be PN-leaning. Does it follow that the selection of the board of directors would reflect this? The possibility is not out of place in a Polarised Pluralist system.

Comprising nine individuals acting in a personal capacity, the board should meet regularly with the authority to administer the business. The publicly accessible company articles note that executive powers are vested in the Managing Director, who is Michel Rizzo, a childhood friend of Dr de Marco who formed part of his electoral campaign team in the past. The other board members are: Helga Ellul, who contested the European Parliamentary election under the PN ticket; Louis Farrugia, one of the country's leading businessmen and industrialists; Laurence Grech, former editor of *The Sunday Times*; Ronald Agius, a revered former Managing Director of ANL and, as noted, old friend of the de Marco family; Dr Austin Bencini, a lawyer by profession who was appointed by Professor Guido de Marco as ANL's company secretary and held the position for twenty-five years; Henry Hornyold Strickland, the grandnephew of Mabel Strickland; and Victor Galea, a leading businessman and former Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce. The company secretary, Dr Clinton Calleja, is a

lawyer at the de Marco and Associates firm and is reputed to have been involved in PN. In December 2017, Paul Mercieca, former CEO of Deloitte Malta, was appointed Chairman and replaced Ronald Agius.

The political positioning of members of both the Foundation and the board of directors cannot be determined with certainty, but two commonalities can be surmised. The first is the close relationship between the Foundation members, and several directors and council members. This is a direct consequence of small-state proximity. Indeed, this type of relationship within Maltese organisations can be considered the norm; notwithstanding, this does not preclude influence. The second commonality between the two bodies is a skew towards the PN. Although this does not imply a strategic selection of members of both groups, it merits consideration when interpreting the editorial policy and construction of news at this organisation.

Regardless, the composition of the Foundation and the board of directors does have a bearing on one of the company's stated core values: "we will do this by holding true to our values of democracy, truth, credibility, political independence and innovation" (Allied Newspapers, 2018). This statement shows favour to a particular national, political interest. This political positioning of the Foundation and the board of directors would not be unusual in a Polarised Pluralist system; the question is whether it trickles down to the newsroom. The next element to consider is whether the choice of the members of the management team mirrors the suggested inclinations of the two entities. Does their slant impinge on the running and structure of the organisation? Does it shape its construction of news?

6.3 Organisation structure and routines

As we have noted, *Times of Malta* is a more complex and diversified entity than other news organisations in Malta. It ventured into event creation with the hosting of *The Big Debate* in 2012, which saw the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition going head-to-head in an engagement that was televised live on two of the major television channels in Malta. This was followed by events such as *The Business Observer* breakfasts and the *Pink Fashion Show*. By 2015, *Times of Malta* was even launching its own boat show, *The Valletta Boat Show*. The company entered the broadcast sphere with *#TimesTalk* on *TVM*, eventually moving the programme online after it was dropped by the public broadcaster. These events were launched to generate more revenue and diversify the skill base at both the editorial and executive level. The consequences of this, within the context of a small state, are that the journalists had to create a system whereby they can multitask. The limitation of resources often precludes specialisation, which is apparent in all three case studies. As recently as 2016, *Times of Malta* comprised around two hundred and forty full- and part-time employees. Knowledge of its structures is crucial to understanding news construction within this organisation.

6.3.1 Management

Does the choice of management staff and its structure mirror the leanings of the owners and the board? Gans (2004) paid particular attention to the way story selection occurred within an organised structure. Within the organisation, as stated, the group is led by Michel Rizzo, who joined *Times of Malta* in January 2005 as Chief Executive Officer of the Group's subsidiary Mediamaker Ltd, and was subsequently appointed Managing Director. He occupied this role until December 2012, at which point he was made Managing Director of Progress Press Ltd and director of ANL. He became Managing Director of ANL in 2017. His personal

outlook could be summarised in his own words: “I’m a strong fan of the *Daily Mail* not just for sports. I don’t mind a bit of gossip here and there. To look at it [...] they mix breaking news with health issues, topic issues ...they just chuck everything into one box... because we are changing people”.

The example he chooses reveals the values he espouses. His priorities should mirror that of the board of directors, and his opinion is important because it could establish the corporate trend of the organisation and signal the intentions of the board: “we are not saying that it [news] becomes all native content. Ultimately, we are talking of balances here. To a certain extent, I feel there are areas in what we do... [which], in principle, take on more of a commercial bias. Which is why we are looking at the need of having a commercial editor: a person who can take content which ultimately is paid for and turn it into newsworthy stories” (ibid.). This represents the need to commercialise content and generate further revenue through news, and shows that, at the highest level of the organisation, it is considered necessary to construct news to fulfil commercial needs. This is a position which is more akin to a Liberal media system with a neutral commercial press than the Polarised Pluralist system which is presumed to dominate in Malta. Does the aim to monetise the news impact editorial autonomy?

Times of Malta has six departments covering the company’s primary functions. These are Editorial, Sales, Technology, Finance, Human Resources and Operations. To obtain a deeper understanding of how its news is produced, the size of this organisation determines that we should explore these departments.

6.3.2 Editorial

It is made clear, in many of the interviews, that the editorial team can take decisions on content which are removed from the commercial needs of the company. As stated by one of the editors, “[I was] fully aware that the commercial aspects must be respected and considered but I would not... fall into that trap [of allowing commercial needs to influence content]” (editor at *Times of Malta*). Another editor is even more vociferous: “I think what has made this company so successful is that we probably come the closest to narrating the truth better than anyone else. This doesn’t mean we always get it right, but I think it’s the credibility we’ve built in eighty years. I mean, don’t forget the most credible point is the fact that we will take on anybody politically, even commercially” (editor at *Times of Malta*). Interestingly, these claims somewhat contradict the Managing Director’s view.

At an editorial level, the setup protects content from commercial interference, with the editors themselves vehement in their independence. As we shall see, this contrasts with what the commercial managers in the organisation feel. While it is incumbent on the Managing Director to inform the editors of corporate issues they should be aware of, this would be an irregular occurrence and the editors are confident that they can make their own content choices. This is not, however, to say that they are blind to financial realities and we find instances where acknowledgement is given to commercial needs:

I think that we have become more aware, in recent years, that there is a commercial side one cannot ignore. I joined this organisation eighteen years ago and we were too strong to even bother about anything. I mean, there were always the same threats of advertisers pulling out because of a story. Today, we might be a bit more aware. It doesn’t mean we’ve changed our way of thinking; it’s just the fact that you are aware of what a story might cost the company in pounds, shillings and pence. At the end of

the day, it probably makes us a bit more cautious about how to attract, how to approach a particular story; not by ignoring the story but by making sure that we are being very fair to all sides concerned (senior journalist at *Times of Malta*).

Here is an editorial staff member who is mindful of his commercial responsibilities but removed from any form of influence that may result from them. We can deduce that news is not constructed to accommodate the publication's financial needs and, in this respect, the editorial team at *Times of Malta* does not face the commercial pressures which would be present in a Liberal American media model of news construction; nor is it faced with the pressures prompted by the nation's size to the extent one would expect in a small state. In a sense, we see a pattern where journalists in Maltese news organisations appear detached from critical commercial decisions taken by the management of these organisations. This is strikingly different from what we find in large legacy news organisations in Liberal media systems, but we note that *Times of Malta* is not yet affected by the financial implications of digitisation faced globally by other legacy news organisations. The interviews indicate that, within *Times of Malta*, the construction of news is primarily editorially driven, yet we recognise that the ownership and organisational structure has a broad political allegiance. We shall explore this further.

6.3.3 Sales

The Sales and Audience department provides insight into the different populations which *Times of Malta* relates to. The dominance of *Times of Malta* pre-2010 was such that newspaper sales were not pursued. Clients gravitate toward the medium unsolicited. This is representative of a major organisation within a small state benefitting from a quasi-monopoly. This has changed. As we have noted, it moved from a monolithic structure focused on print to

one that has multiple selling propositions. This results in the need for a different mindset among the sales team. New methods of selling the print edition in legacy format, as well as in e-paper format, poses one of the main challenges. While several members of this team have specialist skills, the majority cross-sell advertising in print and online formats, as well as a limited amount for broadcasting. Again, we notice that professional multitasking exists at some level in all three Maltese news organisations.

An executive in the sales department puts it like this: “the effort is two-fold: one is to develop new business, and there you are looking at new media and sponsorships through event management and event organisation; and, second, is to sustain advertising space in legacy media” (sales executive at *Times of Malta*). This shows us the concern about increasing revenue is growing. Varied ways of generating it are openly discussed: “I would say, though still in its infancy, we actively pursue native advertising, sponsored content, in what we call commercial publications, such as supplements or magazines. Going forward [...] I think it would constitute an important element of revenue because it elicits deeper levels of engagement with the potential advertiser” (senior sales representative at *Malta Today*). While editors will state there is resistance to commercial demands and editorial choices are made purely on the merits of content, the sales department seems to push for a more collaborative approach:

If you look at commercial sensitivity at large by the editorial team, I would hope to think that one of the reasons that the editor-in-chief sat at the management meeting was to get a deeper understanding of the challenges we face commercially and obviously in other key areas of the organisation. I’d also hope to think that these cascade throughout the editorial team (ibid.).

The sales side of the organisation is not only wishing to offer commercial assistance, but it is actively pursuing this role. This being said, the interviews do not indicate that this actually happens. The wall between the editorial and commercial teams seems to remain intact. News at *Times of Malta* is not constructed with an eye to commercial benefits. In this respect, it becomes increasingly clear that the routines within the organisation protect its editorial arm from any commercial interference from management. Simultaneous to the assessment of *Times of Malta* as a commercially driven organisation, we establish that this does not encroach on its editorial integrity. This evinces a news organisation which is not market-dominated. The commercial side of the organisation does not drive the news, unlike in a typical Liberal American media system.

6.3.4 IT

The Information Technology (IT) department manages and supports *Times of Malta*'s digital and media services, engaging in web development to improve its platforms, as well as offering strategic support on the future needs of the organisation. It is their remit to source specialists for and design any digital products the newspaper may wish to launch. The important detail is that this division is said to be a catalyst for the creation of new products which, in turn, can generate income. The department also provides IT support within the company. This means that it has both an operational and strategic role. At the leadership level of this department the feeling is clear: "I have never encountered a board which hasn't made the making of money its priority over and above any other value [...] It always comes down to the numbers. What matters at the end of the day to the stakeholders are the numbers..." (senior IT executive at *Times of Malta*). The discussion with employees in the IT department went further and questioned the values which the organisation harbours. "The way we write things to promote democracy should always be there. It should always be an embedded value, part of

our mission, part of our vision; but you have to see how much effort you are putting into that *vis-à-vis* the return and the overarching structure of the company with regards to the way the industry is changing” (ibid.). This is a member of the company’s executive body questioning the position of editorial independence, as well as the values and credentials of the organisation. While this does not present a clear indication of executive interference into editorial output, it does suggest a disposition to prioritise commercial interest over the stated corporate and editorial position.

6.3.5 Finance and HR

The two final departments to examine are finance and human resources (HR). The Finance and Business department is said to be responsible for *Times of Malta* asset and credit management. It monitors all aspects of its investments and the organisation’s budgetary performance. One of the key areas of development is the need to be able to access movement in performance of the multiple outlets and revenue streams that the organisation has created. While this might sound like a natural function, it has resulted in the need for both cultural and operational change.

The disquiet in this department stems from a perception of inefficiency in parts of the organisation: “I think that our editorial is operating inefficiently. I think that our journalists are overpaid. I think that overtime, for example, is excessive. The newsroom is overstaffed so I would say that we’d move our newsroom to operate at the efficiency of other newsrooms” (senior member of finance at *Times of Malta*). This quote indicates a strain of a different sort, where costs are stacked up without a clear understanding of the returns. This said, editorial staff did not indicate that they have experienced pressure to curtail their stories as a result of financial constraints. This is an organisation that looks at efficiency in a very corporate way;

yet, editorially, there is no indication that this is influencing the way news is constructed. This is not what the literature leads us to expect in a small state.

The HR department is responsible for staff needs, staff policy and the organisational development of employees. It is responsible for the training of staff and employee relations. One of the major preoccupations in this department is the sourcing of talent, as well as the maintaining of staff levels. Concerns exist about the limitation of resources at a qualitative and quantitative level, in that it is said that it is difficult to recruit numbers and skill. As previously established, this impediment fits the characterisation of small states presented in the literature. The main challenge is said to be the need to redirect talent into new areas while continually looking for ways to economise.

It was clearly stated that the department performs a supporting role and the discretion of who is hired within the editorial domain is the remit of the editorial team. This being the case, it is interesting to note a number of editorial staff has, at one time or another, worked for the PN media. None has worked for the PL. This hints that there is a trend which emanates from the owners of the organisation, the Foundation, through the board of directors, and into the newsroom. The same political leaning is prevalent at all levels. In this way, *Times of Malta* does exhibit elements of a Polarised Pluralist system, which contradicts the more Liberal American media model it depicts in its corporate literature, and goes counter to the wishes of its original founder, Mabel Strickland O.B.E, as expressed in her foundation and editorials. To be clear, this does not imply *Times of Malta* journalists are politically appointed. What is interesting, however, is that, although editorial employees state that they are not influenced by managerial or commercial demands, they are recruiting staff who emulate the political sympathies found at other levels of the organisation.

There is no written policy which determines the politics of any recruit entering the newsroom, but it is clear that a political slant exists. It can be surmised that the presence of PN-

leaning journalists could act as a psychological barrier to entry for individuals who do not share the same ideals. This will be matched by a concern among the editorial recruiters to employ like-minded individuals. We can identify a similar trend in the literature, which details journalists learning about their organisation through interaction with its members. How this happens can be understood through a small-state perspective; in Malta, the political leaning of individual recruits can be easily identified, as a consequence of proximity. The newsroom will know the political outlook of each potential recruit. Here we may recall the words of one *TVM* journalist: “here, in Malta, people judge you not on your attire, but politically.”

What we are gathering is that, at the hiring stage, like-minded journalists are being accepted into the organisation. Thus, the mentality and rationale of the newsroom is sustained and perpetuated. The role of the HR department is to facilitate the administrative process and support all elements of the organisation. They do not directly recruit individuals but support departments in doing so. The choice of new recruits is the responsibility of the editorial branch of *Times of Malta*, and it is seemingly autonomous. The ownership level of the organisation does not determine recruitment; editorial holds this control, which runs counter to what we would expect of a Polarised Pluralist news organisation. We are establishing that control of the newsroom at *Times of Malta* rests in the hands of the editorial team, making recruitment an empowering mechanism that engenders a particular mould of journalists. This, in turn, maintains any editorial slant that already exists.

6.3.6 Digital routines

As noted, the interviews showed there was some divergence of view between the managerial and editorial arms of the newspaper. While the journalists and editors are adamant in their view of editorial independence, the management team tells of a need to generate more commercially viable content. The key word here is ‘content’, not ‘news’. A common trend

throughout the interviews indicates that the aim of *Times of Malta* is to ensure the brand remains profitable and is not dependent on other areas of the company. A second feeling expressed across the board is the need to grow the business, in terms of revenue and audience, while prolonging the commercial life of the printed titles. To do this, several key areas are indicated as having to be addressed, with a significant number of questions being asked. In this way, the organisation steps apart from the other case studies. The interest in and search for business development and fresh revenue streams is palpable.

The interviewees all state that the *Times of Malta* editorial department has come a long way in the last eight years. It has broken down barriers between departments, advanced its digital offering (to include broadcasting), changed the way the print titles are produced, and created a central hub for editorial team members to work together. It is widely considered that the organisation will need to continue to evolve if the print titles and website are to be sustainable in the next few years. The effects of the decline in circulation is apparent and it can be estimated that, if the current trend continues, the daily newspaper may be down by more than fifty per cent within three years [insert citation: prevalent in 2018]. It is repeatedly stated that *Times of Malta* needs to be an effective and profitable business, with the responsibility for this resting on management, business and editorial to decide what changes are necessary. Yet, throughout the interviews no mention is made of the link between revenue generation and quality of output.

Respondents are clear that the future of media generally, and of *Times of Malta*, specifically, is digital. As print readers and revenue decline, digital revenue continues to grow. The acknowledged challenge for *Times of Malta* is to ensure it gets its slice of the digital-revenue cake. The other major question presented is whether the newsroom structure, skill-levels and allocation of resources is fit for purpose. During the election in 2017, the editorial department did not appear capable of making the necessary changes to its digital and print

products. The resources were geared to serve a print rather than digital format; newspaper production, rather than content gathering. The feeling is expressed that there is no logic in retaining the existing proportion of people dedicated to the former.

Another question relating to the organisation's structure, which features prominently in the discussions, is whether digital and print should form separate departments, with their own staff and editor/publisher. With the staffing level as it is at *Times of Malta*, it is felt that it would be more efficient to develop a multi-skilled team which works on both. In doing this the organisation would be treading a path similar to *Malta Today* and, to an extent, *TVM*, making it a common link between newsrooms in a small state. The options would appear to be to either: develop or retrain the existing staff in the skills required, or replace them with staff that have the skills and the capacity to learn new ones. It is, however, far from guaranteed that people with the skills required can be found in Malta. These problems are particularly endemic to a small state. The construction of news is, here being influenced by a lack of the resource and scale needed to sustain development.

The central difficulty faced is that, although the organisation is experiencing continuous growth within its digital domain, it is fearful of taking the plunge into a digital-first strategy. This would mean breaking news on the website as it happens, as opposed to holding the story until the next day's print edition. The main source of revenue for this organisation is through its print newspaper and it seems reluctant to commit fully to an online subscription model. Interviewees also highlighted that staff reduction is taking place within the organisation as a whole, despite it not happening in the newsroom. It is described as only a matter of time before *Times of Malta* will face the same budget reductions within the newsroom as are being experienced at Western news organisations.

6.3.7 Editorial routines

The editorial department comprises *Times of Malta*, *The Sunday Times of Malta*, *timesofmalta.com* and all other related magazines, supplements and publications. It is the department's responsibility to generate content, including news, current affairs and business news, for all platforms. Deeper pockets have meant that news workers have undergone some training in different media, including the use of video and social media as tools for the dissemination of news. Historically, the organisation's leading masthead, *The Sunday Times of Malta*, had always been a separate entity to the daily newspaper, *Times of Malta*, both papers being equipped with their own editorial and back-office functions. The newsroom served content to both titles, seven days a week. In line with initiatives that are taking place in editorial newsrooms across the globe, *Times of Malta* decided to align its three media platforms – daily, Sunday and online – under one Editor-in-Chief. While this measure is said to have worked, the way in which the company produced and shared its publications changed.

The Editor-in-Chief at the time of this restructuring, Steve Mallia, worked at *Times of Malta* for eighteen years, before leaving in 2016. Having lived his formative years in the United Kingdom, he was impervious to the local political scene, and it can be surmised that this is one of the factors that allowed *Times of Malta* to adopt a more politically independent slant. In essence, he was immune to the issues that prevail in this small country under the influence of proximity. The elements of political parallelism and advocacy, which are the norm for other journalists and editors working in a Maltese context, are not influences which he recognised. It is commonly felt that his vision and direction for the editorial department was based on an accumulation of facts free from political partisanship. This indicates that, at the highest editorial level of the organisation, a more Liberal approach was being envisaged which recognises objectivity and balance, and which tenaciously guards internal pluralism. This is key, as it demonstrates that political positioning within the organisation was ultimately the

remit of the Editor-in-Chief, a position we would not expect of a news organisation within a Polarised Pluralist system.

This being the case, we may wonder what led to the appointment of an individual with no partisan leanings to such an instrumental role within this organisation. It seems that the first candidate for the lead editorial role was an individual with clear political allegiance. The indications are that this was resisted by the board of directors, who wanted to distance the masthead from direct political influence. It was felt that the profile of Steve Mallia, a highly capable, politically detached and articulate editor would be a wise choice.

This was not without consequence. The interviews indicate that a feeling arose outside the organisation, before and directly after the 2013 election, that *Times of Malta* had shifted its editorial policy. By 2015, it had been pointed out that efforts were being made at the highest levels of the organisation to move away from a centralised editorial system. It is safe to assume that such a decision could not have been taken without clear direction from the highest level of the organisation. The decision was made to divide the role of Editor-in-Chief into the old format of three distinct roles, namely, an editor for the daily *Times of Malta*, an editor for *The Sunday Times of Malta*, and another for digital media, *timesofmalta.com*.

The new system meant that editors would oversee the editorial content of their specific medium and manage a team of assistant editors and sub-editors in the compilation of their specific products. For a time, it is pointed out, this worked, with the journalists being coordinated by a News Editor who supported all three mastheads. Eventually, this move seems to have had significant repercussions on the control and direction of editorial policy. Technically, the content generated is supposed to be decided by the editorial team in several meetings held throughout the day, with the editors joining their daily huddle to identify key events as they are happening, as well as potential stories for the newspaper and for online media.

The importance of these daily huddles went beyond their stated aim, which was to identify the news stories to follow. They served as a vehicle to harness the newsroom talent, as well as being a forum where ideas and questions could be pooled. They also served as a vehicle for engendering unity of purpose and thought within the newsroom; a place where the News Editor could strategically implement a unified direction. This said, the daily meeting also served as a method to encourage a form of internal pluralism, creating a space where diverse views could be aired. While this move away from a unified leadership may have initially seemed innocuous, it meant that the locus of the editorial policy shifted from the Editor-in-Chief to three distinct and strong-willed individuals.

The implication of reverting to separate editors could be that the editorial policy had defaulted to that which was the culturally accepted norm of the organisation: a PN slant, away from a more independent outlook. The lack of a centralised decision-making process within the team resulted in further fragmentation within the organisation, with individual journalists feeling they now had the ability to pursue individual agendas. It gave rise to a more advocative form of news, causing an increase in political parallelism. This shift was uncontested; the senior levels of the organisation were unwilling to intervene. This, in turn, resulted in the breakdown of the daily editorial meetings, as explained by a senior member of the editorial staff in an interview held in 2018.

But the *Times* stopped doing them. Shall I tell you why? You have journalists that do not trust each other so they do not have daily meetings anymore. One journalist will not speak in front of another because the other journalist will try and damage him. It's heavily toxic. At the *Times*, it has become horrible. Beyond horrible. You've got a fragmentation of the editors, which I don't believe is a good thing..." (senior journalist at *Times of Malta*).

The senior journalist describes a breakdown in internal pluralism. This is further underlined by another member of the editorial staff: “you’ve got journalists [...] who are on very bad terms. You’ve got journalists that don’t speak to each other. You can take a couple of people not speaking to each other –, journalists have strong personalities always. But when that stops you having meetings and talking, you’ve had it” [insert citation]. It is made clear that some of the antagonism at *Times of Malta* was a result of information leaking to political parties. The routines within the organisation changed and the daily newsroom meetings were abruptly discontinued. This crucial point is verified by two separate sources. It is also a strong argument for the view that bureaucratic routines do not apply in the same way in Malta. In the professional literature it is the conventions of journalism – those of balance and objectivity, and the very nature of the bureaucratic routines of news organisations that minimise the impact of a journalist’s background and views on their reporting. This is a central argument of the sociology of news tradition advocated by Schudson, and it is not apparent here. Indeed, we can now submit that these conventions are not present in any of the three case studies, which could have important implications for understanding how news is uniquely constructed in a small state.

The journalists at *Times of Malta* exercise a considerable degree of autonomy. They are not constrained by bureaucratic routines. In a sense, we see the creation of ‘rogue agents’. The lack of central control resulted in an erosion of editorial checks and balances and allowed these conceptual ‘rogue agents’ to flourish, as expressed below.

So, stuff is being published which I do not believe would have been published in that form some years ago. This is across the board. The *Times* was always the most financially powerful. The *Times* had a philosophy that what you had to print was

correct. That is less so [now]. Partly due to circumstance, but also due to attitude, and journalists are stronger than they were at implementing their own agenda on the media” (senior journalist at *Malta Today*).

This last sentence conveys a position of individual advocacy beginning to surface. This would seem to be the result of a lack of central editorial control. The circumstances mentioned in the above quote also refer to the financial status of the industry in general, and *Times of Malta*, specifically. So, while a feeling was expressed that the change in operations resulted from a toxic environment created by a lack of leadership and clear editorial policy, there was “a level of antagonism that started developing over the past year and a half” (senior journalist quoted in 2018). The emerging financial challenge that the organisation was facing was also becoming an issue. As another senior journalist observed in 2018, “to start with, you have to note that there was a weakening of human resources. People left, not all people were replaced. Physically, the numbers dwindled” (senior journalist at *Times of Malta*). He also stated that “holding a meeting for all journalists was physically impossible. Somebody is out on a coverage; somebody is out of the newsroom. That was one aspect” (ibid.).

What we have here is a clear indication of how the lack of routine created a vacuum which eventually eroded the editorial cohesion of the whole of the news organisation. This is the consequence of two elements. The first, a breakdown of an effective control structure; second, the restrictions created and imposed by diminishing human capital. In turn, this is symptomatic of what the literature alludes to in the limitation of resources in a small state. To an extent, the deficiencies of the newsroom were also a reflection of the political climate developing in the country around 2016, when it was becoming increasingly toxic. As one interviewee put it, “the country went into this political mode. You had people being fed stories from one side completely. That was the main focus and target” (senior journalist at *Times of*

Malta). With *Times of Malta* becoming more litigious, in the view of the government, the reaction was a form of stonewalling: “from Labour’s side. Suddenly shutter. You’re sending questions; not getting replies. Replies taking long to come back... They [the government] went into siege mentality. Times is enemy number one” (senior journalist at *Times of Malta*). This exacerbated the aggressive political atmosphere.

On the other side, you had elements in the PN feeding Ivan [Camilleri] and Jacob [Borg]. Getting information is ok for a news organisation. The more sources you have the better. The feeling was that anything else that did not fit into that narrative of good governance and corruption etc. was a waste of time, a diversionary tactic. Anything related to gay rights: ‘what type of story is this? This is not a story’. Forget the fact that the country was making history. That did not fit within the narrative. So, you would get these subtle jabs. This antagonism. You propose a story” [...]” ‘No, let’s get real stories”” (senior journalist at *Times of Malta*).

Schudson (2011) writes about what he calls socially organised distortions built into the structures and routines of news gathering. The routines at *Times of Malta* changed and, with this, as the textual analysis will confirm, so did the way news was constructed. Gans (2004) points out that news is the creation of an organisational process. Yet, clearly these journalists are considerably autonomous. They are not constrained by bureaucracy and, thus, we have the introduction of our rogue agents. This is an alternative picture to that portrayed in the literature of news sociology. Sammut (2007) stated that Maltese newsrooms still tend to organise their news routines around political exigences. This has not changed, and an argument can be made that this has actually increased.

What led to the creation of these rouge agents and why are they present at this point in time? The absence of a central leadership role at the editorial level could certainly be indicated as one of the main reasons for this at *Times of Malta*. If we connect this to the high level of polarisation with the country, as well as the rise of journalist agency, we begin to witness how this happened. Within this organisation these agents are unfettered. Perhaps their understanding of the political alignment running through all levels of the organisation gives license for them to engage in a particular form of advocacy. It becomes clear that under the previous Editor-in-Chief the organisation was moving towards an American objectivity model and that the changes to the editorial structure, since, simply allowed the news organisation to revert to type – that of a partisan newspaper in a polarised system. With this in mind, we can retrospectively understand how Sammut’s (2007) study could have identified a trend towards a liberal American model.

This leaves us with the question of why the Editor-in-Chief left the organisation. Did he depart because of this more partisan line? This remains unclear. It is most likely that the division of the role, reverting back to separate mastheads, would have been a demotivating step down. It is also possible that he foresaw the dangers of a decentralised newsroom, both editorially and perhaps even financially.

6.4 Culture

6.4.1 Values and culture

A difficulty arises when we study the present organisational routines and compare the stated values and culture of the organisation to what exists today. In its mission to inform and educate, *Times of Malta* states that it aims to convey the truth, however unpalatable it may be, without fear or favour, and strives to make objectivity and impartiality the hallmarks of its

reporting (Allied Newspapers, 2018). This is a position removed from what would be expected in a Polarised Pluralist system and more closely resembles an American Liberal media model.

I think to a large extent I believe we've always had the people at the top, at least at the News Editor and Editors' point, where we get both sides of the story and we insist upon it. I'm not saying we always get it right. Sometimes we fail on that and sometimes we might not be fair on getting both sides of the story for a few reasons. The story might have broken late or maybe the person who is writing it is unnecessarily getting one side of the story more than the other. However, I think if you had to compare us to a lot of the international news organisations, we probably come out the fairest (senior journalist, *Times of Malta*).

Laudable sentiments, especially when tied to the belief of one of the organisation's technological officers that *Times of Malta's* goal is the provision of an information service to whoever needs it, whenever and wherever they require it, across all platforms. This forward-looking culture seems to have been present for some time, with the directors expressing their desire to implement strategic reorganisation as far back as 2009. The Managing Director announced the following statement during a presentation held to all company managers on 5th June 2009:

An exhaustive list of industries has undergone a wholesale reorganisation to take them towards the next generation. The newspaper and media industry is no exception and the directors of Allied Newspapers have realised that to meet the challenges of new audiences, markets and new competitors we, too, must embrace a culture of change to

transform Allied Newspapers into a modern, professional information provider in all platforms for Malta and abroad (Managing Director at *Times of Malta*).

For years there existed the belief, at the editorial level, that the strength of its audience makes it the news medium of reference. The organisation states that it historically staked its reputation on being an unbiased media house, with credibility at the core of all it does. Credibility was often mentioned as being the essence of the organisation. This clarity of purpose is unusual. The following, placed at the entrance to its old Valletta premises, underlines the culture that the organisation intends to represent:

Its mission: To disseminate credible content that enriches people's lives by informing, educating and entertaining them. *Its vision:* To be the undisputed leader in disseminating credible content across as many media platforms as possible, with a strong commitment to excellence. *Its core values:* We will do this by holding true to our values of democracy, truth, credibility, political independence and innovation.

In this respect *Times of Malta* is unique, in that it clearly states its mission, vision and core values. This clarity of position is unusual in a local context. The organisation also establishes the following objectives:

To promote democracy, human rights and a free press; to develop a reputation for excellence in journalism, achieved by consistently pursuing relevance and immediacy; to provide a respected opinion about all the news that matters; to inform, educate and entertain the public; to provide the ideal medium for advertising to as wide a client-base as possible and retain the lead that has been built over the years in this respect; to

register an annual profit that is reinvested towards furthering the mission of the organisation (Allied newspapers, 2018)..

These objectives are aligned with the positioning of the major shareholder, the Strickland Foundation. No other news organisation in Malta has so explicitly set out its mission and vision.

All these elements have helped build a positive aura around this organisation, especially when compared to younger and smaller, if more agile, news organisations. The company considers it a strength that, as a media company, it has the ability to challenge and question where the organisation wants to be, a belief cemented in its maxim: *Rooted in values. Driven by innovation.* This conjures the image of an organisation that is not only financially sound, but also has a set of guiding principles which allow them to produce a product which is credible and politically unbiased. This has empowered the organisation and the interviews clearly establish that these journalists exercise a notable degree of independence. They are not constrained by bureaucratic routines, which is what is meant by rogue agents. This is in striking contrast to what is portrayed in the literature on news sociology. While the self-presentation looks good, what is the genuine workplace culture at this organisation? Do the historic cultural values of *Times of Malta* still apply today?

6.4.2 Present day culture

The definitions set forth by the organisation present a model which is representative of the American Liberal media model of objectivity and balance. However, the interviews demonstrate a side to the *Times of Malta* which is advocative and tied to the political slant of the shareholders and directors. What transpires is that the routines of the organisation have given freedom to the more robust, vigorous and litigious members of the editorial staff, which

has, in turn, shifted editorial authority away from the actual editors. With an Editor-in-Chief the organisation was able to foster a culture which followed a more impartial form of news. It would also be safe to say that this move – the removal of the Editor-in-Chief – was a precursor to the change in editorial stance at *Times of Malta*. With the positioning of three separate editors neither of them seemed to have taken a clear leadership role. Yet ultimately the interviews show that *Times of Malta* defaulted to its historic position, that of holding power, government, to task. Specifically, confronting the PL government. We will see later that the textual analysis bears this out.

This positioning eventually led to the advocacy-driven elements within the organisation taking a more dominant role and allowing for a stronger form of advocacy journalism, moving away from the *Times of Malta* objectives. This resulted in a self-reinforcing circle and the role of the editors being apparently side-lined. Referring to non-politically framed stories, one journalist noted that “the editor would be amenable to the story. But you still get the snide remarks. They just demoralised other people, especially the younger recruits” (journalist at *Times of Malta*). It seems that when concerns about the organisational framing were pointed out, the editor would say, “if I do not have enough copy I go with that story in the front page” (senior journalist at *Times of Malta*). This was a vicious circle that developed slowly.

The more stories on good governance and corruption making the front page, the more established that narrative became. Clearly these stories were important; the trouble was that some journalists felt they were representing only one side of the political spectrum. This is a reflection of what Fishman was concerned with when he wrote about the “process by which a special reality is socially constructed: the public reality of mass media news” (Fishman, 1988, p. 129). Themes were created and followed by the journalists, eventually becoming ingrained in the news organisation itself. By pursuing a theme, other journalists underline the original news judgement and create a form of consensus. In this way, *Times of Malta* was setting the

agenda. The very stature of the organisation directed its audience towards what it considered the most relevant issues in the country.

The notion expressed in the interviews is that this resulted in a number of stories being framed to suit a particular agenda: “what I think is, and this is the frustration that others in there shared, it cannot be just one-way traffic. If Simon Busuttil [PN leader] said something idiotic, go after him, ask the questions and hound him. Don’t interpret [going after him] as being a diversionary tactic” (senior journalist at *Malta Today*). Two instances stand out in the interviews which reflect the workplace culture and agenda during the 2017 general election. Comments are made by two separate members of editorial staff on the choice of the independent survey agency that *Times of Malta* had employed, as there had been some concern in the past with regards to their political reliability.

When I saw the survey published, I questioned [it]. [A senior journalist] commented: ‘don’t you think that the Sunday survey had something missing [...] the political party approval rating’. It was obvious that they made it and did not publish it. It looks [...] [as if the survey agency] was not comfortable because the sampling was skewed in favour of one party. I do not know the result. I think it was showing a large Labour victory” (senior journalist at *Times of Malta*).

Two journalists are untrusting of the motives behind the organisation’s survey. This has to be situated in context. Within the PN, it is understood (personal communication with senior journalist) that a decision was taken to abandon polling because their polls were showing a landslide for Labour. The message was adapted: “let’s start telling the public we can win it by 4000 votes” (senior journalist at *Times of Malta*). The implication is that the organisation was

following a political party line, which is incongruous with its stated values. As we shall see, the textual analysis corroborates the journalists' scepticism.

The second instance took place the weekend prior to the election date, on 28th May 2017 (Editorial, 2017), when *The Sunday Times of Malta* ran an editorial. While this in itself was unusual it is not unheard of in its eighty-four-year history. Its pertinence stems from the reaction within the newsroom: "then we had that famous editorial, where we said, vote PN. The joke of the day [...] if the *Times* is going to come out in favour of you, start praying, because you are going to lose" (journalist at *The Sunday Times of Malta*). A further revelation is put forward by a senior journalist:

People were shocked. When I say people, I am not referring to people who are Labour or Labour-leaning. Even internally, people like [a senior editorial staffer]. I have a lot of respect for him/her because, despite his/her leanings [...] you work with everyone [...] you're getting sources from one side you're getting sources from another. You're getting sources from multiple areas. But if that stops you from the central, core journalistic endeavour it should be scrutinised as much as Panama Papers. That job was side-lined or abandoned. Nobody knew about that editorial (senior journalist at *Times of Malta*).

In both cases, there is a lack of communication between the most senior members of staff. This brings into question the reasoning behind the decisions.

What we have, at this point, is an organisation with a political slant at the shareholder and director level, which is also present at the editorial level. Yet, there is no suggestion that this was a result of overt pressure from within the organisation. The journalists followed their personal editorial missions. The result was a culture where it was frowned upon not to follow

a particular framing of the news. While any news organisation has its editorial direction, the attitude created was narrow and unidirectional, and hostile to any other interpretation. “An environment was being created where people were coming up with stories and were not feeling comfortable coming forward with them, for any story that could put the government in a good light, within reason (not something fickle, like they opened a new road)” (journalist at *Times of Malta*). This is a pronounced manifestation of White’s theory that the journalist “shall hear as a fact only those events which the newsman as representative of the culture believes to be true” (White, 1950, p. 390). Was a political slant obvious in the textual analysis?

6.5 *Times of Malta* Coverage of the 2017 Electoral Campaign

6.5.1 The narrative

This is an organisation that purports to present stories which are largely consistent in slant and frame, and which does not have a form of centralised control on the quality and direction of the news. The interviews indicate that the individual journalist should operate with a certain amount of unchecked freedom. While on a superficial level this may seem positive, in reality, in a polarised system this could allow reporters to follow a personal agenda. As elaborated earlier, in Polarised Pluralist systems, journalism is often used as a springboard to political or commercial platforms. With this in mind, a number of themes arise from the textual analysis which portray an organisation operating a form of advocacy journalism, pursuing its agenda in the genuine belief that what it is doing is in the national interest. This is a form of partisanship which should be determined at the editorial level. However, a discrepancy arises between individual news workers in the organisation: those who support a particular political theme and those who do not.

We find that *Times of Malta*'s selection of journalists to cover particular events varies from the processes at *Malta Today* and *TVM*. At *Times of Malta*, the textual analysis shows it is not unusual for a journalist to be sent to cover political events with an opposing political agenda of their own. While this jars with the methods of the other news organisations, it is a valid way to generate news and information. This more pugnacious approach is present in the tone set in its editorials during the 2017 elections and distinguishes itself from the other news outlets studied, in that it clearly frames where it stands. The *Times of Malta* editorial position is clearly signposted at the very beginning and the very end of the electoral campaign. Its political partisanship is defined as being robustly opposed to government.

The editorial of 2nd May 2017, states: "it is possibly the worst decision the Prime Minister could have made, to call an election a year early, when the country is in the midst of an institutional crisis" (Editorial, 2017). The piece is positioned against Prime Minister Muscat's decision to call an election: "Dr Muscat had one real option to take, to step aside, but he did not. Now the country will have to face the consequences of that decision. We can only hope the electorate will be wiser" (ibid.). There is little doubt as to the editorial positioning here. On 28th May 2017, the last Sunday before the General Election, *The Sunday Times of Malta* presents another strongly worded editorial: "when faced with facts and questions like these, voters' immediate personal interest must take a back seat, party allegiance put aside, and pride swallowed in favour of the common good and the country's future" (Editorial, The need for change, 2017). It goes into detail about what its reader should think and why the country should follow its advice to not vote PL: "many had good reasons for voting Labour in 2013. Those same reasons and more exist today to vote for another change" (ibid.).

Likewise, the article leaves no room for doubt on who its readership should support: "while Labour may have set an economic 'miracle' in train, it will take a Nationalist government, with its record of serious regulation and forward-looking economic management,

to keep it on track” (ibid.). Finally, it takes the high ground and concludes, “at the end of the day though, when voters enter that voting booth, their decision must above all be a moral one. On that basis, the PN-PD coalition ought to win their vote” (ibid.) The textual analysis shows *Times of Malta* has taken a decision to position itself against the government of the day and explains why it is doing so, to the extent that it moralises the vote. This follows the pattern, demonstrated in previous chapters, that journalists in the privately-owned news organisations, *Malta Today* and *Times of Malta*, are free in this polarised culture to present robust, advocacy-based news.

With this understanding it is possible to understand the amount of negative framing that exists in the news text studied. The narrative at this news organisation is a portrayal and framing of a government which lacks the credentials to govern. This is in stark contrast to what happened in the other two organisations – neither *Malta Today* nor *TVM* pushed a defined political narrative. This tells us that *Times of Malta* is a news organisation with a type of advocacy that is very different from the other publications covered in this research.

6.5.2 Election polls

A further example which underlines the skewed narrative of *Times of Malta* can be found in the polling process adopted by the organisation, which warrants further examination. The survey focuses on corruption and faith in institutions, as opposed to voting intentions, despite the latter being the logical choice less than two weeks away from an election. The headline states that “majority don’t trust institutions or PM to tackle corruption” and goes on to note that “a total 54% of respondents in a survey conducted for The Sunday Times of Malta said they have little trust or no trust at all in State institutions to take the necessary steps against corruption. 46% claimed to have a great deal of trust or a fair amount of trust” (Manduca, 2017). But its main finding points to the strength of the economy: “the survey

showed that respondents judge the economic situation of the country and their own personal economic situation very positively. In fact, 79% of respondents claimed to be either very satisfied or fairly satisfied with the economic situation of the country...” (ibid.). Compare this to the headline: “a relative majority of respondents, 17%, see corruption as being the most important issue that will determine how they will vote in the general election of June 3” (ibid.). It seems evident that the survey was aligned with the publication’s organisational narrative.

The following week a second survey was conducted (Manduca, *The general election: Third of voters still to decide, 12 percent say they regret how they voted in the 2013 general election*, 2017). What’s key is that the research findings emphasise the unknowns, the non-responders. This would indicate a flaw in the methodology late in the electoral campaign. The gap between the two main parties is beyond the margin of error and indicates a record PL victory, yet *The Sunday Times of Malta* focuses on the unknowns. “Nearly one-third of the electorate, a chunk large enough to sway the election result, will decide who they will vote for during the last few remaining days of the campaign” (ibid.). What concerns us here is this quote: “this level of non-response is higher than it was in the opinion polls preceding the previous elections” (ibid.).

The company which conducted the survey for *The Sunday Times of Malta* stated, “in 2008, the level of non-response was 23 per cent, and it was the same in 2013” (senior journalist). The article does not clearly explain how the non-respondents were distributed in 2008 and 2013. In reality, the non-respondents were split proportionately, relative to the respondents who did answer. Had this been stated in the article, *The Sunday Times of Malta* would have predicted the electoral result. Here the organisation is being obtuse in its conclusions and allows room for interpretation beyond what would logically be expected.

The article goes on to state that “while the stated voting intentions point to a clear favourite – the Labour Party – the high percentage of those who regret the way they voted in

2013 and the high proportion who are still undecided would indicate the potentially decisive influence of the uncommitted voters” (ibid.). One final piece of evidence that points to a wilful misreading of the poll is the following quote: “respondents were asked to name the party which would be best for the country. 44 per cent said Labour, 32 per cent answered the PN, and 24 per cent did not state an opinion or chose neither of them” (ibid.). Even if the non-respondents’ votes were distributed with a 75% shift to PN this would still not have resulted in an outright victory. We are able to see that the text has been strategically aligned with the editorial narrative highlighted in the interviews.

The editorials and electoral polls in the text underline an important issue. *Times of Malta* took a stand in its last editorial before the general election that reflects the positioning of its shareholders, directors and more politically combative journalists. It is consistent. This is more reflective of a news organisation located within a Polarised Pluralist system and does not align with the organisation’s self-perception. This is somewhat different from what we found at *Malta Today* and *TVM*, where we note that advocacy exists and emanates directly from its journalists; at *TVM* we deduce that advocacy is limited, almost neutered, in order to preclude controversy. In these cases, we can see a form of balance being created, although for different reasons from a typical Liberal American media system. *Times of Malta* does not present this form of balance and positions itself to oppose the government – in its own way, holding power to account. This situation is exacerbated by the government’s lack of engagement with this news organisation. We can observe, across all three organisations, that news is primarily driven by editorial staff. Regarding news construction, there is no indication during any of the interviews that there is direct intervention from the various structures within *Times of Malta*. The same holds true for *TVM* and *Malta Today*.

It is evident that the lack of centralised decision-making at *Times of Malta* has allowed the organisation to fall back to its default, historical editorial position, a position which is

exacerbated by a number of journalists. Together with this, the routines within the organisation have changed with a consequential effect on the production of news. This demonstrates that bureaucratic routines do not manifest in the same way in Malta. The literature (Schudson, 2011) emphasises the importance of routines in news construction, yet the textual analysis seems to indicate that, in this small state, the advocacy of the individual journalist is able to sway such routines, adding further weight to the understanding that, in this small state, different elements come into play in the construction of news.

6.5.3 Government corruption

The main theme that emerged from the textual analysis, government corruption, is present at the start of the campaign and reflected in the choice of journalists who cover one of the first events, with a subsequent slant demonstrated in one of the first press conferences of the electoral campaign (Borg, 2017). The theme rotates around a number of issues of corruption and is framed to primarily emphasise them. This angle is reinforced when the Attorney General is questioned by a *Times of Malta* journalist: “Attorney General Peter Grech yesterday defended himself from accusations that he had not taken any action despite having been in possession of ‘evidence’ of alleged kickbacks by the Prime Minister’s chief of staff for over a year” (Camilleri, 2017).

On the same day the Prime Minister is confronted with issues of corruption by another *Times of Malta* journalist (Borg, Watch: PM unfazed about ‘kickbacks report’ Brings up Beppe Fenech Adami instead, 2017). The frame is maintained with AV showing the journalist vigorously questioning the Prime Minister in English, while the latter (PM) answers in Maltese. The event was staged to cover electoral issues and it was used to chase the corruption narrative. Other stories are regurgitated, playing into the same frame. One refers to an incident that happened a year earlier. It is initially puzzling as to why it is being brought up again (Camilleri,

2017). The headline reads, “Passport buyers from Russia given vote: They were ineligible because they had not lived in Malta” and goes on to state that, “according to the Government Gazette, Mr. Vaskevich, together with his wife and son, became naturalised citizens in 2015. They were struck off from the electoral register in September 2016” (Camilleri, 2017). The story finishes with the statement, “no wrongdoing by the Russians is being alleged” (ibid.). The background to this story is that the Prime Minister’s Chief of Staff was alleged to have received kickbacks from the firm which represented the Russian family. This line of questioning is similar to that at *Malta Today*, in that the narrative of good governance and corruption is a central theme in the text. There, too, we find aggressive questioning.

In general terms, a consistent trend surfaces at *Times of Malta* which constantly questions the legitimacy of government at all levels. “Former Chief Justice Joseph Said Pullicino has branded the Prime Minister’s remarks on a magistrate ‘inappropriate’ and said members of the judiciary should be allowed to work in complete serenity” (Micallef & Caruana, 2017). This is one example of the difficulties faced in dealing with sources within a small state. Although we cannot question the underlying intent of the quotation, perhaps we can presume the political leaning of the source through his historic appointment and former legal relationships. This may be clear to the Maltese reader. Yet, when we contextualise this story with what the Prime Minister actually said, perhaps we can reach a different conclusion.

The Prime Minister’s comments were made in Maltese on a programme called *Xtra*, presented by Saviour Balzan (Dalli, 2017). He is first asked what would happen if he wins the election and is then found to be guilty. He states that he would resign immediately. He is then asked what would happen if he loses the election and is subsequently found innocent by the Egrant enquiry. His answer is:

PM: *That is the magistrate’s problem. He has to carry it [the responsibility].*

Interviewer: *The magistrate's problem.*

PM: *Of course, He carries it. What can I do? There is nothing I can do about it. I cannot turn the clock back. I would have resigned, left political life. It is not my problem.*

The article also includes a quote from the former Chief Justice, “saying that a magistrate would have to shoulder responsibility for the time taken to conclude an inquiry is a form of undue pressure and an inappropriate comment,” Dr Said Pullicino said.” Time is never mentioned in the interview and it is unclear how the PM is assumed to be pressuring members of the judiciary.

Having said this, the textual analysis does not present apparent and vexatious slants. The video footage is not obviously edited to skew reality. Rather, it is the choice of stories which *Times of Malta* is following that frame the narrative and the way news is being constructed. In this context, another story weaves into the theme and presents the cultural issue of switch voters, playing on the idea of how ‘wrong’ it is to shift party loyalty in a Maltese environment (Camilleri, Corruption: when PM ‘looked the other way’ Philip Rizzo, a PL voter in 2013 and ex-CEO of the Foundation for Tomorrow’s Schools, has switched back to the PN, 2017). The length of the headline draws particular attention to it, and the article continues, “Mr Rizzo, an experienced auditor who in the 2013 general election publicly switched allegiance and voted Labour, said that following his experience with this administration, he would not be able to sleep at night if he voted PL a second time” (ibid.). Mr Rizzo vividly expresses his discomfort with the PL government. The point is that the issue of proximity again has its influence. The move from one political party to another is relevant, to the extent that the individual is known to the publication’s readers and will create pause for thought. A value judgement is placed on the way a voter switches political allegiance.

This trend persists in a number of stories throughout the electoral campaign and continues to build on the question of the government's legitimacy. The pattern is that these stories are followed primarily by two journalists. As the election campaign progresses it becomes increasingly clear that the key purpose of highlighting this theme, indeed the *Times of Malta* electoral narrative as a whole, comes down to the part played by these two journalists. Jacob Borg assumes responsibility for covering stories which broadly relate to issues around good governance and corruption. He probes, assertively, on camera and in his writing. He fact-checks government statements and unrelentingly questions its position, especially when it comes to good governance. Ivan Camilleri is positioned as the journalist who questions government and the PL on multiple fronts. As an ex-journalist within *NET News*, owned by PN, and an ex-journalist from *TVM* during a PN government administration, there is little doubt about his political affiliation. His relationship with his sources, while skewed, brings in an important dimension to *Times of Malta's* news construction.

The textual analysis shows that he benefits from an important reservoir of information through his political contacts and sources. These sources allow him to robustly advocate the agenda of his choice. In turn, this positions him as a viable conduit to attract information from other sources, creating a spiral of agenda-driven news. The difficulty is that these sources originate from one political party, creating slanted coverage, and it is clear that the organisation does not benefit from a similar dynamic with the government. Indeed, there seems to be no advocative sources on behalf of the government, only official ones.

The text also shows that, on a number of occasions, the government refused to engage with *Times of Malta* events (Grech H., 2017). If we link this to what we are told in the interviews about the impact vigorous advocacy may have had on changing the organisation's routines, we are able to arrive at the conclusion that this runs counter to North American

journalistic standards of objectivity and balance. The textual analysis shows that the advocacy indicated in the interviews has been built into news construction at *Times of Malta* in general.

Here the story of the resignation of Godfrey Farrugia from the PL and joining of the PD is insightful (No Byline, Watch: Godfrey Farrugia to contest election with PD, says Labour has lost its soul, 2017). *Times of Malta* gives a clear explanation of the reason behind the move of the ex-PL candidate to resign as party whip and contest the general election under the PN mantle as Forza Nazzjonali, the joint PN and PD campaign arrangement. The article includes an AV of Dr Farrugia's personal statement and elaborates on the way he was greeted at the PN headquarters as being "warmly applauded" (ibid.). The article also notes, "Prime Minister Joseph Muscat curtly said: 'I wish him luck for the future. I respect Godfrey personally'" (ibid.). A tweet posted by the Leader of the opposition underlines the framing of this article as positive. This is in line with a linear form of advocacy we find exists at *Times of Malta*.

We can contrast this to a *Malta Today* article, which includes a 3 minute and 36 second AV outlining the position of the candidate, explaining the move as a defection: "Labour leader Joseph Muscat would not be drawn into commenting over Godfrey Farrugia's defection" (Agius, 2017). This positions the candidate differently from *Times of Malta* piece, in which the candidate "quit the Labour party accusing it of losing its soul" (No Byline, Watch: Godfrey Farrugia to contest election with PD, says Labour has lost its soul, 2017). The use of the word 'defection' is meaningful. These are very different positions which reflect the advocacy of both organisations.

Both articles contrast heavily with the coverage afforded by *TVM* (No Byline, Updated: Godfrey Farrugia to contest election with the Partit Demokratiku, 2017), comprising four lines with no accompanying AV. Movement between political parties in a polarised society is rare. Movement of the party whip is a significant move in any culture, especially in the middle of an electoral campaign. And yet, *TVM* offered little coverage. The drive to avoid controversy

clearly rules the newsroom, and is unusual in an organisation that proposes balance as a key value. The articles show us how the organisations are constructing news, primarily driven by editorial staff, around their different forms of advocacy.

6.5.4 Rising tension

The frame of government corruption was enhanced by rising tension in the country. The story ‘We are all part of the same family’ (No Byline, 2017) is the President's plea for mutual respect. Maltese President Coleiro Preca calls for cool heads during the electoral season, indicating the amount of tension present at the time. “President Coleiro Preca urged people to respect each other at home, work and even when interacting on social media, and reminded parents of their responsibility to serve as a positive example to their children” (No Byline, 2017). This is amplified by another story: “conditionally discharged after insulting, then apologising to Pullicino Orlando (PL supporter): Faced criminal charges for his Facebook comments” (Brincat, 2017). The magistrate comments, “even in times like these, means of communications should not be used to create division amongst the people of Malta” (ibid.). We can infer from ‘times like these’ that these were not ordinary times. This frame flies in the face of what was detected, in chapter five, at *TVM*, where the textual analysis reveals an intent to normalise the situation in Malta. *Times of Malta*'s coverage reflects the prominence of the electoral process within this small state, as indicated in chapter four. The tension in the country is best understood in this context, as well as with recognition of the role played by proximity in politics.

The frame of a government that threatens democracy is also used as an instrument to raise tension:

Joseph Muscat had clearly threatened the independence of the judiciary when he said the inquiring magistrate would have to shoulder responsibility should he be cleared of the Egrant inquiry after losing the election, Simon Busuttil said today (No Byline, Muscat's comments 'a clear threat' to independence of the judiciary, 2017).

The concept that institutions are under threat is further consolidated: “replying to questions following a news conference in Msida this morning, Dr Busuttil said that the judiciary was probably the only independent institution remaining” (ibid.). These are exceptionally strong statements, yet there is nothing to indicate that journalists questioned this.

6.5.5 Foreign influence

As in the other case studies, one of the themes that arises is the importance of outside and foreign opinion during the campaign. One of these stories looked into Russian interference in the 2017 election (No Byline, Muscat raises spectre of Russian meddling, 2017). The article quotes an intelligence website stating that MI6 and CIA have warned the Maltese government of possible Russian interference in local politics, in retribution for not allowing a Russian tanker to refuel in Malta. The article goes on to state that “the political storms sweeping the small Mediterranean island of Malta worry Western intelligence agencies, who suspect Russia could be behind it all” (No Byline, Russia suspected of sowing confusion in Malta, 2017). The Russian embassy is quoted: “Russia has never interfered into Malta’s domestic affairs and has no intention to do so in the future. All questions regarding these allegations should be addressed

to the so-called ‘security services of allied countries’ that spread this fake information’” (No Byline, Russia denies interference in Malta's affairs, 2017).

Later in the day the Prime Minister states, “yesterday I was asked a specific question by a journalist [...] I confirmed that we had been alerted by foreign agencies of possible Russian retribution [...] I believe that we were alerted and will not speculate further” (Sansone, 2017). The author goes on to quote the leader of the opposition: “this shows the level to which Joseph Muscat has fallen. I ask him to keep some sense of proportion: I doubt that Putin would waste any time thinking about Malta” (ibid.). This topic is also presented in a political event that same day: “Nationalist leader Simon Busuttil, speaking in a jovial manner in Lija this evening, again scorned claims of Russian involvement in the general election, adding that if the prime minister’s claims were to be believed, then the Forza Nazzjonali had become Forza Internazzjonali stretching all the way to Moscow” (No Byline, Watch: Simon Busuttil, tongue in cheek, says Forza Nazzjonali has become Forza Internazzjonali, 2017). Through this story we understand, on the one hand, that Malta has a role to play at the global level. On the other, the joke being made by the opposition is that the country is too small for Russia to possibly concern itself with.

The foreign angle is also brought in when reference is made to foreign press coverage, with *Times of Malta* noting that the former, the Russians, did not state that an election had been called because Busuttil created instability. Rather, the article notes it was called because the Prime Minister and his associates were faced with charges of corruption. The frame is of a country in crisis. “The choice, therefore, was between ‘Panama-Muscat and Malta of the Maltese,’ Dr Busuttil said” (No Byline, Watch: Simon Busuttil, tongue in cheek, says Forza Nazzjonali has become Forza Internazzjonali, 2017). The article features video footage, which is slick and edited. In other words, if the foreign press is taking a position it must be credible,

and the position being taken is *not* to blame the leader of the opposition for calling an early election.

Further examples arise (No Byline, European Parliament wants to question Muscat on Panama Papers, 2017). The article presents the EU parliament's position and is heavily critical of the government, specifically attacking the Prime Minister and his staff, and underlining the unusual circumstance of Malta calling an election during the presidency.

Asked what he would do to repair Malta's reputation, Dr Busuttil said he would leverage the personal contacts he had built up with European leaders during his time as a member of the European Parliament. He said that as soon as he was elected, he would use the last month of Malta's presidency to go to the European Council to deliver the message to the leaders of the EU's 28 countries that Malta had turned the page (Macdonald, 2017).

The leader of the opposition goes on to state, "and even before the summit, I am willing to go in person to the main EU economies, Germany, France, Italy, the UK and Spain, to talk to the leaders and assure them that we are once again on the right track" (ibid.). This builds into the narrative of how important foreign perception is.

This theme is carried through to the end of the electoral campaign with coverage of Manfred Weber, chairman of the European People's Party, saying "he could 'smell change' in Malta derived through a new government under Simon Busuttil" (No Byline, Watch: 'I will not let you down' Busuttil tells Sliema mass meeting, 2017). The role of the foreigner in the context of a small state is disproportionately influential. In this way, what 'foreigners' say about Malta becomes important. "But this behaviour is not Malta, this corruption is not Malta,

Joseph Muscat is not Malta. Malta deserves a better future,' Mr. Weber said" (ibid.). We have noted a similar trend at *Malta Today* and *TVM*.

6.5.6 Non-partisan views

It would be incorrect to assume that *Times of Malta's* coverage is wholly one-sided, and examples can be found which do not fall into the same negative-frame narrative. The *Malta Files* story presents a different dimension and is a case in point (Grech & Sansone, 2017). As mentioned in the previous case studies, the story covers the release of a database of files related to companies operating in Malta. *Times of Malta's* article is balanced and establishes commonality between the two main parties. There is very little politicisation of the story. It shows that both parties agree that this (the *Malta Files* story) is what they term 'spin'. The Minister for Finance, Scicluna, calls for all practitioners in the financial sector to defend their national interests.

Their livelihood is under threat. They need to defend their country, far from politics. We know it is hard, but it needs to happen. To defend your country, it does not mean you have to align with one party or another. I expect both parties to make a positive statement, that our fiscal and tax regime is there and will remain there. It is legitimate and it is recognised [...] It baffles us that when the slightest whiff of criminality makes us remove the licence of Italian companies; these same companies are granted a licence in Italy (ibid.).

The leader of the opposition, "Nationalist Party leader Simon Busuttil said he is disappointed that Malta is in the international headlines for all the wrong reasons. But he insisted that he disagreed with the 'incorrect' conclusions of the Malta Files, insisting that Malta was no offshore tax haven" (ibid.). The *Malta Files* story is a rare example of a story that is covered

in a consistent manner in all three case studies. All three news organisations present a unified front against the conclusions of the *Malta Files* which positioned Malta as a tax haven.

Further examples of this – what could be termed balanced coverage – exist . One article provides a blow-by-blow account of what the Finance Minister has to say about the PN tax proposals: “Prof. Scicluna said the PN’s tax proposal, including the 10 per cent for those earning up to €20,000, were regressive and anti-social since they benefited those who earned most” (Sansone, 2017); with no sugar-coating “Prof. Scicluna said the package of proposals would lead to a deficit, or else a PN government would have to raise taxes to make up for the shortfall. Otherwise, he added, the PN in government would find an excuse not to deliver on its pledges so as not to cripple public finances” (ibid.). Equally, a piece featuring Fitch’s evaluation of the impact of a snap election on the economy is matter-of-fact and simply gives an accurate account of the rating agency’s evaluation (Borg B., 2017). This would indicate that the organisation is not always aiming to present a unidimensional frame of the government’s performance. In a sense, it demonstrates that there are elements within the organisation disposed to present a non-partisan view.

We need to question whether this is an effort to create balance or whether it could be something else. It would seem that, when the national interest is at stake, the defensive frame is employed by all media organisations. But when the governance of Malta is in question, different slants take hold, depending on the editorial position of the newspaper. These organisations are not promoting balance or neutrality, rather they are presenting a frame around what they believe to be ‘national interest’. This is how framing defines the news in Malta.

6.6 Conclusions

Within this news organisation we find the construction of news is driven by editorial staff through a coming-together of like-minded individuals. Editorial guidance emanates from the top of this organisation and the choice of stories, their angle and the thrust of the editorial is dictated by the choice of editors. It appears that journalists are selected who conform to the editorial slant of the organisation. In effect, the agency of these journalists is conditioned by the presence of rouge agents within this news organisation. This results in a linear form of advocacy which could have consequences for internal pluralism.

Times of Malta stands apart from the other news organisations studied in a number of ways. It has a legacy which is reflected in the size and structure of its operations. It is different in the form and level of funding it is able to attain. While the other news organisations researched have one level of final editorial decision-making, *Times of Malta* has a system of three separate editors, each of which had their own spheres of responsibility. The textual analysis shows this is part of the reason behind the way news is constructed within this organisation. Ultimately, the text does not present explicit and vexatious slants. The video footage used is not obviously edited to skew reality. Rather, it is the choice of stories which *Times of Malta* is following that shapes the narrative and the way news is constructed.

What has emerged is an organisation which has a clear and established political position. A political slant at the shareholder and directorial level exists which sits uncomfortably with the stated aims of the majority shareholder, the Strickland Foundation, as well as *Times of Malta* itself. In this case it is the structure created by the removal of the Editor-in-Chief which de-centralised editorial policy. This has also been exacerbated by changes of routines. While the aims of the organisation and main shareholders correspond to those of a Liberal American media system, the journalists and editorial staff have a high degree of

autonomy because they are not constrained by conventions of objectivity or bureaucratic routines. This runs counter to the sociology of news narrative found in the literature.

In this case study, the strains on organisational finance are significant. There is a divergence of opinion between the managerial and editorial arms of the organisation on how far its commercial needs and demands can be stretched and how much they can intervene in the creation of news. However, the indication is that the commercial side of the organisation did not interfere in the construction of news. The main research question of this dissertation asks, “what drives the construction of news in a small polarised state?” We explore the issues of proximity, journalists’ agency and advocacy as a path to elucidate this question, and are thus able to demonstrate the following key findings.

6.6.1 Proximity and the small state

We showed the relationships between the shareholders and board of directors can be understood as a result of the intimacy inherent to a small state. An understanding of the networks of links between individuals indicates the potential spheres of influence that can come into play. In this way, we have members at both the shareholder and directorial level whose lives and relationships intersect. Perhaps, in another context, in a larger state, it would be unusual to meet individuals with so many long-standing relationships and, resultantly, who work in a figuratively incestuous way. It is not unusual in this small state, nor is it unusual for these influences to co-exist. Relationships are widely known in the Maltese context, so the audience is able to factor this into their interpretation of the news. Notwithstanding, the indication is that the managerial side of the organisation does not interfere in the construction of news.

A further issue which arises is the limitation of sources. We have demonstrated that most of the sources emanate from one political party, the opposition, as a result of what seems to be a breakdown in communication between the government and editorial staff at *Times of Malta*. It is clear that the majority of journalists complement each other's political dispositions. None of the interviewees mention that this is the result of a recruitment policy, so may be accounted for by the editorial team's choice of like-minded individuals. Equally, the organisation may not appeal to journalists with opposing political ideals. Size limits the pool of resources; however, it is not the only factor reducing the availability of potential news workers. As established, another cause could be related to its known political positioning.

6.6.2 Journalists' agency

The political stance of *Times of Malta* allows for an unidirectional approach to the way news is constructed. The interviewees show that the drive of the organisation is to underline the chosen narrative; that is, to question the government's credibility. Ultimately, this has always been one of the keynotes of any news organisation, to hold power to account, and is a central tenet of a Liberal media system. In this respect, the organisation is also exhibiting that it is uninfluenced by commercial impositions. While it has been argued that news organisations sustain institutions of power (Herman & Chomsky, 2002), this is not the case here. But it can also be said that dissenting voices are not allowed to present their case within the newsroom. The interviewees suggest a lack of trust within the newsroom, which has resulted in a change of routines. The reason behind this is implied to be that information was being leaked to third parties and, as a result, the daily newsroom meetings were stopped. This removes an important forum for the discussion of what stories and questions to pursue, and can indicate a serious impact on internal pluralism. The end result is that, within the newsroom, if a story departs

from the newspapers' primary narrative this is treated as a distraction. Organisational routines do not sustain conventions of balance and objectivity.

It seems there could be one primary reason which allows this to happen: there is no central leadership at an editorial level. This, in turn, creates a vacuum of leadership in two particular areas: there is no one who could take a final decision on what the editorial policy of the organisation actually is, and there is no one who is directly responsible for all news workers at the highest editorial level. It therefore becomes extremely difficult to retain control of the newsroom. The more vociferous elements, the rogue agents, held sway. It can also be stated that this aligns with what we elucidated in the literature, with Gans, Epstein, Tuchman and Fishman assuming that the character of the journalist will influence the news in a Liberal media system. A position that sits well with journalistic mythology.

6.6.3 Advocacy

Advocacy journalism has a strong presence within *Times of Malta*. This emerges from the interviews and textual analysis, which we show to be a form of linear advocacy – clear, uniform and prevalent in most of the material studied. The issue that arises is that its presence seems to preclude the possibility of any narrative that does not fall in line with the organisation's position. In this way a situation arises where divergent views are not entertained. This particular form of advocacy results from a number of compounding factors related specifically to *Times of Malta*. The position of the shareholders, the position of the board of directors and the historical positioning of the organisation all played their part in the way news was constructed. This is a form of advocacy which is very different from that which is present in the other case studies. Perhaps, in this respect, *Times of Malta* is closer to the British media, where advocacy follows a set editorial line.

If we are to compare the advocacy present at *Times of Malta* to the other case studies, we recognise that this organisation sits on the opposite side of an advocacy continuum from *TVM*. It is also different from the advocacy at *Malta Today*, in that it does not present the divergent views we see there. We find that the linear form of advocacy negates the need for internal monitoring. The presence of this aggressive kind of advocacy creates a form of monitor of the state which goes beyond the watchdog function of the press towards a guard dog function. Here the press is actively engaged in its opposition to the government and goes beyond observing and reporting; to some extent, it is interventionist.

The result is that the political positioning of the organisation defaults to what its journalists believe should be their personal slant, this being a combination of their personal inclination and of the historical inclination of the news organisation. We noted that, while no documentation is presented to outline an organisational recruitment policy, a number of employees have worked for party political media, specifically PN or the state broadcaster, *TVM*. This is a clear indication of their political sentiments and ties in with the political outlook of the shareholders, as well as of several directors.

Under the leadership of an Editor-in-Chief, for the first time since the mid-1970s the organisation adopted a questioning approach to the PN in government between 2009 and 2013, asking challenging questions of power. *Times of Malta* retained this policy towards government, notwithstanding a change in the party governing in 2013. Indeed, it is argued that the approach is more confrontational post-2013. It is worth acknowledging that the pugnacious approach of the publication was retained with the removal of the role of Editor-in-Chief. By mid-2016, the previous Editor-in-Chief, one of the most intellectually gifted editors *Times of Malta* had ever had, left. Two news editors, two of the most senior journalists and four senior executives no longer occupied their positions; their political leaning was perhaps not in line

with the organisational stance. The exception is a senior journalist, who left to join PN as Head of Communications.

Chapter Seven

Conclusion: The construction of news in a small polarised state

This thesis started by questioning whether Malta was moving towards a more Liberal American media system, as seems to be the case in other Southern Mediterranean systems experiencing a decline in political partisanship (Philips, 2015). We note that while Sammut (2007) recognises that Maltese journalism is polarised, she elaborates on her observations, stating that the Maltese population has an acute understanding of how the news is constructed and indicating that the population desires that Maltese journalism move towards a more liberal media system, with balance and objectivity as its central tenet. While Sammut's (2007) laudable work and hope for a more liberal form of news runs parallel to prevailing trends within the Southern Mediterranean region (Elvistad & Philips, 2018) this has not happened in Malta; if anything, an argument can be made that the reverse is the case. The Maltese media system has not moved away from a polarised advocative environment.

Sammut (2007), in her breakthrough book, accurately captures the advocacy tradition of Maltese journalism and further establishes how advocacy journalism is mainstream in Malta, even when the practitioners are trained to follow a professional paradigm. She asserts that, despite its limitations, advocacy journalism still has an impact on participatory democracy; thus, the idiosyncrasies of the Maltese system have implications for media and social theory. This is crucial, as it directs us to explore the media milieu in the context of a Polarised Pluralist system, directing our attention to understand Malta within this geographical sphere. All this being said, she could not have foreseen the increasing level of polarisation in the Maltese Media

system, and does not discern the complexity of the advocacy models we have advanced in this thesis.

7.1 Polarisation and advocacy

This research positions advocacy as a tangential notion of professional journalism guided by the ideals of objectivity and public service. In a Maltese context, advocacy is a form of political mobilisation that seeks to increase the power of people and groups and make institutions more responsive to human needs. Until the ascendancy of objectivity, journalism was largely advocative, a potential propaganda tool for political organisations (Starr, 2004). We have established this to still be the case in Malta and it is not unusual to find similar environments in other European democracies. Across the continent journalists approach news reporting as a way to politically influence and promote ideas associated with their own party (Hanitzsch, 2019).

In contemporary scholarship, the concept of objectivity is increasingly considered an outdated and unachievable myth (Laws & Chojnicka, 2020). Advocacy journalism should thus be recognised as a form that maintains high standards of factual accuracy, fairness and thoroughness. This definition acknowledges that journalists build stories with inherent biases – personal, financial or institutional – and places a heavy onus on those professionals to be more assiduous sub-editors than their mainstream counterparts. With either a social or political motive, the reporter intentionally and transparently adopts an unobjective stance, but ethics require the facts to remain unembellished. Advocacy journalism can be truthful, accurate and credible, conveying the journalist’s perspective without silencing opposing views, even to the extent that they may report scandals that support the opposition. Advocative journalists should also make use of neutral sources to establish facts. This is a fair and thorough style of

journalism. Ultimately, the term ‘advocacy journalism’ encapsulates this intentional and wholly transparent bias, and it is a model that flourishes in the Maltese media landscape.

It should, however, be acknowledged that advocacy journalism has remained marginal throughout the twentieth century as mainstream media organisations embraced the notion of objectivity. This has resulted in a conflict between how advocacy is viewed and what it can be, and has fostered a reluctance in editors and academics to allow advocacy into the newsroom. For some, advocacy journalism is indistinguishable from propaganda, which they cannot reconcile with the values of the democratic press, for example truth-telling and accuracy. The feeling has been that advocacy fuels distrust and undermines the professional status of journalism.

While distrust *is* present in Malta, it can be argued that professional ideals do not eliminate personal sympathies – they simply restrain them. The objectivity ideal is supposed to safeguard the integrity of the press but bias can appear in subtle ways as a byproduct of the essentially selective nature of journalism. This leads us to ask whether journalism can be objective and neutral or whether this concept is a fallacy. As noted, the objectivity ideal is increasingly scrutinised by scholars and practitioners. One could reasonably argue that the difference between objective and advocative news reporting is that the former conceals its bias while the latter is direct about it.

In keeping with the notion that news media should be a tool for social change, advocacy can increase civic involvement. It helps spotlight issues that are neglected by the mainstream media and can galvanise a population into strong civic direction. Yet proponents of objectivity disapprove of this style of journalism, regardless of the intentions behind it. Ultimately, maintaining journalistic fairness and integrity should be the priority, irrespective of the motives of sources and news subjects.

We have seen that the journalist not only facilitates the advocacy of sources but also engages in the process of advocacy by promoting certain elements through selective framing. The simple act of including a source in a story, for example, introduces an element of bias to it. We have also demonstrated a number of other factors which can influence the degree of advocacy present in a news piece, including overt displays of partisanship. Advocacy combined with professionalism is characteristic of mainstream journalism in Malta; it can even be argued that this is the normative ideal.

We have identified three different forms of advocacy at three different Maltese news organisations. Each has a direct influence on the nature of reporting at the organisation where it manifests, and reflects their individual cultures, routines, and ownership structures. At *TVM*, a media organisation owned by the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), the external polarisation surrounding the organisation results in the creation of boundaries which, in turn, occasion what we have named a ‘neutered advocacy’. The very polarisation that is being stoked outside the organisation is replicated within, but the consequences are not what we would expect in a Polarised Pluralist state. This polarisation results in checks within the organisation, with a significant amount of self-censorship taking place. Here, we found that the routines within this organisation centre around the position of the Head of News, with journalists recognising that each news item will face Reno Bugejja’s scrutiny. By ensuring it is understood that he will personally check every news item, the Head of News is able to implement his ideal of a neutral non-confrontational reportage.

We found that journalists within this organisation have links to the main political parties – the Nationalist Party (PN) and Labour Party (PL) – and are politically motivated. However, it is clear that this results in a form of neutralisation – a consequence of internal scrutiny. This means that at the state-owned organisation, where we would anticipate a significant level of state intervention, this political motivation is also muffled, resulting from internal surveillance

by the journalists themselves. This happens despite concerted efforts by those in power to manipulate the news through regular complaints, filed to the Broadcasting Authority (BA). What is demonstrated is that attempts for political control over the media are not always exercised in a direct or explicit way. Furthermore, as a consequence of these internal boundaries and self-censorship, we found little advocacy for either major party during the very final stages of the 2017 electoral campaign.

As a consequence, we surmise that the reporting of news with balance and impartiality within *TVM* is a coping mechanism for reporting in a highly polarised state. Here we have a publication that is precluding contention by remaining neutral and being descriptive rather than evaluative. This neutered advocacy offers a form of balance, creating a dispassionate voice, which is important within a polarised society, as it brings to the fore a crucial dimension in the way news is being constructed. This results in a form of news that represents a broad political spectrum, ensuring it does not solely speak for the governing party.

At *Malta Today* advocacy is prevalent, with journalists presenting divergent frames and creating what we call ‘bi-polar advocacy’ – identified as another coping mechanism which this news organisation has adopted to present widely differing views. This is in contrast to what we found at *TVM*, where journalists are allowed to advocate for the causes they believe in. Even though the owners of this organisation have a history of political involvement, it is clear that this does not limit the type of journalist or journalism within the organisation. The presence of reporters with diverse political outlooks is immediately apparent in the textual analysis.

Unusually, *Malta Today* has a Managing Editor who is a fifty percent shareholder and who partakes in the day-to-day running of the organisation: a situation that should raise alarms about managerial interference. Notwithstanding, the interviewees made clear that the owner does not intrude on the way their stories were constructed. Therefore, it would seem that commercial considerations do not override conviction in the public purpose of this journalism.

The owner has made a concession, allowing his journalists to frame their own agendas to keep readers with different political outlooks happy – a response to Malta’s polarised society. Contrary to *TVM*, he does not follow the standard liberal media structure of neutrality.

This has consequences on the way the news is reported, as contesting news items with divergent interpretations of events are uploaded within minutes of each other. We noted that the presence of bi-polar advocacy demonstrates the functioning of routines which allow journalists to express their own belief systems. Through the daily newsroom meeting, all journalists participate in the decision-making process on how news is constructed, and allow for a collective discussion on story selection, framing, and the sources of each news item.

Times of Malta exhibits an obvious and direct form of advocacy, where the organisation ownership, structure, routines, historical culture, and editorial policy are all aligned. At this news organisation, a clear level of partisanship occurs which does not gravitate towards the party in government. We identified individuals with relationships and ties to the opposition (PN) at ownership level, board level and in the newsroom. Yet, it transpires that not all journalists are comfortable with this arrangement. The organisation changing its routines to cope with an increasing presence of advocacy has resulted in a breakdown of communication within the newsroom. We were told a feeling of distrust arose when sensitive information discussed in meetings began to be leaked. This has resulted in the suspension of newsroom meetings, leading to a lack of transparency in the way stories are selected and framed, and helping to emphasise the linear nature of the organisation’s advocacy.

These changed routines create a transparent and coherent form of what we called ‘linear advocacy’. The production of news with linear advocacy demonstrates the presence of a comprehensive political line at *Times of Malta*, leaving no doubt as to its political position supporting the opposition (PN). The result is an explicit form of advocacy, meaning it does not conceal from the public its news agenda. In this case, we have an organisation that has

followed its historic trend and marshals its journalism and sources into a linear political direction. This position must be viewed in the context of a Maltese population well imbued with the capacity to dissect the various forms of advocacy that exist.

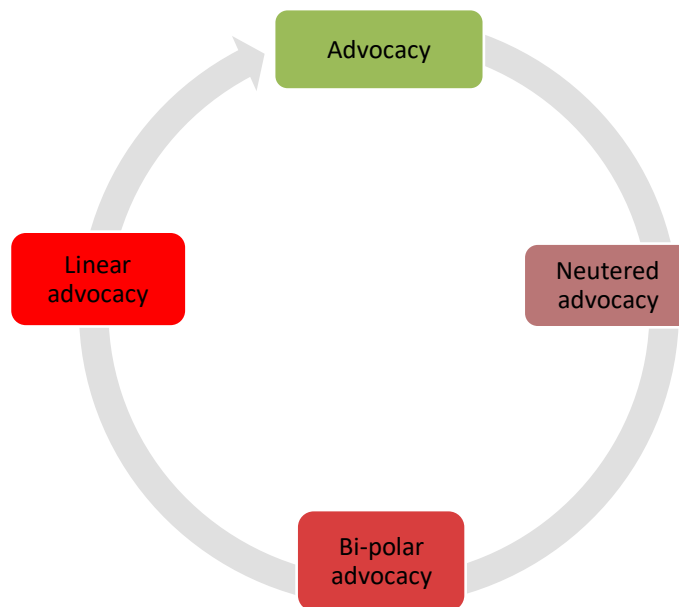
In a very different way from *Malta Today*, journalists at *Times of Malta* engage very little with the company's management. It is clear that the wall between editorial and management has not been breached within this organisation and that journalists are well removed from any commercial consideration. In effect, this distancing of editorial functions from commercial requirements was found to exist at *TVM*, *Malta Today* and *Times of Malta*. Editorial decisions are not commercially driven.

These disparate forms of advocacy constitute three structures of decision-making that are a response to a polarised and politically involved society. The presence of these forms of advocacy illuminates a paradox: these journalists claim to be custodians of public conscience, but without applying to their work their personal morality about the principles of objectivity which are central to an American liberal media system. The textual analysis showed us that only *TVM* attempts to sustain a neutral voice. As such, this forces us to question the role of objectivity within this media system. The literature leads us to believe that the difficulty of demarcating facts from values lies at the heart of the critique of objectivity and threatens to undermine the integrity of the news media's monitorial role. When opinions guide the curation of facts, this understanding of the role is, to some extent, violated.

However, this work shows that there is a strong case to be made for valuing journalists who present news from a particular perspective, resulting in knowledge that is partial, yet honest, open, and debatable, too. This type of journalism would intend to be critical, thus averting the risk of failing to see (or pretending not to) how embedded their own claims are in their writing. With this reflection in mind, we should begin to consider advocacy as a

continuum (Wilson, 2015) between different representations, as indicated in Chart 7.1, rather than a simplified depiction of polar opposites.

Chart 7.1: An advocacy continuum



Each form of advocacy found in this research has its own value and signposts the position that none is superior over the rest. This thesis reveals that advocacy can serve a function in the democratic process because it recognises that journalism must not be judged by its camouflaged ideologies, but by the ideological views it transparently supports. By questioning the very existence of neutrality, it becomes more reasonable to move away from distinguishing between objectivity and advocacy, and towards an appreciation of the various types that exist.

7.2 A different perspective of pluralism

A second theme we have identified revolves around the concept of pluralism and shows us that, in this media system, pluralism is more complex than is typically portrayed. Media plurality is a vital pillar of a healthy democracy; the general understanding of pluralism is

recognised to mean choice of media consumption and sensitivity to economic ownership models (Bagdikian, 2004). This evaluation of media pluralism considers the number of outlets available and how comprehensively they represent different groups and interests in society. It also ventures to explore who owns and is able to influence media outlets (Doyle, 2002). Grounded in a liberal pluralist approach, such a perspective sees journalism as essential to the creation and maintenance of participatory democracy (Gans, 2004).

In the case of Malta, we have identified three versions of pluralism of news. Pluralism in this country is played out in intricate and versatile ways. We have seen pluralism manifested as carefully balanced content, as is the case at *TVM*. Contrasting with this, we also recognised a form of paradoxically tilted yet balanced reporting at *Times of Malta*. Finally, a pluralism of opposed viewpoints was identified at *Malta Today*; both right-wing and left-wing articles are published by this same news organisation.

Malta Today's is a particularly unusual case, because here we discovered different forms of pluralism in the reporting of news, simultaneously having pluralism in terms of the organisation and orientation of the papers' positioning, thus presenting us with internal pluralism and external pluralism within the same media system. This is atypical and challenges a simplistic understanding of pluralism that imagines internal pluralism as balanced reporting in the American style, and external pluralism as represented by newspapers with different viewpoints in the Mediterranean style. It is much more complex in the case of Malta.

TVM is able to reach a large audience and constructs news in a neutral way while sustaining a form which is believed to be in the public's best interest. Here we have pluralism which offers balanced reporting, yet we should note that this research revealed that the reluctance of this organisation to cause controversy does impact the external pluralism of its content. The absence of a comments section on its website demonstrates this. However, we recognise that the routines create a form of internal pluralism of news which allows different

perspectives to be presented. In this respect, we found various opinions covered by the same press item.

At *Malta Today*, the presence of bi-polar advocacy enables the organisation to convey a wide range of opinion, differing from what we found at *TVM* because, in this case, journalists advocate for the causes they believe in. While this creates strongly divergent views within the newsroom, it also results in a high degree of organisational internal pluralism. In response to publishing for a polarised society, the owner has made a concession, allowing his journalists to frame their own agendas and facilitating an internal pluralism that will promote multifaceted content for a large audience with distinct political views. Through the daily newsroom meeting, editorial staff participates in the decision-making process on how news is constructed and fosters collaborative discussion on the choice of stories, framing and the sources of each news item. This creates a polarised form of pluralism at an organisational level, with the consequence that news items carrying the indelible mark of one journalist's political sympathies are immediately contrasted by another news item indicating the opposing sentiment.

At *Times of Malta* we discover a balanced reporting style with its own particular slant. While this organisation changed routines as a reaction to weakened internal organisational pluralism, its linear form of advocacy resulted in a transparent and coherent form of news. In a sense, here we have a standard advocacy of a distinct point of view; one organisation depicting a singular version of reality, as portrayed in Hallin and Mancini's (2004) Polarised Pluralist system.

The balance and pluralism we found within one news organisation constitute a significant departure from Hallin and Mancini's (2004) analysis. The authors see different media representing multiple points of view. To them, newspapers can be right- or left-wing in advocating their cause, which they view as a debased form of pluralism. In Malta, we alternatively located the presence of a kind of neutral media, such as *TVM*. We established

different versions of advocacy at work, for example, at *Malta Today*, where we find one newspaper offering opposing party views. The Maltese media system does not easily fit into the existing models; their criteria are too one-dimensional as far as the framework in this country is concerned. Malta offers a cacophony of dissenting and conflicting voices, which is a prerequisite for healthy competition and vibrant debate (Barnett, 2015).

7.3 Proximity and scale

This leads us to conclude that, although there are resemblances to a Polarised Pluralist model, Malta's is different, and, in order to comprehend this, we found it essential to also appreciate the consequences of scale. This research establishes that proximity and scale allow for the journalist to be involved in all parts of the news-making process, as a result of limited resources and news workers needing to perform multiple roles. As a consequence of this, the journalist assumes more control over the way the news is framed. This gave us further insight into the personal advocacy permeating their news items and where their agency derives from.

The issue of proximity and scale is largely absent from the literature, yet our findings show it is relevant to help understand how news is constructed in this small state. What proximity means in the Maltese context is that the journalist is constantly engaging with, and surrounded by, the very sources they relate to in the pursuance of their role. They meet in social, cultural, and familial contexts, which cannot help but influence the nature of the relationship with their source. The relationships of family and friends puts sustained pressure on journalists, especially at *TVM*. This is a reality of working in a small and polarised society.

The paths of the journalist and sources are constantly intersecting in an environment where anonymity is near impossible. We also detected a pattern within *Malta Today* and *TVM*, where journalists attend the political rallies of parties they support. This is seen as normalised

behaviour, for the situation is one where the public is fully aware of the journalists' political affiliations. We believe this to be another coping mechanism in what could be an antagonistic environment.

Multiple relationships also exist between the shareholders and directors at *Times of Malta*. At *Malta Today* directors and shareholders are the same individuals. Evaluating these relationships through the lens of an idealised American liberal media model would raise alarms. However, when we contextualise this in a population of fewer than half a million citizens, we recognise the inevitability of these dynamics. This is significant: understanding this situation immediately sheds light on the realisation that the whole idea of impartiality in a small island state is a myth and an aspirational benchmark, but, in reality, and for the reasons argued, it is unachievable. We submit that the presence of advocacy and the resultant surveillance makes it unnecessary. Conversely, as a consequence of the issue of proximity, any cultural outsider commenting on events in Malta without understanding the complexities of the polity milieu of a small island state would not grasp the background and advocacy that exists. In this way, they would be unable to filter what is being said, leading to a misinterpretation of the sources' agenda.

The key point is that, in reality, small states systems seem removed from what one would expect from the regional explanation posited by Hallin and Mancini (2004). The literature leads us to anticipate significant influence from neighbouring countries. However, the Maltese language, to some degree, protects its population from foreign influence. With an exclusive language Malta is less vulnerable and exposed to competition from abroad. Within this research it is crucial to also examine the role of Malta's English-language news organisations for a comparative reading. The reach of these English-language organisations makes their inclusion a prerequisite to understanding the construction of news within the state.

Moreover, we have shown that the citizens of this small state have more individual power to influence political decision-making than the citizens of a much larger one. This can be viewed as a clear advantage in a small state like Malta. The country has a high concentration of media relative to its population, differing from what is found in the Southern European system, but similar to another small state: Iceland. This observation is useful because it could indicate that other small states act counter-intuitively to what we would expect in a restricted market with limited resources. The quantity and diversity of media presence is greater than one would assume of countries that size. Like Iceland, corporatism is less developed in Malta than in other larger media systems. In both countries, state intervention is limited to the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). Indeed, the press in these island nations do not receive direct subsidies and no financial aid is available to newspapers. In this way, Iceland is dissimilar to the Nordic states and aligned precisely with what we find in Malta.

If they were considered solely based on their geography, the commonalities between Malta and Iceland would be missed. Both countries suffer from a lack of research coupled with the existence of polarisation and parallelism. Smallness of scale also creates anomalies which distinguish these states from the media system models that prevail for the larger states in their geographic region. The political parallelism present in Iceland is a distinguishing factor that distances it from other Nordic states, while, in Malta, we find diversity and representation, together with a form of neutral journalism, existing in some residual form in the PBS. This is not in line with what we would expect in a Polarised Pluralist media system.

We have discussed the prominence of multitasking and it is important to underline its relevance here. These small states are similar in their lack of available resources, which results in professional multi-roling. This means that the journalist exerts more control over his/her work than we would think possible in a small state. It would be instinctive to assume that journalists in a small state have less control. In reality, because they fulfil multiple functions,

journalists take on more responsibility and, therefore, more agency and advocacy. It is time for us to look at the small state as a hybrid of other media systems, because scale drives them to adapt to vastly different realities from those experienced in the media systems of larger states around the world.

7.4 Journalist agency

While Sammut's (2007) work provided an admirable opportunity to look into the structure of the Maltese media system, we do not agree with her position that ownership structures and their goals override the sense of news value and journalistic ideals, even in the case of the non-partisan press. On the contrary, we found journalistic agency acts as a barrier to ownership interference. Further to this, Sammut makes the point that, as a result of the bi-partisan agenda, journalists face difficulties in asserting their independence, a point that goes counter to our findings.

We recognised the capacity of journalists to follow the news with varying degrees of energy and control as a consequence of divergent motivation, which ranges from an ethically driven search for news to an agenda motivated by political parallelism. Journalists' drive and agency was an important guiding facet to determine how news is constructed. At *Malta Today*, we noted the presence of journalists who adamantly advocate their own political outlooks, creating tension within a politically divided newsroom. However, this autonomy allows the journalist to introduce different dimensions to the publication's output, across various points of view. This is reflected in their news, which is polarised and pluralistic.

At *TVM*, journalists generally resist the desire to present their own political frame. Yet, the interviews demonstrated that one of the primary reasons for joining *TVM* was their political motivation. In this case, journalists' agency is reflected in the way they monitor each other's

work. Its presence had a neutralising influence and, as a consequence, the impartial ethos fronted by *TVM* gives rise to a form of surveillance. This results in news which is neutral and offers varied perspectives, as discussed above.

The presence of this agency is not without negative implications. At *Times of Malta*, dissenting voices have been silenced by senior journalists questioning the validity of certain stories. This results in a lack of trust on the part of the dissenters and, in turn, has influenced the routines affecting internal organisational pluralism. We are led to believe that more assertive journalists hold sway and are afforded this authority because of a lack of leadership within the organisation. This informs us that, while motivated and driven journalists are essential to a newsroom, they also stimulate the need for strong, central leadership which is able to keep a balance on how the news is constructed and presented to continually reflect the position of the newsroom. If the organisation lacks robust leadership, it is difficult to imagine a situation where a free flow of challenging ideas is possible.

7.5 Strengths and weaknesses of the Maltese media system

When considering the atypical positioning of the Maltese media system discussed thus far, a case for an exceptional definition of the nation's media system, with reference to Hallin and Mancini's (2004) Polarised Pluralist model, can be built. The scholars suggest a number of conditions that most of the Southern Mediterranean states have in common. Fundamental is the uneven development of liberal institutions in Southern Europe and their late transition to democracy. These states have low levels of news circulation, a tradition of advocacy, politicisation of public broadcasting, and limited evolution of journalism as an independent profession. Hallin and Mancini (2004) underline how radio and television have been regarded

as arms of the state, a leading example of this is RAI's *lottizzazione* by the leading Italian parties – a manifestation of the heavy use of media by those in power.

Hallin and Mancini (2004) helpfully identify the advocacy tradition in Mediterranean countries. Although this is valuable, we have shown it cannot account for the complexity of Maltese society. The researchers argue that the central role of the state in the Southern Mediterranean media systems has limited the tendency of the media to play watchdog, a role widely valued in the prevailing liberal media theory. We found that the presence of more complex forms of advocacy in Malta has resulted in a significant 'watchdog' presence, akin to the interventionist approach espoused by Hanitzsch et al (2019). Together with this, unlike other Mediterranean states, Malta has a relatively expansive media market and a high level of public engagement with the news. Although political parallelism has a marked presence, we must qualify how far the media system reflects the major political divisions in this society.

The high level of news consumption in Malta can be equated with democratic involvement. Here we have a media system which contrasts with the Mediterranean model. Hallin and Mancini (2004) make the point that the polarisation tradition is essentially an elite form of journalism; newspapers with very low circulation are, essentially, a conversation between political elites. By contrast, Maltese media papers have a high penetration if we total their online and offline reach, demonstrating these publications are not simply an exchange between political elites. Rather, they are inclusive of the whole population, join into the wider political debate and make themselves a force of political integration precisely because they are successful in engaging the attention of the public.

Malta does not exhibit the level of professionalism we would expect to find in a Polarised Pluralist system, as proposed by Hallin and Mancini (2004). Journalistic autonomy exists and we have noted the significant agency they can exercise in their work. We discovered that journalists in two of the news organisations studied had authority over their work

throughout the news production process. Unlike what you would expect from a Polarised Pluralist system, Malta also has distinct professional norms, including ethical principles, such as the duty to protect professional sources, to maintain a separation between editorial content and advertising, and to follow common standards of newsworthiness. We highlighted an example of public service orientation – at *TVM*, its notion of professionalism is led by an ethic of public service.

While acknowledging that, at present, the Maltese media system is one which opts for neither an American liberal media system nor an Southern European one, we recognise that Maltese journalism supports the public in its involvement in the democratic process because we established that activist news encourages political participation. The system empowers social groups and has a PBS which is able to appeal to a large audience and construct news in a neutral way, nourishing a news form that is believed to best serve the public's interest. Perhaps what is lacking in the Maltese case is a public broadcaster that is more evaluative, pugnacious and aggressive in its positioning, thus creating a more interpretive approach.

In this media system, the news has deeply ingrained links to communities of interest and this thesis is a call to recognise that it nurtures a different type of journalism with an essential role in Malta's functioning democracy. It is a form that strives to combine radical democracy with a more deliberative perspective, because a healthy democracy should be informed to be sustained. In Malta, information dissemination may take on various shapes, but the result is a news system that fulfils its purported role of speaking truth to power for an involved electorate. This is exemplified by the exceptional electoral turnout and political engagement in Maltese society and implies that Malta's political parties are not disconnected from their base. In responding to the views of different parties, the media system is being representative, because the political parties are likewise representative, in contrast to many countries where the public feels disconnected from the political class. An example close to

Maltese shores can illustrate this elite bubble: the rise of Matteo Salvini's far-right movement, *Lega*, in Italy (Stille, 2018). There is no equivalent in Malta. The nation's political elites themselves represent this participant democracy; its consistent and remarkably high voter turnout suggests that its leaders speak to the population.

These are a number of facets that further demonstrate how Maltese journalism strengthens democracy. We have shown it is a system with a diversity of news platforms and extensive reach, as well as the freedom to publish and a plurality of ownership. The political left and right are decisively represented. Again, comparison to other countries consolidates this view, for example, the U.S., which is asymmetrically polarised (Benkler et al., 2018), and the British press, which is overwhelmingly skewed to the right (Curran, Gaber & Petley, 2005). The Maltese system observes and informs, acting primarily as a source to the public and providing a channel and forum for diverse media voices or sources. These tasks of observing and informing are carried out primarily because of the existence of an efficient and extensive information collection and distribution system, facilitated by proximity and scale.

7.5.1 Serving Maltese society

The dilemma within this small state is not so much its polarisation. Its politicised culture has created a universal awareness of political agendas and, indeed, has enabled the Maltese audience to identify and filter news at an individual level, an assessment clearly elucidated by Sammut (2007). What we have recognised as problematic is the misunderstanding of this news system by outside perspectives, and the wider consequences this may have. It is nonsensical that the norms of other much larger and, perhaps, more flawed media systems are used as a benchmark to measure a smaller media system – and particularly, in this case, without accounting for the unique context within which the Maltese media system operates. In a polarised advocative system, objectivity does not thrive. This will be considered

dangerous so long as we fail to recognise the frailty of objectivity itself. The concept of impartiality as inherently flawed guides us to understand that it is an improvement to address a population that is acutely aware of the way news is constructed than for one to be misled by a pretence of an impartial form of news.

Most media organisations that follow the objectivity tradition tend to echo each other, taking their compass bearing from the political class or government. In Malta there are clear links between media organisations and the political elite, but they are different and varied elites, resulting in different and varied news. Information may also be suppressed by the objectivity model, as it represents a consensus of society and excludes people beyond it. This is not so in Malta, as diversity is fairly represented. We find advocacy for both the left and right and, as a result, Maltese newspapers often explore diversity further than a publication adhering to the objectivity tradition.

Equipped with this understanding, we are able to unpack the way the Maltese media system is serving its society and strengthen our understanding of how a polarised news system can sustain democratic values. We find that the journalism studied has found ways to construct news which suits its cultural setting and has, therefore, become a system that enforces its own safeguards. The internal surveillance and other coping mechanisms we have illuminated are testament to this. By being diverse, the Maltese media system offers a platform for different voices, ideas and political positions to be heard by the general population. By being representative, it offers a stage for all political ideas, albeit combatively, in a transparent way.

Independent news organisations in Malta have consistently supported the public sphere and the democratic political system. They show a consistent trend of upholding the values of public order and law, with a tradition of being respectful of human rights. These news organisations monitor the socio-political environment, having developed tools to hold officials

to account for the way they exercise power. In doing this, journalism in Malta is able to identify the most relevant issues, nurturing an open platform for debate.

The news culture in Malta is a symbolic system handed down over time, within which journalists and officials perceive the world, attend to it, and find meaning within it. Their work must be evaluated within this context, because a cultural account of news helps explain generalised images and stereotypes in the news media. The present level of scrutiny faced by the political elite would not be remotely possible if the Maltese press was not independent and, therefore, unable to serve its society. Having said this, we have noted that the neutering of public service broadcasting at *TVM* undermines its independence. Indeed, a neutral but evaluative point of view, which puts forward a pugnacious dialogue with reasoned logic, is lacking. So, perhaps we should consider one way this issue can be determined. In recognising the idiosyncrasies of news construction in Malta, we must also acknowledge that the need exists for more study and research in the field of news sociology. Yet, no institution exists to champion this cause.

7.5.2 A school of journalism

The need for a school of journalism could be crucial to sustaining a news system that serves its society. Notwithstanding journalism's historical roots, the absence of a fully-fledged, independent school of journalism with the remit to research and explore the realities and consequences of news construction in Malta is sorely felt. The institution would be tasked with understanding what a 'professional ethos' means and how it could be applied to a Maltese context. It would explore journalism through a specific cultural lens to identify and understand the political field in which it operates.

The purpose of this school would be to educate journalists as reflective practitioners, at the same time as addressing the precariousness and diminishing authority of the profession. As

much as professionalism is a contentious topic, it is a tool to demarcate between journalists and the public, constructing and distributing news. In a world where misinformation and disinformation are a daily occurrence, deliberation on its implications on both a national and regional level is crucial to how Maltese news media can engage with and combat these factors, both from internal and external angles.

Creating a school of journalism would have major advantages if it positioned itself at the outset to respond to the technological challenges news organisations face today. This is fundamental, as it is hard to imagine the field moving forward without a deeper understanding of the role technology will play in its future. By doing this from the beginning, it could differentiate itself from other, perhaps more revered, institutions of learning.

The organisation would need a well-defined remit to understand the consequence of Artificial Intelligence on the field of journalism, with a clear grasp of the coevolution of technology, people and society. This will help prepare for the future of journalism, which will take a hybrid form of expert thinking and complex skills of journalist design, so that algorithms and people can act collaboratively. The institute would explore hybrid practices where journalists can gauge analytic criteria and learn to effectively prioritise, classify and filter. Computational skills and, indeed, programming and coding skills, will permit a level of tinkering that will encourage exploration of human machine symbiosis. It is only with specialist coding that the full palate of opportunity can be realised.

To achieve algorithmic media literacy, journalists will need to think computationally and with data. This institution would also be composed of people who can teach technical approaches to news construction in a contextualised way, aligning with the values and constraints of reporting. This institution would offer programmes in Computational and Data journalism, Masters degrees in Computational Science and Journalism, and doctorates in Computational Journalism applying computational thinking to data management, statistical

analysis linked to issues in journalism. In this way, journalism can truly serve Maltese society for the benefit of all, allowing it to produce its own retort to the problems posed by the political, economic and socio-cultural contexts within which it exists.

7.6 Limitations of this study

For all the strengths of this research it has a number of limiting factors which should be addressed. While we examine the processes that come together to construct news in Malta, we do not delve into the audience experience – the other half of the communication process. Although the drive of this study is to understand the construction of news in a small polarized state, it would be useful to develop a concurrent understanding of the audience perspective. This could offer a rich area for future study.

This research does not explore the journalistic methods or socio-political influence of news organisations owned by political parties, nor those belonging to the Catholic church. At the time of writing, digital publications run by these groups did not rank in the country's top-ten news websites. In future scholarship, a thorough understanding of the Maltese media system would require analysis of these institutions. For this reason, broad inferences drawn from the present thesis about *all* Maltese news organisations would be inaccurate.

While the use of qualitative interviews provided a rich vein of material, the information provided is anecdotal. This could be complemented by a more ethnographic methodology which would embed the research within each organisation for a deeper understanding of the various cultural, organisational and editorial relationships circulating within them. However, the researcher of this thesis previously worked in the news environment for over a decade. As well as offering unique insight into these research findings, the author's professional experience and expertise enabled an informed analysis of the data.

Finally, analysis of news texts and interviews with journalists offers insight into the way sources are selected and the reasons why some might be deemed more reliable than others, but journalists are inherently limited in their own ability to illuminate the motivations/agendas/ideologies of their 'informers'. A deeper approach in considering the role of sources in the process of news-making would add a valuable layer to our understanding of the media in a polarised state.

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<https://www.tvn.com.mt/en/news/watch-supporters-celebrating-near-pl-headquarters-hamrun-awaiting-labour-leader/>

Appendix 1 – List of interviewees

Name	Organisation	Role/position	Mode
Saviour Balzan	Malta Today	Managing Editor	In person
Matthew Vella	Malta Today	Executive Editor	In person
Kurt Sansone	Malta Today	Journalist	In person
Tim Diacono	Malta Today	Journalist	In person
Kevin Grech	Malta Today	Sud editor	In person
Adriana Farrugia	Malta Today	Sales Executive	In person
Anon	Malta Today	Journalist	In person
Anon	Malta Today	Journalist	In person
Anon	Malta Today	Administrator	In person
Anon	Malta Today	Administrator	
Anton Attard	TVM	CEO	In person
Reno Bugejja	TVM	News Editor	In person
Fiorella Pace	TVM	Journalist	In person
Keith Demicoli	TVM	Journalist	In person
Mario Micallef	TVM	News Coordinator	In person
Mario Xuereb	TVM	News Coordinator	In person
Norma Saliba	TVM	Web portal Coordinator	In person
Anon	TVM	Journalist	In person
Ruth Castillo	TVM	Journalist	In person
Rodianne Caligary	TVM	Portal administrator	In person
Steve Mallia	Times of Malta	Editor in Chief	In person
Ray Bugejja	Times of Malta	Editor	In person
Chris Scicluna	Times of Malta	Editor	In person
Herman Grech	Times of Malta	Editor	In person
Alex Galea	Times of Malta	Executive	In person
Claude Licari	Times of Malta	Executive	In person
Donald Tabone	Times of Malta	Executive	In person
Michel Rizzo	Times of Malta	Director	In person
Anon	Times of Malta	Executive/Journalist	In person
Anon	Times of Malta	Executive/Journalist	In person
Peter Sands	Sands Media Services	CEO	Telephone
Steve Auckland	ESI	CEO	Telephone
Steve Hill	Washington Post	President	Telephone
Norma Saliba	IGM	Chairperson IGM	In person
Zach Leonard	ESI	CTO	Telephone

Appendix 2 - Textual analysis articles

2 May

[Times of Malta – Watch: Muscat must go if inquiry finds against Schembri, whatever election outcome, Busuttil insists](#)

[Times of Malta – Update 2: Muscat promises tax cuts for all, better pensions, resurfacing of all roads](#)

[Times of Malta – Curtain falls on political career of several MPs](#)

[Times of Malta – Watch: Marlene Farrugia on 'saving Malta from the wolves'](#)

[Times of Malta – Editorial - The early election: It's a recipe for disaster](#)

[\[LIVE\] Simon Busuttil addresses press conference](#)

[Busuttil: Muscat must go if Keith Schembri allegations prove true](#)

[Marco Gaffarena gets permit for Sliema apartment block](#)

[\[WATCH\] Prime Minister announces snap elections for 3 June](#)

[Muscat launches Labour Party election campaign: 'Our country's best days'](#)

[NCPE reiterates appeal that 30% of candidates for election are women - TVM News](#)

[PN leader says the solution for instability should have been the PM's resignation - TVM News](#)

[General Election 2017: call for applications for vote counters and supervisors - TVM News](#)

[WATCH: First rehearsal for Claudia in Kyiv - TVM News](#)

[Tax cuts and €700m for roads among five priorities announced by PM - TVM News](#)

3 May

[Times of Malta – Education Minister 'referred to Nemea Bank, not Pilatus'](#)

[Times of Malta – Holidays pledge is 'perfect example of an unsustainable measure' - MHRA](#)

[Times of Malta – SR Technics to expand operations, build €30m hangar](#)

[Times of Malta – Muscat gives more details on tax refunds promise](#)

[Times of Malta – Brian Tonna's Willerby Inc set up days after 2013 election](#)

[MaltaToday survey | The undecided: 16% of young voters will not vote](#)

[Joseph Muscat to seek consent for bank holidays, despite bodies' disapproval](#)

[Inquiring magistrate awaiting verifications from foreign banks on a number of Maltese individuals](#)

[First-hand account the best form of evidence on Egrant inquiry, PN deputy leader Beppe Fenech Adami argues](#)

[Charities deny Italian prosecutor's claims of 'collusion' with smugglers](#)

[SR Technics to expand in Malta with €30m investment and 400 new jobs - TVM News](#)

[BREATHLESSLY: Positive reaction from international media - TVM News](#)

[PN Deputy Leader says PM has remained silent following whistleblower's testimony - TVM News](#)

[PM says 190,000 will get "bonus" of between 200 euro and 340 euro per year - TVM News](#)

[PM to contest election on 2nd, 5th electoral districts - TVM News](#)

[U issa ħrafa mit-Times – Glenn Bedingfield](#)

[Times of Malta – Recruitment to continue during election campaign](#)

4 May

[Times of Malta – European Parliament wants to question Muscat on Panama Papers](#)

[Times of Malta – Fact-checking Egrant claims on PM's website](#)

[Times of Malta – PN focuses on Gozo - incentive to stop island's de-population](#)

[Times of Malta – Labour insists its promises are realistic and will boost the economy](#)

[Times of Malta – €35.2m being claimed by Nemea Bank depositors after licence suspended](#)

[Prime Minister Joseph Muscat addresses press conference](#)

[Busuttil pledges key Gozo policies in first 100 days](#)

[MEPs ask Joseph Muscat to appear before PANA committee of inquiry](#)

[PL ramps up pressure on MEP cash, PN insists they did nothing wrong](#)

[PM's chief of staff had Swiss bank account before opening Panama companies](#)

[PL alleges PN netted half million euro from Nationalist Euro MPs' allowances - PN denies allegation - TVM News](#)

[PN Leader promises that new PN Government would implement Gozo proposals in first 100 days - TVM News](#)

[Labour Party's electoral proposals aim for economic growth of 6.5% - TVM News](#)

[Malta with biggest reduction in CO2 emissions in 2016 - TVM News](#)

[PM - Rents and housing will be first priority for new Labour Government - TVM News](#)

5 May

[Times of Malta – Watch: Schembri would have to resign if investigation leads to criminal steps - PM](#)

[Times of Malta – Watch: PN pledges full-time MPs, new ministerial code of ethics and magistrate focused on corruption](#)

[Times of Malta – Snap election unlikely to affect Malta's economic setting - Fitch](#)

[Times of Malta – Watch: Tonio Fenech bows out of politics after 20 years](#)

[Times of Malta – Watch: Muscat lays out seven-year plan to fix Malta's roads](#)

[Marlene Farrugia receives death threats from 'fake Facebook profiles'](#)

[Only PN and PL to face off each other in downsized Broadcasting Authority debates](#)

[Labour's €700 million roads project: 170 residential roads in first three years](#)

['PL victory will give death knell to financial and construction sectors' - Simon Busuttil](#)

[Recreational marijuana: PL, PN, PD jump on board](#)

[PM announces that Kappara flyover's two carriageways will be opened by September - TVM News](#)

[An increase of 9,000 persons in full time employment at end November 2016 - TVM News](#)

[University announces there will be no changes in exams schedules - TVM News](#)

[PM: Funds spent on roads in five years will now be spent in a year - TVM News](#)

[Fitch says Malta budget surplus shows fiscal progress - TVM News](#)

6 May

[Malta MotorSport Federation enthusiastic to assist in racing circuit project - TVM News](#)

[AD launches electoral campaign on the theme 'Vote Green - Vote Clean' - TVM News](#)

[Revised Electoral Register published - check your voting eligibility - TVM News](#)

[Youth seriously injured in Siggiewi motorcycle incident - TVM News](#)

[PM announces first 12 proposals for pensioners - TVM News](#)

[Times of Malta – Josie Muscat returns on PN ticket](#)
[Times of Malta – Watch: Muscat on Panama ‘mistake’, prostitution, and ‘hiding’ Konrad Mizzi](#)
[Times of Malta – Nurse accused of violent indecent assault against colleagues](#)
[Times of Malta – ‘I have no power to prosecute’, AG says, amid passport kickbacks claim](#)
[Times of Malta – Third of army personnel get promoted ahead of election](#)
[Josie Muscat, Comodini Cachia to run on PN ticket](#)
[\[WATCH\] Muscat: 'Legalisation of recreational marijuana would not be a free for all'](#)
[Pedestrian hit by cyclist in Sliema](#)
[PN and PD discussed possible legalisation of recreational marijuana](#)
[Court halts Assistant Commissioners selection process](#)

7 May

[Times of Malta – Watch: PM unfazed about ‘kickbacks report’](#)
[Times of Malta – Publish the other FIAU reports, Simon Busuttil tells AG](#)
[Times of Malta – What factors will determine the election outcome?](#)
[Times of Malta – The dark side of Malta’s construction boom](#)
[Times of Malta – 'We are all part of the same family': President's plea for mutual respect](#)
[\[LIVE\] Thousands congregate to Zabbar for Labour mass meeting](#)
[Election about principles and not proposals, Simon Busuttil tells mass meeting](#)
[Attorney General Peter Grech: ‘I am not privy to FIAU investigations’](#)
[Simon Busuttil demands Attorney General publish all FIAU reports into Castille corruption](#)
[Former Labour whip not ruling out PN ticket](#)
[How the black bags of domestic waste are treated at the Magħtab Complex - TVM News](#)
[UHM suspends industrial directives on Gozo Channel - TVM News](#)
[Fortunate escape for Żejtun octogenarian 75 years ago - TVM News](#)
[Keith Schembri says he is not aware of FIAU report - TVM News](#)
[PM inaugurates new Sliema Wanderers sports complex - TVM News](#)

8 May

[Times of Malta – Corinthia to run Zaha Hadid project in Doha](#)
[Times of Malta – Busuttil promises to extend children's allowance, introduce four-week paternity leave](#)
[Times of Malta – Labour makes promises in transport, education, health, environment, business sectors](#)
[Times of Malta – Watch: Many questions, few answers from Brian Tonna](#)
[Times of Malta – Passport buyers from Russia given vote](#)
[Labour proposes constitutional protection of the environment, no new ODZ projects](#)
[Free childcare for all, increased children's allowance amongst PN proposals for family](#)
[Brian Tonna denies falsifying HSBC letters of reference in libel case](#)
[Macron clinches French presidency in landslide over far-right Le Pen](#)
[German army calls for searches of all barracks after Nazi memorabilia found](#)
[PL says PN proposal for free child care for everyone is haphazard and not viable - TVM News](#)
[Video: State of emergency following heavy floods in Canada - TVM News](#)
[Death of young musician who fell off Vittoriosa Bastions - TVM News](#)
[French President-elect promises to fight "divisive forces" - TVM News](#)
[PM announces five other priorities including free school transport and free exams - TVM News](#)

9 May

[Times of Malta – 'You have to call Malta': recordings suggest Italy dallied while hundreds drowned](#)
[Times of Malta – Watch: PN pledges to 'clean up' cash-for-passports scheme](#)
[Times of Malta – Schembri, Tonna refuse to provide loan proof](#)
[Times of Malta – Watch: No discrimination against qualified teachers, Education Minister says](#)
[Times of Malta – Fact-checking Schembri 'smear campaign' claims on PM's website](#)
[Defence slams 'phantasmal' objections to bail of Mangion Walker murder suspect](#)
[The secret bookie: €108,000 in election betting in six days during Malta general election](#)
[Franco Debono won't contest general elections](#)
[AD pokes holes at Labour's Sant Antnin recycling plant proposal](#)
[Labour party financing return reveals backing of high-rise developers](#)
[PL proposal for SEC examinations to be held in same schools attended by students - TVM News](#)
[Woman knocked down by car in Pietà - TVM News](#)
[Spain: Girl dies in bouncy castle explosion - TVM News](#)
[Irish artist's cornea given to Maltese artist who lost his right eye vision six years ago - TVM News](#)
[PN promises wage increase of €200 monthly to employees in GWU scheme - TVM News](#)
[Updated: PN promises wage increase of €200 monthly to employees in GWU scheme - TVM News](#)

10 May

[Times of Malta – Cardona's chief of staff in trouble again](#)
[Times of Malta – Data leak reveals details of 70,000 offshore firms in Malta - German state minister](#)
[Times of Malta – New outpatient block at Mater Dei, tax credit for private health insurance - PL](#)
[Times of Malta – Social housing programme, refunds for rental price increases - PN](#)
[Times of Malta – Watch: 'I leave my past to historians', says Josie Muscat](#)
[PN commits to reversing, reimbursing social housing rent increases](#)
[Joseph Muscat: We are building a future-proof health system](#)
[A shot across the bow? Malta gaming leaders unfazed by Swedish incursion](#)
[Political earthquake: How Joseph Muscat changed Maltese concerns](#)
[Elusive evidence for 2012 loan led FIAU to request police investigation](#)
[New Outpatients building and carpark instead of helipad at Mater Dei among Labour health proposals - TVM News](#)
[Not guilty of trying to kill uncle hit by van at Imgarr - TVM News](#)
[Heart specialist appeals for prudence for a healthier lifestyle - TVM News](#)
[Youth gets 22-month sentence for possession of 17 ecstasy pills, 21 cocaine sachets - TVM News](#)
[PN announces its proposals for social housing sector - TVM News](#)

11May

[Times of Malta – Pilatus Bank to sue over defamatory claims and data leaks](#)
[Times of Malta – Ancient walls uncovered just outside Ċittadella](#)
[Times of Malta – Foundation challenges the introduction of the Morning After Pill](#)
[Times of Malta – Updated: Electoral Commission receives nominations](#)
[Times of Malta – European Parliament agrees to discuss situation in Malta... after the election](#)

[Pilatus Bank files defamation proceedings in the USA over 'harmful allegations'](#)
[\[LIVE\] Labour takes its campaigning to Santa Lucija](#)
[Simon Busuttil: 'We don't live in a normal country, but I will be your voice'](#)
[MEPs to hold plenary debate on Malta situation after June election](#)
[Girl, 12, dies following traffic collision](#)
[Psychological assistance given to students shocked by friend's death - TVM News](#)
[Electoral Commission today received 87 nominations by candidates for general election - TVM News](#)
[Man acquitted of vodka smuggling due to lack of evidence - TVM News](#)
[Youth arrested after he was found with 100 sachets of drugs - TVM News](#)
[Appeal regarding man who committed theft from car hire office - TVM News](#)

12 May

[Times of Malta – PN unveils 100 proposals for Gozo](#)
[Times of Malta – PM: "full faith" in authorities after damning report links Dalli to fraud claims](#)
[Times of Malta – Marlene Farrugia to contest 5th and 10th districts](#)
[Times of Malta – Updated: Electoral Commission receives nominations](#)
[Times of Malta – Saddles owner promises iconic bar will be serving in no time](#)
[Nationalist Party launches 100 proposals for Gozo](#)
[Decommissioning of Birzebbugia gas storage tanks starts today](#)
[Bail request for murder suspect in Eleanor Mangion Walker case denied](#)
[OLAF linked Dalli to Ponzi scheme in 2016, but police 'still investigating'](#)
[Claudia Faniello fails to qualify to Eurovision final](#)
[PN launches its Gozo Electoral Programme and offers 100 proposals - TVM News](#)
[Demolition of Birżebbuġa fuel plant underway - Wied Dalam to become a natural park - TVM News](#)
[Investment of €12 million for construction of new fire stations - TVM News](#)
[UAE princesses accused of maltreating servants and keeping them as slaves - TVM News](#)
[Suspended sentence for theft from Tarxien pigeon fanciers club - TVM News](#)

13 May

[Times of Malta – Watch: Godfrey Farrugia to contest election with PD, says Labour has lost its soul](#)
[Times of Malta – PN in government will raise taxes, PL would give another good budget - Muscat](#)
[Times of Malta – Last chance to restore Malta's reputation - Busuttil](#)
[Times of Malta – Updated: Electoral Commission receives nominations](#)
[Times of Malta – At least 74 countries impacted in 'biggest ever' cyber attack](#)
[\[LIVE\] Simon Busuttil, Marlene Farrugia address press conference](#)
[Godfrey Farrugia to contest elections with Partit Demokratiku](#)
[Three in court after attempted robbery in St. Paul's Bay](#)
[Gozo tunnel project 'feasible' as Muscat eyes 2025 completion date](#)
[Political ethics 'an orphan of the PL and PN', says Green Party | Malta elections 2017](#)
[Elderly motorcyclist suffers serious injuries after collision in Tarxien - TVM News](#)
[PL says that Busuttil not fit to be PM if he refuses to assume responsibility - TVM News](#)
[President appeals for initiation of a screening system for Coeliac sufferers - TVM News](#)
[Żabbar Ditch Garden to be transformed into a family park with an investment of €1.5m - TVM News](#)

[Study: 82% of Gozitans in favour of tunnel - TVM News](#)

14 May

[Times of Malta – PN considers the hunting issue as closed - Busuttil](#)

[Times of Malta – €600,000 in Pilatus account soon after alleged kickbacks](#)

[Times of Malta – Lawyers' group fears breakdown in rule of law](#)

[Times of Malta – Watch: Portugal wins Eurovision, Malta got no televoting points in semi-final](#)

[Times of Malta – PN to include gay marriage in manifesto](#)

[MaltaToday Survey | Muscat retains trust lead, parties four points apart](#)

[I voted in favour of hunting, Busuttil tells party faithful](#)

[An election about fundamental principles | Beppe Fenech Adami](#)

[AD pledges to uphold citizens' interests, not big business'](#)

[Muscat proposes removal of parliamentary privilege if elected](#)

[Wednesday debate at University between Party leaders - TVM News](#)

[Ukraine President in Malta next week to sign bilateral agreements - TVM News](#)

[Warning of another possible computer hacking attack tomorrow - TVM News](#)

[30th anniversary commemoration of the death of Dun Mikiel Azzopardi - TVM News](#)

[Marriage between same-sex persons - PN's commitment in electoral manifesto - TVM News](#)

15 May

[Times of Malta – Those unable to work due to disability will get minimum wage, Busuttil pledges](#)

[Times of Malta – Watch: Hunting penalties may be in need of downward revision - Muscat](#)

[Times of Malta – Passer-by tended to stabbing victim in vain](#)

[Times of Malta – Labour promises to extend childcare facilities](#)

[Times of Malta – It's my party... and I'll sit on my car roof if I want to!](#)

[European court decision on finch-trapping will be respected – Muscat](#)

[\[WATCH\] Free childcare service to be broadened under new Labour government](#)

[\[WATCH\] PN pledges 30,000 new jobs, annual surplus](#)

[\[WATCH\] PN pledges 30,000 new jobs, annual surplus](#)

[Police officers testify in compilation of evidence against Birkirkara murder suspect](#)

[Opening finch trapping now will harm Malta's EU court case, Simon Busuttil warns](#)

[Alleanza Bidla complains on allocated time for political broadcasts by Broadcasting Authority - TVM News](#)

[French President chooses Édouard Philippe as Prime Minister - TVM News](#)

[Italy: Mafia infiltrate major migrant detention centre - TVM News](#)

[Asphalting of Bugibba-Qawra seafront to continue between tonight and Thursday - TVM News](#)

[Centrecom to double workers to 500 - TVM News](#)

16 May

[Times of Malta – Malta football icon Ronnie Cocks dies, aged 73](#)

[Times of Malta – Watch: PM spokesman on PN's 'vicious' attacks, corruption... and that Azerbaijan trip](#)

[Times of Malta – PN proposes maximum 10% income tax rate for those earning less than €20,000](#)

[Times of Malta – Finance Minister in Germany to fight off 'fabricated claims'](#)

[Times of Malta – PM calls Opposition tax proposal discriminatory](#)
[Ukrainian aircraft manufacturer to ‘explore possibility’ of Malta logistics centre](#)
[Maltese finance minister Edward Scicluna speaks to Berlin press to challenge German ‘offshore’ claims](#)
[\[WATCH\] PN proposes 10% income tax on earnings up to €20,000](#)
[\[WATCH\] Joseph Muscat wants consultation on recreational marijuana by end of year](#)
[Motorcyclist grievously injured following Hamrun collision with car](#)
[Man draws portrait of his eye donor - TVM News](#)
[Ukraine President on state visit to Malta - TVM News](#)
[No compensation for woman hit by bus in St Paul's Bay - TVM News](#)
[PN Leader announces package of income tax cuts to stimulate the economy - TVM News](#)
[AD affirms its stand against Spring hunting and trapping - TVM News](#)

17 May

[Times of Malta – Commentary: Leaders clash at University debate](#)
[Times of Malta – Police officer ‘ignored FIAU report’](#)
[Times of Malta – Watch: 'No cloud of corruption... just hot air' - PM spokesman](#)
[Times of Malta – Jail for teen caught with 31 sachets of cocaine](#)
[Times of Malta – Senglea gives Muscat warm welcome](#)
[Labour pledges free hormone therapy for trans people](#)
[\[WATCH\] Five leaders go head-to-head in University General Election debate](#)
[‘We’ve got nothing to hide’, Scicluna tells German press over tax system](#)
[‘We’ve got nothing to hide’, Scicluna tells German press over tax system](#)
[Ex-hunter acquitted of bribing ALE police officers](#)
[Teen jailed for 39 months after admitting to having 31 sachets of cocaine in his car](#)
[\[WATCH\] Muscat: 'Labour true proponent of liberal equality'](#)
[PM: Civil Union for gay couples to become marriage by summer - TVM News](#)
[Serbian woman charged with homicide of two elderly men in Bugibba had considerable amount of cash in her apartment - TVM News](#)
[Film on the life and death of Carmelo Borg Pisani to benefit from Film Malta Scheme - TVM News](#)
[Research: Amount of sleep effects one's appearance - TVM News](#)
[UPDATED: Debate between Leaders at University - TVM News](#)

18 May

[Times of Malta – Equity firm makes bid for Air Malta - Muscat](#)
[Times of Malta – Magistrate raps 'mock investigation' as man is acquitted of indecent assault](#)
[Times of Malta – Retractable roof being mullied for Pjazza Teatru Rjal](#)
[Times of Malta – Rubble walls, trees to go as permit is given in ODZ land](#)
[Times of Malta – Quarter of PN government public procurement would be from SMEs](#)
[Prime Minister: ‘Busuttil doesn’t want Egrant inquiry out before 3 June’](#)
[\[WATCH\] Joseph Muscat addresses press conference](#)
[Man found in possession of cocaine arrested at airport](#)
[National Development and Social Fund revenue exceeds €200 million](#)
[Muscat paints picture of 'divisive' Busuttil](#)
[New app to bring Parliament closer to the citizen - TVM News](#)
[Not guilty of violent indecent assault on workmate - TVM News](#)
[PL proposes possibility of roofing over Pjazza Teatru Rjal - TVM News](#)

[PM inaugurates St Julians business centre with €8m investment - TVM News](#)
[Caruana Galizia guilty of defaming Julia Farrugia - TVM News](#)

19 May

[Times of Malta – Malta is a target for Italian mafia, Russia loan sharks, damning probe says](#)
[Times of Malta – Italian politician quits amid secret Malta company revelations](#)
[Times of Malta – Anger as grave prices soar by €3,000](#)
[Times of Malta – Scicluna digs into PN’s ‘irresponsible’ pledges](#)
[Times of Malta – Singer Destiny vows Britain's Got Talent](#)
[Russian billionaire’s fast loan empire uses Malta to pay peanuts in tax](#)
[Muscat vows to be responsible for ‘ambitious’ Labour manifesto](#)
[Nationalists would implement transparent digital public procurement system](#)
[Labour meets at Eden for extraordinary general conference](#)
[Election Chat • How is 2017 different to the 2013 electoral campaign?](#)
[Appeals Court rejects Alleanza Bidla plea for candidates to contest every electoral district - TVM News](#)
[PM inaugurates St Julians business centre with €8m investment - TVM News](#)
[€216.7 million saved through Citizenship Investment Programme income - TVM News](#)
[WATCH: Policeman escapes lightly after being dragged by motorcycle after slithering on an oil patch - TVM News](#)
[Education Ministry: no change in number of English Language lessons - TVM News](#)

20 May

[Malta Files: PM emphasises he will defend Malta from this long-planned attack - TVM News](#)
[PN says PBS follows PL propaganda - TVM News](#)
[PM presents Labour Party candidates for general election - TVM News](#)
[WATCH: Destiny Chukunyere astounds Simon Cowell with performance at Britain's Got Talent - TVM News](#)
[Malta Files: a spin intended to damage the country – all information is online - Prof. Scicluna - TVM News](#)
[Times of Malta – Watch: PM calls for united front against 'unprecedented attack' on financial services](#)
[Times of Malta – PL, PN ignore environmentalists’ challenge](#)
[Times of Malta – Police to be paid for overtime... up to 24 years later](#)
[Times of Malta – Stop putting party cronies on state entities - AD](#)
[Times of Malta – Watch: Muscat says nobody should rejoice in Malta Files reports](#)
[\[WATCH\] Gozo hospital no longer viable without Vitals investment, Muscat warns](#)
[Simon Busuttill says Glenn Bedingfield’s blogs betray Labour’s true homophobic beliefs](#)
[\[WATCH\] Labour proposes 3-year tax holiday for businesses relocating to Gozo](#)
[PN: National broadcaster ‘cannot be trusted’](#)
[Activists, academics, authors call for progressive taxation](#)

21 May

[Times of Malta – PL, PN's economic and fiscal proposals explained](#)
[Times of Malta – PN candidate Ivan Bartolo says attacks against him 'desperate attempt to divert attention'](#)
[Times of Malta – Nominee companies, fiduciaries used as ‘cover-up for foreign criminality’](#)

[Times of Malta – Busuttil to Attorney General: Stand up and be counted](#)
[Times of Malta – Majority don't trust institutions or PM to tackle corruption](#)
[\[LIVE\] Thousands in Mqabba for Labour mass meeting](#)
[\[LIVE\] PN Mass meeting in Zabbar](#)
[Briguglio: We need gentle politicians, not bullies](#)
[\[WATCH\] PN's former international secretary urges country to vote for Joseph Muscat](#)
[Busuttil: We must once again write our country's history](#)
[AD calls for Board of Inquiry on Malta Files - TVM News](#)
[Three Police Stations modernised and a new station planned for Marsascala - TVM News](#)
[LIVE: PL and PN mass meetings - TVM News](#)
[UPDATED: Claims of being beaten by bouncers in Paceville bar - TVM News](#)
[PN Leader is confident Maltese people will write new page in history - TVM News](#)
[Times of Malta – Watch: Fierce fire at Sant' Antnin waste recycling plant](#)

22 May

[Times of Malta – Watch: Fierce fire at Sant' Antnin waste recycling plant](#)
[Times of Malta – Hunt for missing man continues, one year on](#)
[Times of Malta – PN promises one-time grant for young people to visit an EU country](#)
[Times of Malta – Cancelled wedding costs would-be groom €14,000 in damages](#)
[Times of Malta – EU flags supervision of Malta's financial services](#)
[Flames engulf Sant Antnin recycling plant](#)
[Marlene Farrugia strikes out against motor racetrack: 'Build it in Sicily, not Malta'](#)
[Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's son-in-law set up Malta accounts to avoid millions in tax](#)
[FIAU filed inquiry complaint](#)
[\[WATCH\] Joe Bannister to step down by end of year, Prime Minister Joseph Muscat reveals](#)
[PM proposes overtime tax reduction among various fiscal measures - TVM News](#)
[European Commission predicts public finances surplus for the coming 3 years - TVM News](#)
[Watch - sea lion pulls girl underwater in Canada - TVM News](#)
[AERIAL VIDEO: Fierce fire at Sant'Antnin recycling plant in Marsascala - TVM News](#)
[Man ordered to reimburse in-laws for wedding expenses after getting cold feet - TVM News](#)

23 May

[Times of Malta – Watch: Muscat addresses activity in Mellieha](#)
[Times of Malta – Watch: Busuttil addresses activity in Paola](#)
[Times of Malta – Treated sewage to be supplied to farmers, mostly free of charge](#)
[Times of Malta – PM's bodyguard contract 'secret'](#)
[Times of Malta – American University deputy manager says claims against him were 'fabricated'](#)
[PN pledges to revise high-rise policies to protect skyline, abolish inheritance tax](#)
[\[WATCH\] Drone footage reveals extent of damage following Sant'Antnin plant fire](#)
[PN pledges to revise high-rise policies to protect skyline, abolish inheritance tax](#)
[Simon Busuttil: 'Egrant inquiry will not be published before election'](#)
[37,000 voting documents remain uncollected](#)
[PM: PN Leader is terrified for inquiry to be concluded because there is no proof or truth behind allegations - TVM News](#)
[EU Agriculture Ministers discuss in Malta the effects of climate change on water - TVM News](#)
[PL says Busuttil continues to defend George Pullicino on the BWSC case - TVM News](#)
[PN proposes that couples benefiting from IVF are entitled to free medicines - TVM News](#)

[Japanese Prime Minister to visit Malta on Saturday - TVM News](#)

24 May

[Times of Malta – Muscat raises spectre of Russian election meddling, Busuttil says claims 'ridiculous'](#)

[Times of Malta – Watch: PN unveils its environmental proposals](#)

[Times of Malta – Labour government would retain current retirement age](#)

[Times of Malta – Godfrey Farrugia complains of Facebook identity theft](#)

[Times of Malta – Voters irked by barrage of calls and messages](#)

[\[WATCH\] Nationalist Party launches manifesto for ‘socially just, corruption-free’ Malta](#)

[Good governance, Russian meddling dominate Broadcasting Authority press conference](#)

[Muscat: ‘Four years of economic growth is your guarantee of stable future’](#)

[Simon Busuttil’s dithering over IIP true risk to real estate sector, Joseph Muscat warns](#)

[Alternattiva Demokratika wants national debate on religious inclusivity](#)

[PN proposing three Malta sports promotions between 2023 and 2025 - TVM News](#)

[Election stress may cause decrease in male births - TVM News](#)

[Marlene Farrugia says some voters have a sense of mental confusion - TVM News](#)

[Agricultural sector to be given free advice in new service - TVM News](#)

[GO comments on the Vodafone - Melita partnership proposal - TVM News](#)

[Times of Malta – Russia denies interference in Malta's affairs](#)

25 May

[Times of Malta – Russia denies interference in Malta's affairs](#)

[Times of Malta – Conditionally discharged after insulting, then apologising to Pullicino Orlando](#)

[Times of Malta – PD leader never made any demands in return for joining coalition](#)

[Times of Malta – Muscat refuses to 'speculate' on possible Russian spy involvement](#)

[Times of Malta – Watch: Simon Busuttil addressing PN activity in Lija](#)

[Global press tracks down taxpayers abroad, but finserv institute says ‘no secrets in Malta Files’](#)

[\[WATCH\] Marlene Farrugia not for sale, Simon Busuttil insists](#)

[PM won’t speculate on Russian link, but insists he received ‘specific’ information on meddling
43.3% of floating voters undecided](#)

[Good governance, Russian meddling dominate Broadcasting Authority press conference](#)

[Positive experience for 230 students at new Kirkop school - TVM News](#)

[Former Greek PM Papademos injured in car explosion - TVM News](#)

[AD proposes a drugs policy with a human aspect - TVM News](#)

[PD Leader appeals for harmony between environmentalists and hunters - TVM News](#)

[International dignitaries attend high-level tourism conference in Malta - TVM News](#)

26 May

[Times of Malta – Muscat's comments 'a clear threat' to independence of the judiciary - Busuttil](#)

[Times of Malta – Watch: ‘Malta will survive as financial services jurisdiction’](#)

[Times of Malta – PN proposes metro system with four lines - Busuttil](#)

[Times of Malta – Another €210,000 in government jobs awarded to Gozo whistleblower](#)

[Times of Malta – Watch: Marlene Farrugia vs Arnold Cassola](#)

[Busuttil condemns Muscat’s ‘threats’ to magistrate: ‘He thought Bugeja was his puppet’](#)

[Prime Minister warns of ‘constitutional crisis if PN is elected on a lie’](#)

[\[WATCH\] PN unveils metro plan: first train in five years](#)
[Labour, Partit Demokratiku come out in favour of gamete donation](#)
[Despite election year, government finances still performing well, Labour says](#)
[Malta has a first-ever strategy for crime prevention - TVM News](#)
[€1.2 million funding for restoration of Valletta's St Paul's Anglican Cathedral - TVM News](#)
[Denies being the child's father as he only "saw the woman for two hours" - TVM News](#)
[Face-to-face for their second electoral debate - TVM News](#)
[Chamber of Advocates says PM's comments put pressure on Magistrate - TVM News](#)

27 May

[Times of Malta – Two detained in Sicily on terrorism charges after arriving from Malta](#)
[Times of Malta – Former judge calls Muscat’s remarks inappropriate](#)
[Times of Malta – Muscat challenges 'hypocrite' Busuttil to sack Fenech Adami](#)
[Times of Malta – Electoral campaign gifts ‘could breach law’](#)
[Times of Malta – Japanese PM in Malta](#)
[Busuttil accused of influencing PN Cabinet decision over Shell’s €5 million settlement](#)
[\[WATCH\] Busuttil challenges FIAU to publish unconcluded report](#)
[FIAU found Dubai company connecting LNG tanker owners to Schembri and Mizzi](#)
[Joseph Muscat, Simon Busuttil on Xarabank: No love lost between leaders during tense debate](#)
[\[LIVE\] Busuttil addresses party faithful in front of PN headquarters](#)
[Knives two men dead after they tried to defend Muslim girls being insulted by his hate aggression - TVM News](#)
[First-ever Collective Agreement for ITS administrative employees - TVM News](#)
[Maltese athletes among early voters this morning - TVM News](#)
[WATCH: Detained under arrest after facing 30 charges of theft and damage to properties - TVM News](#)
[Malta Movie Trail: commemorative plaques at Malta and Gozo film localities - TVM News](#)

28 May

[Times of Malta – Vitals hospitals memorandum signed before tender won](#)
[Times of Malta – Watch: Busuttil condemns use of Down's Syndrome picture in political meme](#)
[Times of Malta – Corruption: when PM ‘looked the other way’](#)
[Times of Malta – The general election: Third of voters still to decide](#)
[Times of Malta – Vitals says its officials have no Pilatus Bank accounts](#)
[Simon Busuttil ‘disgusted but not surprised’ at alleged kickbacks in Enemalta sale](#)
[MaltaToday Survey | PL still leads by four points, Muscat trust by five](#)
[German MEP Manfred Weber addresses PN mass meeting: ‘Malta needs change, it needs Simon Busuttil’](#)
[Change does not scare me | Joseph Muscat](#)
[\[WATCH\] Choosing Malta | Simon Busuttil](#)
[FIAU flagged suspicions of kickbacks in Enemalta sale, Konrad Mizzi issues denial](#)
[AD criticises political leaders' comments on the Judiciary - TVM News](#)
[PD says Zonqor and White Rocks should not be developed - TVM News](#)
[Hunter loses dinghy after being caught hunting illegally in Grand Harbour - TVM News](#)
[Two women, man evacuated from ship by AFM helicopter - TVM News](#)
[VGH sustains that none of its owners or directors have accounts in Pilatus - TVM News](#)
[Russia denies report of interference in Malta's election - TVM News](#)

29 May

[Times of Malta – Attempted hacks of government IT system increase at start of EU presidency](#)
[Times of Malta – Promotions blitz in the army continues](#)
[Times of Malta – Watch: Chris Cardona vs Beppe Fenech Adami](#)
[Times of Malta – Watch: ‘I now have the experience to lead this country better’ – Muscat](#)
[Times of Malta – Watch: ‘I will not let you down’, Busuttil tells Sliema mass meeting](#)
[\[WATCH\] Thousands at the Granaries for Labour's mass meeting](#)
[Integrity and honesty more important than money, Simon Busuttil tells mass meeting](#)
[MITA suspicion that Kremlin-friendly hackers attacked government servers – The Observer](#)
[From Matteo Renzi to Tony Blair, Joseph Muscat endorsed by former prime ministers](#)
[Simon Busuttil ‘disgusted but not surprised’ at alleged kickbacks in Enemalta sale](#)
[Third day of chaos at British Airways because of problems in computer system - TVM News](#)
[MI5 investigates warnings which it had received about Salman Abedi - TVM News](#)
[Some people don't let politics take over their lives - TVM News](#)
[12,339 voting documents still not collected - TVM News](#)
[WATCH: Man drives wrong way, hits three motorcycles and crashes into shop in St Julian's - TVM News](#)

30 May

[Times of Malta – Two children hospitalised after being hit by car](#)
[Times of Malta – Muscat will have to quit 'when' Schembri is taken to court - PN leader](#)
[Times of Malta – Watch: Muscat in no-show for Times Talk](#)
[Times of Malta – Watch: Mario de Marco vs Owen Bonnici](#)
[Times of Malta – Watch: Schembri offered to resign when lies emerged about his health - Prime Minister](#)
[\[WATCH\] Muscat: My friendship with Keith Schembri 'nothing to be ashamed of'](#)
[\[WATCH\] VGH denial over Pilatus Bank account should be taken with ‘a pinch of salt’, Simon Busuttil claims](#)
[Russian refused Maltese passport now creates ‘first space nation’](#)
[Malta government seals €50 million bank loan for major social housing project](#)
[Planning Authority keeps chairman’s new salary under wraps](#)
[70 apartments, 115 garages to replace abandoned buildings in Cospicua - TVM News](#)
[PN leader promises that a Nationalist Government will immediately take back Gozo General Hospital - TVM News](#)
[80 BMW "Presidency" cars to be auctioned in aid of MCCF - TVM News](#)
[Two children hospitalised after Fgura accident - girl with grievous injuries - TVM News](#)
[Destiny 'live' tonight in Britain’s Got Talent semi-finals - TVM News](#)

31 May

[Times of Malta – Vote for every single PL candidate in Gozo, Muscat says](#)
[Times of Malta – Pilatus ‘secrecy veil’ makes transactions easier – FIAU](#)
[Times of Malta – Betting odds lean towards Labour](#)
[Times of Malta – 91.7 per cent turnout among early voters](#)
[Times of Malta – Watch: Election campaign has been 'intrusive'](#)
[\[LIVE\] Supporters turn up in Xaghra for Labour mass meeting](#)
[Patrick Spiteri extradited to Malta on €7.4 million fraud, appears in court](#)
[MEPs using allowances to rent offices from themselves](#)

[Million-euro Super 5 jackpot during election week](#)
[Saturday election outcome hinges on the 'undecided'](#)
[PN: MEP confirms that political party may rent out offices - TVM News](#)
[PD: Members of autonomous bodies should be decided by two thirds Parliamentary vote - TVM News](#)
[Detained under arrest for attempted Marsa homicide - TVM News](#)
[Scicluna: Malta has given the best evidence it is against tax evasion and money laundering throughout its Presidency of the EU Council - TVM News](#)
[AD: public land should be safeguarded - TVM News](#)

01 Jun

[Times of Malta – AFM rebuts claims aggrieved army personnel promised post-election promotion 'to secure vote'](#)
[Times of Malta – Girl invented abuse claims against her father after he struck her mother while drunk](#)
[Times of Malta – Ignore the surveys, what matters is voting early on Saturday - Muscat](#)
[Times of Malta – Forza Nazzjonali would persist after the election, Busuttil pledges](#)
[Times of Malta – Watch: Simon Busuttil talks boathouses, strange requests... cheese cakes](#)
[Spike in development permits since election announcement](#)
[MaltaToday Survey | Labour 5 points ahead as 'no replies' increase](#)
[Teenage girl claimed father sexually abused her after violent domestic incident](#)
[\[WATCH\] PN government would keep good Labour measures, Busuttil vows](#)
[Think tank disassociates itself from former chair after voting confession](#)
[Alleanza Bidla says it will bring democracy back in Malta - TVM News](#)
[AD says that its campaign was positive with feasible proposals - TVM News](#)
[Electoral Commission reminds public on Saturday's voting process - TVM News](#)
[Students learn Maltese poems for SEC through creative arts - TVM News](#)
['l-Imniehru' accused murderer has prison sentence reduced to five years on hold-up case - TVM News](#)

02 Jun

[Times of Malta – Watch: How electronics could change the voting system](#)
[Times of Malta – Uncollected voting documents highest in 12th and 10th districts](#)
[Times of Malta – Unprofessional chiropractor ordered to pay patient €75,000](#)
[Times of Malta – Parents seek explanation for dead son's missing organs](#)
[Times of Malta – Maltese more likely to trust government than the media, study shows](#)
[PN turns candidates lose on Facebook, after electoral commission ignores complaint](#)
[8,372 voting documents uncollected by Thursday deadline](#)
[Trump pulls US out of Paris climate agreement](#)
[Imaginary Tunisia investment earns conman a prison sentence](#)
[Wrong date sees teenager's road accident conviction overturned](#)
[UPDATED: Woman and daughter hospitalised after car flips over at Vittoriosa - TVM News](#)
[Police advise drivers to avoid Zabbar Road in Fgura - TVM News](#)
[Manchester attack: Police identify vehicle which could be significant to inquiry - TVM News](#)
[Wrong date on charge sheet results in woman's acquittal - TVM News](#)
[8,372 people did not collect their vote - TVM News](#)
[WITH VIDEO: Woman and daughter hospitalised after car flips over at Vittoriosa - TVM News](#)

03 Jun

[Times of Malta – 3% increase in voter turnout by 2pm](#)
[Times of Malta – Election trends: turnout down, invalidated votes consistent](#)
[Times of Malta – Valletta braces for post-election celebrations](#)
[Times of Malta – Watch: Malta goes to the polls today](#)
[Times of Malta – Election slows down restaurant industry](#)
[Record high turnout by 2pm with 52.32% nationwide](#)
[Man vandalises his own car](#)
[\[WATCH\] Election Day: Malta goes to the polls today](#)
[\[WATCH\] Country’s leaders cast their votes](#)
[PN leader touring localities urging the electorate to vote](#)
[Children in South Sudan die after receiving measles vaccinations - TVM News](#)
[WATCH: Voting during the afternoon - TVM News](#)
[Man being detained in connection with Fgura family argument - TVM News](#)
[Seven killed, 100 injured during Kabul funeral suicide explosion - TVM News](#)
[WATCH - voting progress this morning - TVM News](#)

04 Jun

[Times of Malta – Labour expects to win by 54.9%; Muscat says people have chosen to stay the course](#)
[Times of Malta – Live blog: Election 2017 as it happens](#)
[Times of Malta – Busuttil to speak about his political future](#)
[Times of Malta – UK PM May calls for beefed up terror response after London attack](#)
[Times of Malta – Maltese fan escapes with cuts and bruises in Turin](#)
[\[LIVE\] ELECTIONS 2017 • LABOUR VICTORY SEES MUSCAT RETAIN POWER, MAJORITY COULD BE OVER 35,000](#)
[Joseph Muscat: ‘Time for national reconciliation after such a divisive campaign’](#)
[PN deputy leaders concede defeat: ‘Time to look to the future now’](#)
[Surveys calls election but not scale of Labour victory | Elections 2017](#)
[Update 3 | Electoral Commission confirms 92% voter turnout](#)
[WATCH: PM first reaction from the Counting Hall - appeals for unity - TVM News](#)
[WATCH: first reactions of PN's deputy leaders - TVM News](#)
[PN Leader Simon Busuttil concedes defeat - TVM News](#)
[Watch: Supporters celebrating near PL headquarters at Hamrun - awaiting Labour leader - TVM News](#)
[WATCH - See how voters have swung from one election to another - TVM News](#)

Appendix 3 - Disclosure of the position of the researcher

The author of this research worked within the news organisation Allied Newspapers Ltd. for eighteen years. Within this period, he was responsible for a number of activities, ranging from creating and establishing the organisation's digital domain (timesofmalta.com), restructuring of the group of companies, restructuring of the editorial and commercial arms of the organisation, and ultimately fulfilling the role of Managing Director. During his tenure, a diversification strategy was implemented with the intent of creating multiple revenue streams. This included the introduction of audio-visual broadcasting content, creation of an events programme as well as a successful subscription-based model for *Times of Malta*.

In 2016, he was accused of graft, specifically, to influence editorial policy in support of the Labour Party, when it was alleged that he had a company in the British Virgin Islands. The allegation of editorial influence was robustly denied by the editors of the organisation and the researcher. The researcher immediately resigned his position as Managing Director and eventually ended his employment with the organisation, citing constructive dismissal. Allied Newspapers set up a board of enquiry, led by European Court of Human Rights Judge Giovanni Bonello, which deliberated on the issue for eight months, the conclusions of which were never disclosed. This resulted in an amicable settlement between the two parties. Notwithstanding this settlement the opposition party (PN) insisted on starting a magisterial enquiry.

Appendix 4 – Key timeline for the development of news in Malta

