

The Ambiguous Borderline between Human Rights and National Security: The Journalist's Dilemma in the Reporting of Irregular Immigrants in Malta

Carmen Sammut

Abstract

Should journalists merely echo public fears and xenophobic attitudes towards immigrants or should they attempt to change those attitudes? This study discusses the journalist's role as agenda setter and opinion leader. It is based on qualitative in-depth data gathered from 13 journalists working with 8 news organisations on the Mediterranean island of Malta. It explores the various dilemmas faced by journalists in their coverage of irregular boat people and in their reporting of anti-immigrant movements. It shows how journalists hold divergent views on what constitutes national security. Some overstate the role of the police and the army in their effort to safeguard the territorial integrity of the Maltese islands from immigrant influxes. Others espouse a perspective that pegs security to fairness, justice, the protection of rights and cultural integration. This paper points out that globalisation, including migration processes, necessitate better comprehension and interpretation of international news where journalists could help foster greater public understanding of the international causes of migration. However, and to the contrary, Malta is now also experiencing media commercialisation trends that further marginalise foreign news and militate against such informed explanations.

Introduction

Winds of change are challenging the socio-political and economic idiosyncrasies of the Maltese islands, prompting transformations of the media. Integration into the European Union together with the impact of globalisation and immigration influxes brought new realities. In a discussion of the complex interactions of the environment, the economy, society and politics in the Mediterranean, Braudel (1966) maintains that while islands are isolated by the sea, their remoteness is relative, as the sea is also a crossing that may also integrate them with global events. Braudel's observation is highly applicable to the new vulnerabilities faced by the Maltese islands at the turn of the millennium.

In their day-to-day routines, journalists struggle to keep abreast of new currents as calm summer seas encourage a growing inflow of migrants. Boats full of immigrants from underdeveloped and war-torn Africa set out on dangerous and sometimes tragic sea journeys mainly from Libya, a country that has, until now, refused to allow *Frontex* patrols near its coast.¹ Maltese politicians often attempt to convince other Europeans of the extent of Malta's difficulties, by comparing the impact of arrivals on Malta's population of 400,000 with other, larger populations. For example, Home Affairs Minister Tonio Borg told visiting European journalists: "Since 2002 we have had almost 8,000 irregular immigrants reaching our shores. To get a measure of what that figure means, you have to appreciate that – relative to our population size – this figure equates to almost 1.7 million arriving in Germany or 1.2 million in France or the United Kingdom, or 800,000 in Spain during the same period" (Borg, 2006).

As increasing numbers of migrants reach Europe's southernmost periphery, the Maltese political class has been caught between countervailing pressures. First, there are thousands of frustrated migrants who end up in long-term detention on an island that was not their chosen destination. Then Amnesty International, the UNHCR and also the EU exert pressures to protect the human rights of detained migrants and those of asylum seekers. On the other hand, constituents seek solutions and results. Some exert greater pressure through their involvement with pro or anti-immigrant groupings. In this scenario, the media are the key intermediaries of the public sphere.

In a research project commissioned by the Maltese newspaper *The Sunday Times* (Vassallo, 2005) the extent of xenophobia was revealed. Vassallo tested people's perceptions in August, the month when good weather heightens the problem. The results were disturbing. While more than 90% of the respondents had no objection to a European neighbour, an equal number said that having an Arab or African neighbour was highly undesirable. Moreover, more than 75% of the individuals said they would not give shelter to persons who were trying to escape their native land because of political persecution, war or civil war, hunger or mass poverty. The general perception is that Malta is far too small to receive migrants, no matter how serious their problems are. Vulnerability breeds fear and xenophobia. If, as Anderson (1991) wrote, nations are an 'imagined community,' on the whole the Maltese now feel confronted by people who are deemed to be uninvited and unnecessary 'others'.

Migration and the Maltese media

While immigration is a relatively recent concern, emigration has long been a core issue for the media in Malta as they endeavoured to report and to reach out to the Maltese Diaspora overseas. During the 19th and 20th century, the Maltese Islands and other areas of the Mediterranean including Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece, were a points of departure for those who sought better prospects in the ‘New World’. Between 1945 and 1979, when Malta’s population averaged 300,000, it is estimated that around 140,000 people left for Australia, the UK, Canada, and the US. The plight of Maltese emigrants is widely documented (See for instance Cirillo, 1956; Dench, 1975; Coldrey, 1992; Attard, 1997; Cauchi, 1999).

There is now a growing body of literature that examines the condition of immigrants in Malta. These include analyses of media reportage (Amore, 2005; Murphy, 2005). Texeira (2006) analyzes media content and observes instances where the discourses and content are ethically lacking. Texeira notes that newspapers often publish anonymous articles that foment racism. It is interesting to observe that *The Code of Ethics* employed by The *Institute of Maltese Journalists* does not cover the issue of racial incitement². However, both the Maltese *Criminal Code* and the *Press Act* prohibits threats, insults and the fomenting of hatred on racial, national or ethnic grounds. Moreover, the *Broadcasting Act* prohibits racial discrimination in advertising and teleshopping. Anyone who arouses racial hatred, including journalists, is liable to imprisonment.

Murphy (2005) notes that newspapers sometimes use politically incorrect vocabulary and points out a lack of journalistic sensitivity as with, for example, one news item broadcast in the summer of 2005 on the evening news bulletin of the Public Broadcasting Services. The reporter compared the "invasion" of migrants with a jellyfish infestation of the Maltese coast. Such texts led the *Institute of Journalists* to organise a number of seminars to promote more journalist awareness on language use.

The exploration of these issues below is based on data gathered between November and December 2006 consisting of written, in-depth and unstructured responses, from 13 journalists working for the following organisations.

Newspaper/ broadcast station	Nos of journalists
Orizzont & Torca	2
The Times	2
Nazzjon/Net TV/ Radio 101	2
Super One	1
PBS	1
RTK	2
Malta Today	1
Institute of Journalists	2

The Traits of Maltese Journalism

In 2000, The Malta Press Club (now renamed *Institute of Journalists*) had organised a conference for journalists to discuss the challenges they were facing. At the time of the conference, no one had anticipated that the coverage of immigration influxes would need to be scrutinized. Until then, society appeared as if culturally homogeneous and, with few exceptions, journalists reported on social reality from that perspective. At that time, Maltese journalists were more concerned with issues of professionalism and their role-relationship with powerful institutions.

The islands retain significant media-party parallelism³, with a high institutional influence on media structures and content. Whereas most European democracies have experienced a decline in support for mass parties, accompanied by dwindling electoral turnouts, Malta remains a highly polarised country, where almost 98% of the voters participate in national elections. Historical and socio-political dynamics, together with “small market” constraints, has been unattractive to media capitalists. In contrast to the decline of the partisan press throughout Europe, partisan journalism in Malta was renewed in 1991, with the advent of private broadcasting. At that time political parties used their influence to shape the way pluralism was enacted to structure the media market. Malta became the only European democracy allowing political parties to privately own radio and television stations that serve to amplify a polarised political culture.

Despite efforts by independent production houses and individuals towards greater professional autonomy, institutional influence is still overwhelming. In 2005 Lilly Gruber, a prominent Italian journalist-turned-MEP, questioned Malta’s “anomalous” pluralism in broadcasting before the European Commission. Gruber described how the state, the two main parties and the Church overpowered Maltese broadcasting and insisted that the Commission help rectify broadcasting practices in Malta so that “other political parties, minorities and civil society are given the opportunity to voice their opinions on all television media” (*Maltatoday*, 2005). Gruber’s

appeal to the European Commission echoed Maltese concerns that the partisan media are blatantly promoting party-centric agendas, whereas the other media either emphasise 'balance' between the two sides or, at times, indirectly promote a monochromatic world picture through their dependence on spin sources.

The appeal also referred to church influence. The Roman Catholic Church is another traditional actor in the media arena. The prevalence of Catholicism⁴ conveyed a façade of religious homogeneity in which all Maltese are seen as one culture and a single ethnic group. Despite the presence of a Mosque given as a gift from Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, a Jewish synagogue and churches of a non-Catholic denomination, the mass media often disseminate a "sociology of absence" (Baldacchino, 2002, p. 56) where religious minorities fall into a spiral of silence or are presented as voiceless "others" from a predominantly Catholic perspective. Better civic activism by immigrants in Malta would necessitate broader coverage.

Awareness of direct or indirect institutional influence by political parties, the church and also by economic players implies that while Maltese journalists pay lip-service to professional ideology, most do not believe objectivity is feasible. Some segments flout professional ideology by advocating various missions. As a result, Maltese journalism generally defies liberal theory, which portrays media advancement as a progression from 'traditional' to professional 'modern' systems that are nurtured by commercial stakeholders instead of political institutions. According to this view, journalists are deemed to be better able to safeguard democratic processes by overseeing the operations of the state, providing detached information to citizens (Siebert et al., 1956; Lerner, 1958; Pye, 1963; Alexander, 1981).

Malta's special contextual circumstances permit 'traditional' journalism to survive. The position of a significant number of Maltese journalists tends to reflect that of their parent organisation. Thus, regarding migration, *L-Orizzont* (The Horizon), owned by Malta's biggest trade union, the General Workers' Union echoes the dilemmas of the trade union's leaderships. On one hand they express concern about the exploitation of migrant workers in the black economy, while on the other they echo fears that migrants could threaten the job security and welfare of Maltese workers. One trade unionist went so far as to declare that Malta should consider measures that are neither "humane nor just" in order to solve the crisis – pointing to the "dangers of clandestine prostitutes" and "undetected diseases" (Farrugia, 2005). The union's newspaper was criticized by NGOs for mimicking this position. *L-Orizzont* published negative stories about 'home-made' weapons confiscated from immigrants at detention camps, migrants being potential terrorists, black prostitutes roaming the streets possibly spreading AIDS and claims that Malta is fast becoming Europe's shield against illegal immigrants (Texeira, 2006).

As one might expect, party-owned media reflect the position of their main shareholder. Whereas in all other spheres there is a high degree of political polarisation, on the issue of migration there is broad agreement. The opposition had suggested a National Conference on the issue, a proposal that was not taken up by the government. However, both main parties agree on the need for detention centres. Malta has five representatives in the European Parliament of 732 members and all took a common position calling for amendments to Dublin II agreement and for the Commission to give more assistance to Malta⁵. Both main parties are careful in how they project their image: While leaders do not want to plunge into populist racism, both sides fear that unless they are perceived to be defending national interest, they will make room for the rise of extreme right sympathies.

The Church-owned radio RTK also reflects the position of its parent organisation, whose various sub-organisations are directly assisting immigrants. *The Jesuit Refugee Services* was among the first to step-in to help immigrants. Another Church organisation, *The Emigrants' Commission*, set up in 1950 to assist Maltese emigrants overseas, repositioned itself to assist immigrants in their basic needs. The nuns of the *Good Shepherd*, who give shelter to Maltese women suffering domestic violence and to distressed single mothers, are now also giving sanctuary to a number of migrant women and children. The *Peace Laboratory*, set up in by a Franciscan priest in order to spread peace education, also assists migrants. As a result, the church radio's news editor acknowledged that these church organisations provide a steady flow of news items. The station sticks to its mission and underscores the human element. The editor stated: "We are anti-racist and very careful with our vocabulary. We never use the term 'illegal immigrant' on our radio as it is not deemed politically correct."

Whereas these media have clear organisational missions, other media such as the English-language press and Public Broadcasting Services, tend to reflect various positions from the public sphere on the issue. Some journalists writing for the English-language newspapers often form a front that is sympathetic with the plight of immigrants. These also give coverage to the small green party *Alternattiva Demokratika* (Democratic Alternative), which opposes detention centres and calls for multi-cultural approaches. These media also give ample coverage to civil society groups and provide a platform for opinion leaders on the migration issue.

Overall, as I have explored elsewhere, the Maltese media system has several 'traditional' characteristics that broadly lead to significant institutional influence. Yet, it also has some redeeming factors (Sammut, 2007). A combination of advocacy journalism, non-partisan set-ups and public broadcasting has the potential to fulfil some democratic roles possibly better than systems where the media are chiefly concerned with commercial

interests. In the case of migration, this media system has the potential to effectively widen debates and engage all social groups within the socio-political processes.

Opportunities and dilemmas faced by journalists

Immigration has provided journalists with opportunities to openly and collectively challenge institutional hegemony. In one instance, in early February 2005, 100 journalists signed a petition against the government's policy to refuse open access to immigrant detention centres, insisting this policy breaches public interest.⁶ They also observed that the state's refusal to grant open access to the media compels journalists to rely on formal sources (such as official statements and press releases) in their reportage of immigrant detention. This subjects them to a high degree of news management. Hence, journalists sought access to the centres in order to verify news and to gather first-hand accounts that are not filtered by the state.

Moreover, the immigration issue provided opportunity for some journalists to influence the national agenda and to assert themselves as opinion leaders. An example was a news story that appeared in the Maltese press in mid-2004 that referred to an Amnesty International report (cited in Texeira, 2006). The report claimed that Malta had forcibly repatriated some 220 Eritrean irregular immigrants most of whom had been imprisoned and tortured upon their repatriation and were being held under arrest. The story was carried by a Maltese press from mid-May 2004 right up to the first European Parliamentary elections that took place in Malta, which was also contested by the anti-immigrant front⁷. *The Times* carried a full-page news report on the plight of Eritreans on Saturday June 5, just seven days before the elections. Simultaneously, the MLP opposition sought to obtain political leverage and its media outlets led a campaign that called for the resignation of the Minister of Foreign Affairs (Pace, 2004).

The powerful role of journalists as opinion leaders clearly irked anti-immigration groups. In 2006, Malta was hit by a series of arson attacks against individuals working with migrants and supporting their plight. Arsonists torched the front doors of the private homes of Saviour Balzan, the editor of the English-language newspaper *Maltatoday* and those of freelance columnist Daphne Caruana Galizia. This sparked a strong and unified reaction by the journalistic community and a demonstration was organised outside the Prime Minister's Office by the newly formed *Journalists' Committee* that pledged to "keep writing about the plight of migrants and to represent their voices" (Karl Schembri, *Journalists' Committee*, personal communication).

This shows that while journalists working with the non-partisan media are pressing for more professional autonomy, most still choose to engage with socio-political and economic processes. Very few wish to report reality in a detached way, as dictated by the dominant Anglo-American professional ideology. Moreover, most of them are broadly sceptical towards the axiom of journalistic objectivity, as discussed below.

On the whole, the Maltese journalistic community is seeking answers to a number of complex questions, some of which have been faced by counterparts in those countries that received immigrants for a longer period of time: How far should journalists represent norms and myths about issues of race and ethnicity? How should they report xenophobic attitudes and should they attempt to change them? How far should they give visibility to the views of far-right and anti-immigration groups that foster racial hatred? Such dilemmas often lead to what one journalist described as "utter editorial confusion" as some media organisations do not have a clear position. Yet, should each news outlet have a distinct editorial vision to the exclusion of contending perspectives?

Divergent Views on Immigration and National Security Issues

Grouping Maltese journalists into pro or anti-immigrant groupings is a somewhat misleading oversimplification as the argument is actually more complex. Responses from interviewees reveal that journalists hold divergent views on what suits national interest and this often impinges on their positions vis-à-vis migrant rights. Some journalists are more prone than others to adopt orthodox visions employed by the state and political parties while those journalists working with political organisations seem to be more willing to accept their perspectives.

Martin Scicluna (2006), a 'government advisor on illegal immigration' explained: "The paramount duty of any government is to ensure that its people are secure and safe, and that their liberty, including their fundamental human rights and economic well-being are assured. The goal of Malta's security policy is to safeguard the freedom and territorial integrity of the Maltese islands . . ." (p. 11). Opposition leader Dr Alfred Sant also underscored the overriding vitality of national interest and the security of Maltese citizens (Debono, 2005). Such views are often expounded in orthodox international relations literature, where receiving countries often deem immigration to constitute a security threat. As a result, "states draw border lines along bounded space containing people, and police these boundaries to keep the right people in, and the wrong people out," wrote the critical feminist author Pettman (1996).

Most Maltese journalists give importance to the link between national security and illegal migration. They cover the Maltese government's endeavours, efforts taken at EU levels, and international attempts to curb

human trafficking. However, a few journalists, mainly those working for Maltese-language daily newspapers, are more keen to address populist fears and appear to be overly concerned with the security dimension at the cost of wider concerns. These journalists are mostly concerned with keeping the 'wrong people out' and the social and economic impact of letting them in.

As a result they are exceptionally sympathetic to the challenges faced by the armed forces to control immigration, to their difficulties in running the detention centres and deporting detainees. One reporter expressed it this way: "I support Maltese soldiers and I wished to discuss the conditions of soldiers. I feel that some other journalists, especially those working with the independent press, scorn the role of the armed forces and make derogatory remarks." A journalist working for the rival Maltese language daily held an identical position, even though the newspapers are bitter political foes. The journalist also acknowledged going the extra mile in support of soldiers and the police, even though he is often accused of being racist, an accusation he denies.

We need to really investigate from where these people are coming and their backgrounds. Did they escape because of persecutions or because of financial problems? Are they fugitives? Are they escaping from the law? Are they army deserters or, more bluntly, terrorists? I believe that the majority are honest people, but who can tell? Are we safe? Have you been to Marsa near Albert Town lately? [Where the open centre for immigrants is located] Do you know how many crimes these people are committing? Are our soldiers and police safe from health problems? Are we safe?

Beyond issues of political correctness, these journalists are often more concerned about the negative impact of the number of people trespassing national territory. They feel that sheltering unknown immigrants makes the Maltese vulnerable. Joe Vella from the *Institute of Maltese Journalists* explained, "Some of these journalists may feel that these influxes could expose us to social conflict and cultural difficulties based on diverse religious backgrounds . . . When they highlight these problems others accuse them of racism". In their responses, journalists deny they are racist and claim they are mainly preoccupied by threats to national boundaries.

While adopting a populist discourse is acceptable to some editors, none wish to be labelled racist. As a result, in the case of one Maltese-language party newspaper, editorial control is exercised to ensure that strong nationalistic views do not infer racist perspectives. A journalist with pro-Army sentiments admitted he is unable to write freely lest his paper is labelled racist with a negative impact on the image of his party.

While journalists who defend the army have better access to army sources, critical journalists reported they have better contacts with NGOs who have direct access to migrants. These critical journalists feel that journalists sympathetic with the armed forces and the police are often helping to construct stereotypes as they publish unsubstantiated sensationalistic stories that help foster the anti-immigrant hysteria.

Tensions Faced by Journalists Supporting Multiculturalism

Journalists that operate beyond institutional influence are more likely to venture away from orthodox perspectives of national security. Yet these Maltese journalists, who are more likely to take multi-cultural approaches, also face dilemmas. They are particularly sensitive about the role of the media in the construction of negative racial and ethnic stereotypes. As Amore (2005), Murphy (2005) and Texeira (2006) found, these stereotypes are constructed by repeatedly showing images of immigrants in negative and limited roles: Primarily arriving on boats in large groups, confined in centres, as prostitutes, or as illegal players in the black-market economy.

Stereotypes are constructed through qualitative misrepresentations where immigrants are portrayed as anonymous individuals with anonymous backgrounds who are the root cause of specific problems for Malta. Many questions are not being engaged by Maltese journalists. One journalist pointed out: "How many of us have spoken to immigrants about the way they are being exploited by Maltese contractors and other employers?"

Migrants are also pigeon-holed through quantitative under-representation in news, as they rarely have a voice unless they riot or escape detention centres. Through their organisations, journalists have demanded access to the detention centres as a matter of principle. As discussed earlier, this is a key point of contention between journalists and the state, as the government only allows organised visits, fearing that the very presence of journalists would trigger riots.

Greater access and thus more interaction between journalists and migrants could help deconstruct some of the stereotypes as journalists become familiar with the human experiences of these communities of detainees. As Neil Falzon, the UNHCR representative in Malta stated: "Access of journalists to asylum-seekers and refugees could play an important part in promoting a greater public awareness of the plight of persons escaping persecution and conflict, by portraying their individual challenges, fears and hopes" (personal communication, 2006).

Those journalists who are sympathetic with the plight of immigrants warn that stereotypes could constitute a dangerous distortion of reality. Some feel they need to counterbalance the negative impact of stereotypes. This is no simple endeavour. There are times when such journalists may need to report negative stories on immigrants. On such occasions journalists feel they have to handle their stories with care lest their negative stories encourage more xenophobia. One reporter working for *The Times* said:

Once I had to report about an immigrant who burnt a car belonging to a soldier. I felt that I couldn't suppress that information, knowing full well, however, that publishing that sort of article could fuel racism, which I believe abounds in Malta.

While most journalists agree that sensitising the public to the plight of immigrants is acceptable, the idea of full-scale crusading on behalf of immigrants was greeted cautiously. One journalist warned that "campaigning" journalism could backfire because while journalists should "shatter the existing stereotypes", they should "not create more of them".

Looking beyond national security concerns

Journalists, who are misleadingly labelled "pro-immigrant", tend to view security issues as going beyond the policing and patrolling of state borders. Interviews with these journalists reveal that they understand security as something that must be built collectively in our everyday lives. Security should thus entail justice and the protection of migrant's rights. Such perspectives echo Galtung's concept of positive peace and security. According to this view peace and justice are not based on the absence of conflict but are founded on fairness (Galtung, 1996).

While the influence of Samaritan Christian outlooks is clear in the articulated perceptions of some journalists – including those who do not work with the Church media – others espouse humanist and liberal perspectives. One journalist stated: "I would argue that the only solution to the problem of racism is to have a frank, intelligent and complete debate that acknowledges all perspectives except those which incite violence and/or hatred against a particular group." Similarly a broadcast journalist wrote "The media should not give a voice to people making dangerous comments and who spread hatred into people's hearts. We must remember we now have coloured kids at school, including multiracial Maltese kids. We have to protect human beings, and be careful when throwing stones at each other, for they might bounce back straight into our face." Thus, these journalists feel that national security could be threatened from within, by people who incite racial hatred and xenophobia.

Reporting Extremist Views and Anti-Multiculturalism

In the past, far right-wing ideas were often deemed to be the domain of a few eccentric individuals. Media covered their views intermittently mainly because their extreme statements were likely to attract audiences. More recently, these individuals have been riding a wave of social anxiety caused by reactions to the immigrant influxes. When in 2004, one of the most vociferous figures, Norman Lowell, contested the first European Parliamentary elections, his antics attracted much coverage. At one point, the Maltese regulator, known as the Malta Broadcasting Authority, proceeded against the TV station *Smash*, as it broadcast "content which was likely to encourage or incite to crime or to lead to disorder or to be offensive to public feeling" (Broadcasting Authority, 2004). Should extremist individuals and/or groups receive media exposure? According to the results of this present research project, journalists do not have a common view. Most feel they should be covered "as long as they keep in line" because freedom of expression is a fundamental principle of democratic practice. There are even some journalists who express sympathy for immigrants, who nevertheless believe that all opinions should be covered. One respondent warned:

Whereas the media should not act as instruments of racial incitement, we (not just in Malta but across Europe) are running the risk of alienating the people and fuelling subversion by suppressing anti-immigration opinions. The dangers of discrimination are clearly there, but crudely suppressing anti-multiculturalism views and anti-immigration views is equally dangerous.

Nevertheless, other journalists feel that people like Lowell should be ignored. "I believe Lowell should be censored, full stop. He is a self-proclaimed Nazi and as attractive as he might sound to the media, he should not be given the space." Another journalist, writing for an English language newspaper stated: "The *Allejanza Nazzjonali Repubblikana* (National Republican Alliance) is often fanning racial hatred and that can be dangerous. I would treat each of their statements on its own merits."

Journalists who hold such views become targets of attack by right-wing extremists. For instance, Norman Lowell is using the *Imperium Europa* website to spread his message by streaming his controversial speeches online. This is clearly an example of how technological developments pose new challenges. Online, Lowell mobilises his disciples and names individuals opposing him. Attacks on journalists are frequent. Hence as noted by Pajnik (2005), while the new media are often deemed to be conducive to the democratization of society they can also function as a mechanism of exclusion. In this case study, the internet's democratic potential is subverted as it is widely exploited by the far right, whereas immigrants held in detention centres or in the open centres, do not yet have adequate access to become key players in debates that concern them.

Is Detached Journalism Desirable and Possible?

As, stated earlier, while journalists struggle with the complexities of the migration issue, some pay lip-service to professional ideology and to objective reporting as a coping strategy. Yet, this is merely a 'strategic ritual' (Tuchman, 1971). It was a reporter working for the partisan press who stated: "I do not have dilemmas as I report stories on immigration objectively. Journalists should not have predicaments; facts are facts". He made this assertion while working with media that have political advocacy as their *raison d'être*.

A segment of media literature considers objectivity a myth as do members of the journalistic community that were interviewed. A journalist with *Maltatoday*, for example, stated: "We should not pretend to be able to be totally detached, as we never are. We should try to report various view points, including . . . the concerns of Maltese readers . . . We should show empathy with the migrants' plight by highlighting the real human tragedy that is going on, but it should be also accompanied by a critical assessment of what is going on, mostly behind the scenes".

Similarly another journalist working for *The Times* wrote: "Objectivity does not exist. The sooner this seeps into the collective consciousness of Maltese journalism and the Maltese political class the sooner we can start making some progress. Reporting 'objectively' means that one states facts without putting them in their context."

The Importance of Explaining the Context

Journalistic texts need to explain context to facilitate understanding. Mario Schiavone, from the *Institute of Journalists* explained: "Journalists should inform and educate. Readers should be aware of crises in countries like war-torn Sudan and Eritrea and the famine in Ethiopia, the places immigrants are fleeing from. They should also be more aware of Malta's international obligations."

Yet, in spite of the general agreement among journalists on the need to explain background, there are several factors that militate against giving such an informative account. While globalisation processes make it vital for individuals to follow and interpret international news, this same globalisation is often promoting commercialisation and market-driven media content. In many contexts broadcasters seem to believe that audiences are not interested in factual current affairs programmes and are replacing information with entertainment. Internationally we have an increasingly "sound-bite culture" and audience-driven news formats that support entertainment values at the cost of explanation. These processes are accompanied by greater emphasis on personalisation and individuals while details of social, political and economic processes go under-reported. Research shows that content is being dumped-down to attract more audiences. Dahlgren (2000) aptly noted in an article entitled "Key trends in European television", that in many countries the future of public service broadcasting is uncertain, less popular informational programming are marginalised and infotainment is increasing.

A combination of these factors is leading to what Philo (2002) described as the 'mass production of ignorance'. Philo has shown how audiences are either informed in ethnocentric ways or misinformed because of the lack of context in television news reporting. These are challenges that also face Maltese journalism.

Conclusion

The immigration influx experienced by the Maltese islands brought new challenges for journalists. However, in combination with a number of other factors such as better journalism training, pluralism and higher professional aspirations, the journalistic community clearly has better opportunity to be reflexive about its condition. The two journalistic bodies, *Institute of Journalists* and the *Journalists' Committee*, are both involved in the debate on migration and this could eventually open the way to better self-regulatory frameworks.

Media coverage of immigration provides evidence that Maltese journalists are becoming more analytical and they have gained more elbowroom. It also indicates that more journalists aspire to inch their way towards great autonomy from the dominant institutions. In their reportage of migration, some journalists have moved from being responsive to political agendas set by others, to setting the national agenda themselves. Moreover,

journalists may have a better chance to voice the concerns of civil society and to improve the quantitative and qualitative visibility to minorities. As the media open to diversity, they may have a role in the promotion of a society that is less closed and xenophobic. Instead of being ethnocentric and inward-looking, journalism could also partake in ongoing processes observed by Grixti (2006), where the media are broadly advancing an identity formation that is hybridized yet strongly rooted in local culture.

Carmen Sammut is a lecturer in Media and International Relations at the Department of International Relations, University of Malta. Carmen's extensive research on the Maltese media system is published in her book *Media and Maltese Society* (Lexington Press, USA, 2007). Between 2001 and 2004 Carmen was a Commonwealth Scholar at Goldsmiths College in London, where she explored the role of the media in the reinforcement of political polarization in the Maltese islands as part of her doctoral research. An experienced broadcast journalist and active in journalists' organizations, Carmen is also a member of the Press Ethics Committee of the *Institute of Maltese Journalists*.

Notes

¹ *Frontex* is the EU border control agency.

² <http://www.maltapressclub.org.mt/ethics-new.htm>

³ Seymour-Ure (1974) coined the term 'press-party parallelism' to describe the degree to which the structure of the media system was parallel to the party system.

⁴ The Roman Catholic Church is a hegemonic institution that enjoys Constitutional privileges.

⁵ Dublin II obliges receiver countries to deal with asylum seekers. It is deemed to penalize Malta as a front-line state. Through the European Parliament, all MEPs demanded a mechanism allowing a quota of those landing in Malta to be taken in by other EU nations.

⁶ There are 3 detention centres: Ta' Kandja, Floriana, and Safi Barracks. Article 34 of the Immigration Act describes the role of these "places of detention" as: "A person detained in custody under this Act, other than under Article 10 or 22, but not serving a sentence of imprisonment, may be detained either in prison or in any place appointed for the purpose by the Minister by notice in the Gazette, but if detained in prison he shall be treated as a person awaiting trial." (National Coalition of Anti-Deportation, 2007)

⁷ Contesting on behalf of a far-right movement dubbed *Imperium Ewropa*, candidate Norman Lowell obtained a negligible result: 1,603 votes or 0.59% of the votes.

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