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Media viewership and the elections

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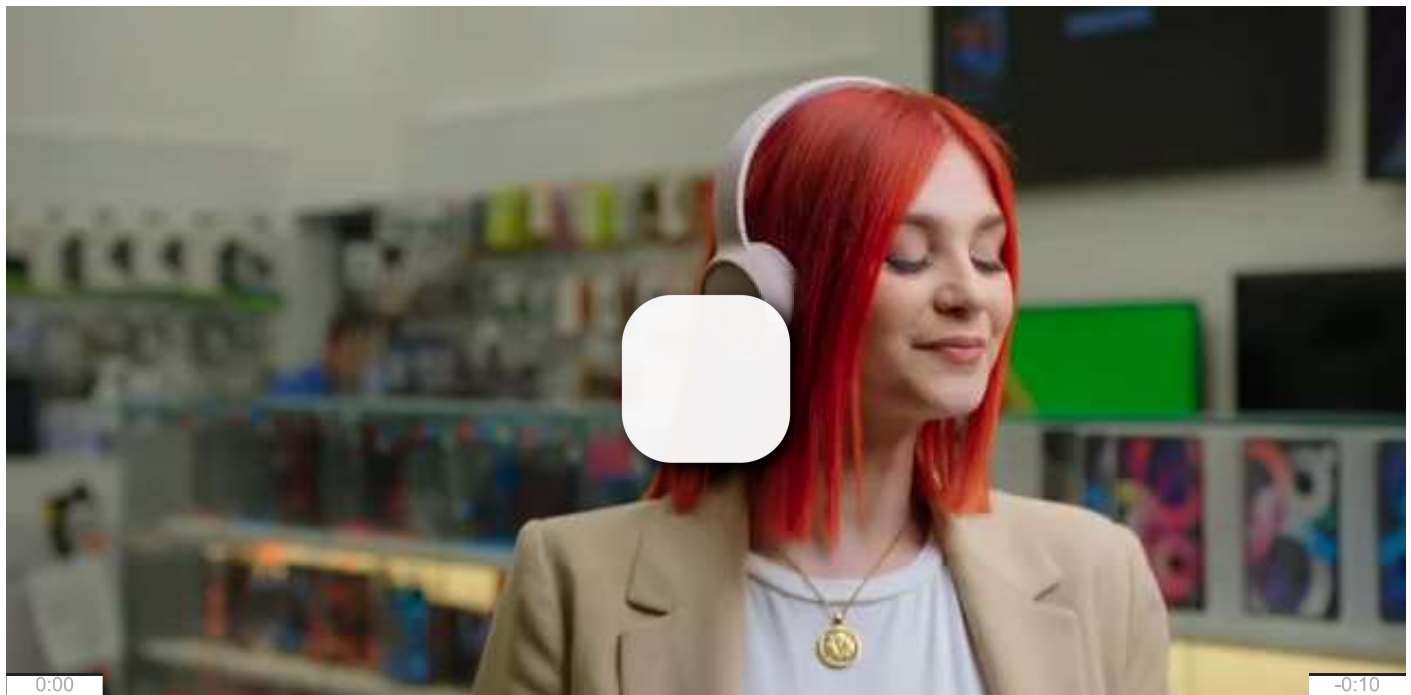
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A few days ago, I was one of the guest speakers in a conference organised by the Ministry in the Office of the Prime Minister in collaboration with the Media Literacy Board on the value of communication today. The aim of the conference was to kick off a process for the drawing up of a media literacy policy.

open frequently, one of the main tasks of the conference was to discuss the findings of a scientific

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I will hereby briefly reiterate some of my sociological observations on findings which struck me, and I will situate this in the context of Malta's national election later this month.

A main finding was that 47.4% refer to one source for a single news item, whilst 32.5% seek the same news item from two sources, while 20.1% seek from more than two sources. To me, this shows that a substantial number of Maltese hear a plurality of voices and interests. This, however, does not necessarily mean that they believe them.

A massive 84.1% of respondents stated that they want news on political stations to remain. This is a very different reality from what some media protagonists, who, it must be noted, are competing for audiences, want us to believe. One media house - Lovin Malta - is involved in a court case against television stations owned by political parties. Marmara's survey, however, shows that the anti-political party station rhetoric is much less popular than the impression being given by some.

It could be the case that many viewers prefer to know what the agenda of a newsroom is, rather than an impression of 'impartiality,' especially when this is not there.

This reflection gains even more currency when one considers another finding in Marmara's survey: namely that only 21.6% of respondents believe that independent media is objective and neutral.

I for one, believe that the media is one of the main pillars of a democratic society. However, the same sense of critique and accountability which the media often demands of others, should also apply to itself. Of course, some media are more transparent, thorough, and fair than others, and, in this regard, I believe that for each media source, one should ask pertinent questions. For example, what is the interest behind the story? What is the agenda being pushed here? Is financing involved open ; article in any way? Which social, economic, and political networks are involved, if any, in

with certain reservations. This is considerably higher than the 20% who said that they believe that their respective party's media always tells the truth and 6.6% who never believe them.

In this regard, audiences may be more reflective than the impression which is sometimes given. From this perspective, whereas many viewers would want to confirm their respective identity or political affiliation by declaring their preferred media source/s, at the same time, the viewership process is one over which audiences reflect and deliberate, being more diversified and multidirectional in terms of the viewership and interpretation of messages.

One finding which particularly struck me was that 70.2% of respondents did not feel that they should comment in public on the media about a particular news item. It is only 8.9% who feel they should do so. To me, this statistic states that the loudest narratives in the media (which also includes social media) do not necessarily represent opinions or attitudes which are shared by most in society. There might be silent majorities who reflect in the privacy of their home, or with people close to them, without necessarily sharing this on Facebook. Conversely, there may be some very loud voices who are busy preaching to the converted, whilst ignoring significant social trends. When certain (lazy) news items feature screenshots of some social media post rather than thorough investigation, this may be artificially inflating such bubbles, to the applause of the respective echo-chamber adherents.

Another finding stated that the majority agree that someone should be taken to court if they wrote lies or offended others on Facebook. At the same time, only 15.8% agreed that the private life of public persons should be exposed to everyone. Once again, this presents a snapshot of reality which is very different from the one propagated by some loud voices. Unfortunately, some feast on addiction to clickbait or try to score points to justify their agenda, by spreading disinformation, half-truths, hatred, and sensationalist spin on the media. The dignity of people is often abused in the process.

Here, the inevitable question is: How free should freedom of expression be? It would be great if there were a clear-cut answer to this conundrum. Some points which I believe are important in this regard include the following, within the context of a liberal democracy: First, that freedom of expression should be accompanied by a sense of responsibility. Second, we should invest more in educational fields such as ethics and media literacy to help equip different stakeholders in the media sphere.

In this regard, one should ask whether journalism itself should match freedom with responsibility. A question which I often ask myself is whether it is acceptable that one can simply declare oneself to be a journalist? Should not this profession have standards as is the case with others? Some professions are warranted, others have their own ethical standards. For example, in academia, scholars subject their research to peer-review. Of course, this slows down the publication process, but is more likely to result in a better product.

During the pandemic we experienced a surplus of fake news, often by social media warriors who appoint themselves journalists and/or experts. Whilst they spread sensation and panic, others, including rigorous journalists, experts, and authorities from respective sectors, would be more open to us when gauging the issue in question.

should also note that sometimes respondents may reply with desirability bias: For example, one may say that they question what they are being told by their party, even if this may not be the case. Conversely, however, a supporter of political party X might be more inclined to tell his interviewer that he doesn't follow the TV station of the opposing party Y. These biases, in turn, might have electoral impacts: For example, viewers may be more reflexive than some may assume. They watch different news, follow different media, interact with different people, and make their respective choices, even if dominant media narratives state otherwise.

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