Reports presented by The Shift News's Editor to the Daphne Caruana Galizia public inquiry on 12 February 2020.



www.theshiftnews.com

Facebook Groups

Background note

The Shift carried a series of investigative pieces between May, 2018 and June 2018 in relation to a number of Partit Laburista (PL) linked super-sized Facebook groups.

The articles are all available here: https://theshiftnews.com/category/investigations/labour-online-hate-groups/.

The background to this investigation was existing local research showing both Malta's Facebook addiction¹ as well as extensive academic research on Facebook's predisposition to create "echo chambers" or "filter bubbles" and how this can be further amplified through the use of closed or even secret groups.³

Put very simply, Facebook's algorithm shows you, based on your interactions on the platform, what it believes you want to see, and it thinks you will react to the most. The trend is therefore for Facebook to further reinforce the user's beliefs and isolate the user from differing views. With groups, users are placed into wider 'bubbles' with a wider reach for their social media posts (a Facebook user's post are limited by number of friends and interactions by friends but in a group the reach is extended to the size of the group). If the group is "closed" (i.e. new members need to be approved by an administrator) then its membership is curated according to the group's rational (e.g. a far-right Facebook group will group users with similar beliefs, with critics being inevitably kicked out of the group) and, as a result, content in the group becomes less diverse. Further, given Facebook's predisposition to promote content which is more engaging, the more extreme posts (gathering more "likes", "reactions" or comments) will inevitably gain more exposure in the group - Facebook's echo chamber effect on steroids but which can though the intervention of group administrators or moderators be curated. Facebook groups can also be "secret" meaning that not only are persons not allowed to see what happens in the group unless approved as a member, but the existence of the group is hidden from public view altogether.

The Shift was also aware that, just a year earlier, Facebook had announced a further tweak to its algorithm (the black box that determines what each person sees) in that Facebook would be further promoting content posted in groups to members.⁴

Anecdotal reports showed: (a) that online discourse in Malta was (and is) increasingly becoming polarised and abrasive, (b) politicians including government officials were (and are still) increasingly using Facebook to disintermediate the press and spread counternarratives, and (c) instances of mass trolling or outright online threats through Facebook were becoming more frequent.

¹ https://www.icon.com.mt/publications/social-media-report-malta/ (2016)

https://science.sciencemag.org/content/348/6239/1130.full ("Exposure to ideologically diverse news and opinion on Facebook", 2015)

³ https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/how-facebook-groups-are-being-exploited-to-spread

⁴ https://money.cnn.com/2017/06/22/technology/facebook-zuckerberg-interview/index.html

The Shift accordingly set out to analyse the local landscape with particular emphasis on groups linked to the major political parties.

The investigation involved research over the course of approximately nine months.

It should be borne in mind that (a) The Shift is an investigative journalism outlet accordingly its end product is not intended to be an academic study and (b) analysing and reporting on Facebook activity is not easy given the sheer volume of content produced online particularly in larger groups some of which have existed for over nine years now.

Summary of Findings

Whilst both political parties, Partit Nazzjonalista (PN) and Partit Laburista (PL) appeared to have Facebook groups with supporters (including closed and secret groups) there were stark differences, foremost among which was the difference in size. PN's largest group (presently "Team PN – Team Success") topped out at just over 3,000 members with the average group size across the groups analysed between 500 to 1,000 members. PL's groups on the other hand topped out at 20,000 members ("Laburisti Sal-Mewt." being the largest) with an average size of ten times PN's groups' average.

What set the PL groups apart (besides sheer size) and which turned the PL groups into the focus of The Shift's reports were:

- (a) The involvement of government officials and public service employees (alongside PL party officials) in actively administering and moderating the groups including screening members for PL membership and curating content by removing critical views;
- (b) The membership and participation in the groups by Ministers and Parliamentary Secretaries as well as the President of the Republic;
- (c) The larger groups changed composition of administrators and moderators (as well as posting settings e.g. requiring pre-approval to post) in times of elections or disquiet showing a high degree of control and co-ordination; and
- (d) The high proportion of hyper-partisan and abrasive content in the groups at times verging onto potential criminal offences ranging from hate speech to trading in influence.

Toxic online discourse, particularly in relation to partisan interests, is an unfortunate reality in Malta (and elsewhere) but when those partaking in such discourse and in certain instances curating the topics (by excluding for example differing views) are government officials and public service employees, this creates a host of concerns not least over the separation between Party and State, a cornerstone of democracy.⁵

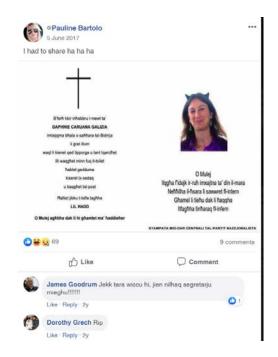
Details of the main findings are included in The Shift's article "Investigating Joseph Muscat's online hate machine" published on 14 May, 2018⁶ with follow ups on 23 May, 2018 ("Manufacturing consent: How secret online groups feed the cycles of spin"), 24 May, 2018 ("Behind the scenes: How Labour online groups reacted to Daphne Caruana Galizia's

- See 5.4 of the OSCE Copenhagen Document: "a clear separation between the State and political parties; in particular, political parties will not be merged with the State".
- https://theshiftnews.com/2018/05/14/investigating-joseph-muscats-online-hate-machine/
- https://theshiftnews.com/2018/05/23/manufacturing-consent-how-secret-online-groups-feed-the-cycles-of-spin/

assassination"8) and on 3 June, 2018 ("II-King ta' Malta: Muscat worship and Labour hate groups"9), amongst others. Printouts are included in Annex A.

Some examples of vitriolic content are included below by way of example as well as in annex (Annex B) the first 54 pages of results in just one of the largest groups for the search term "DCG". Also included (Annex C) is one chain of comments under just one post in the Groups relating to activist Tina Urso before this became an episode of mass online harassment (presently in court) (this was covered in the first article by the Shift¹⁰).

Examples of content (Daphne related pre and post 2017)







- https://theshiftnews.com/2018/05/24/behind-the-scenes-how-labour-online-groups-reacted-to-the-assassination-of-daphne-caruana-galizia/
- https://theshiftnews.com/2018/06/02/il-king-ta-malta-muscat-worship-and-labour-hate-groups/



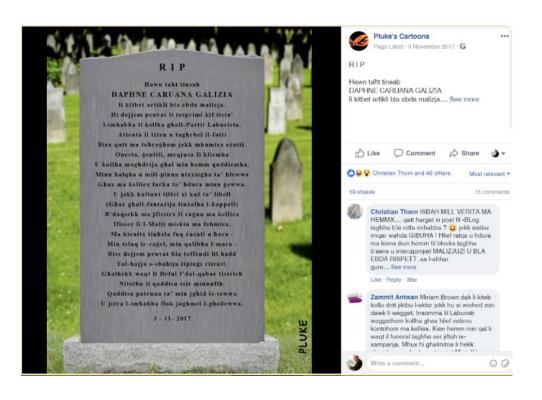






















DCG Anyone who seeks our praise and our vote should also expect our criticism - yes, even criticism of his hair, speech, food choices, house, car and clothes. "



6





•••

Boycott!!

Hbieb, Daphne Caruana Galizia kitbet tghajjir u zeblieh fil-konfront ta`missier il-partner ta`Jeffrey Pullicino Orlando li ilu mejjet 3 snin!

Din il-hdura kontra bniedem mejjet ghas-semplici raguni li kien Laburist, anke jekk kien irrispettat minn kulhadd!

Ghajjret tfal b'dizabilita ghax missierhom inzerta Ministru Laburista!

Ghajjret 2 tfal innocenti ghax missierhom inzerta I-Prim Ministru!

Li I-hdura taghha u I-mibgheda hi bla limitu, jaf kulhadd!

Li ma'jafx kulhadd hu li fuq il-blog taghha, jirreklamaw biex isostnuha l-McDonalds u Alf. Mizzi & Sons.!

Ghamlu boycott lil McDonalds u I-prodotti u servizzi kollha ta`Alf. Mizzi & Sons biex nuruhom li min joffendi I-mejtin, lil persuni b'dizabilita u lit-tfal innocenti, mhux ser jiehu centezmu minn ghandna!!!

Ghamlu "Share u mexxu I-kelma!!

See Translation





Like

Comment Comment

View 37 more comments

50 of 88



Twanny Bugeja ma xbiza

Like · Reply · 4y



Hilda Mallia alba kera daqs wicca

Like · Reply · 4y

Current Status

The groups remain active with pick ups in activity last seen during May 2019 elections.











Online Harassment & Disinformation

Whilst the Facebook groups are just a technology tool (abused of), it is the content including the persons posting same and the ends sought to be achieved that is most deserving of focus.

We briefly group these into two headings:

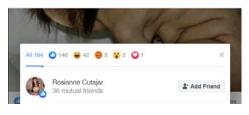
- (a) Online harassment / incitement of critics by government officials; and
- (b) Disinformation.

Online Harassment / Incitement

Some notable examples of accounts and posts by government officials / consultants:

1. Neville Gafa (then OPM – Ministry of Health co-ordinator)









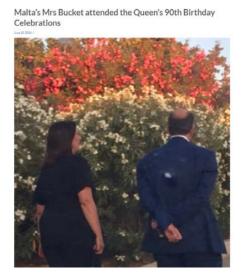






2. Glenn Bedingfield (OPM employee later also MP)

Glenn Bedingfield ran a blog, www.glennbedingfield.com (since taken down) between 2015 until later 2018. Parts of the blog are available on web-caches such as http://web.archive.org/web/20160220055653/http://glennbedingfield.com/.





Bidnija Bogan ģejja toqgħod il-Birgu?







Very high class butt cleavage alert

April 23, 2016 /





Daphne's timeless and tranquil nature



3. Josef Caruana (Editor of it-Torca, OPM employee from 2017)

Excerpts from June 2017 editorial by Caruana in it-Torca:

Sadanittant ma' saqajna ghad ghandna l-midja falza u gurnalisti devjati bhal Pierre Portelli, Neil Camilleri, Ivan Camilleri, Jacob Borg u ohrajn, li pprovaw iqarrqu bil-poplu. Huwa sewwa u xieraq li issa jghibu minn professjoni li rnexxielhom jinfettaw bil-istejjer ivvintati u tghawwig tal-fatti taghhom. Il-jum tal-gudizzju u l-kant tad-dies irae, dies ille ghandu jidwi wkoll lill-midja li jirrapprežentaw – it-Times u l-Malta Independent – li wkoll ghamlu minn kollox biex ifixklu l-progress Malti. Kif qal tajjeb Joseph Muscat, ilkoll irridu nghinuh

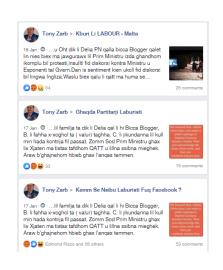
Kif qal tajjeb Joseph Muscat, ilkoll irridu nghinuh biex issehh ghaqda nazzjonali u jkollna socjeta gusta, li mhux biss tkun l-aqwa fl-Ewropa, izda l-ahjar fid-dinja. Ma nistghux nilhqu dan l-ghan nobbli jekk ikun ghad fadal mażźri bhal tradituri u establishment djaboliku. In-nies qalu LE ghal blogging tal-odju u ghal dawk it-taparsi gurnalisti ddettati mill-agenda Nazzjonalista ta' mibeghda. Rajna d-dghufija ta' gurnalisti bla sinsla li kienu kuntenti rekbin fuq il-karru, li jimxi biss b'qerq u mibeghda fil-qala (flok rih), bhal Daphne Caruana Galizia, Ivan Camilleri, Jacob Borg, Mario Frendo, Neil Camilleri u Pierre Portelli. Dawn u ohrajn, li kellhom agendi iżjed personali, bhal Joe Borg u David Thake, iridu jbaxxu rashom quddiem il-verdett u jisparixxu mill-gurnalizmu. Il-poplu tkellem u ghazel ... u ghandu jigi rispettat. Il-poplu jaghmlek u l-poplu jwarrbek.

Hu l-waqt li l-lifghat ma jkomplux jisqu veleni lil gensna. Issa žmien ta' rikonciljazzjoni u ghaqda. Qabel dan isehh, irid jibda l-process ta' tindif. B'hekk nibqghu mexjin lejn l-aqwa žmien.





4. Tony Zarb (OPM / Ministry of Tourism consultant)





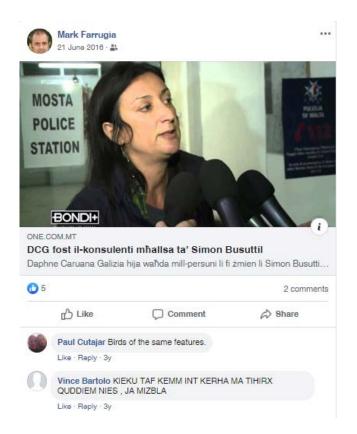








5. Mark Farrugia (Deputy OPM Chief of Staff)















6. Jeffrey Pullicino Orlando (MCST Executive Chairman)



See translation - 4v



lbierah (6/5/17, 10.13 AM). Hemm bzonn jittiehdu passi immediati kontra min qed jinstiga I-vjolenza. Kull Malti u Maltija dicenti ghandhom jiddisassocjaw ruhhom minn din il-mibgheda li qatt ma rajna bhalha f'pajjizna. Fejn huma l-Isqfijiet ? Fuq il-kcejjen u d-dwal jitkellmu biss?

••ooo go mobile 🕏

09:29

7 0 8 99% m+

Done

6 of 6





Hekk sew! L-ewwel taghmel allegazzjonijiet serjissimi-minghajr provi ta xejn hlief dawk manifestament fabbrikati- imbaghad tirrifjuta li tikkollabora ma Iawtoritajiet imqabbda biex jinvestigawhom. INKREDIBBLI! Mhux accettabli li persuna tithalla tagixxi daqs li kieku I-ligijiet tal-pajjiz ma jghoddux ghaliha.



☐ Comment

Like

A Share

50 of 132



John Delia Mela din xiz zoop fox kemm ghanda Qeda tparla ,, alura had had ma I waqafa lil din il hmieg ,,

Like · Reply · 2y

View previous comments



Jien, u 40,000 votant iehor doma kontra I-PN mill-elezzjoni ta' I-2008 l'hawn. Dan gie kkonfermat ghal darb'ohra nhar il-Hadd. Skond esponenti ewlenin tal-partit fl'oppozizzjoni ahna gakbini, stupidi u korrotti. Dan mnejn sa fejn? Imissna napprezzaw il-politika mfassla minn Daphne Caruana Galizia u shabha. Imissna napprezzaw t-tghajjir kontra tfal, persuni b'disabilita, morda u mejtin. It-tixwix kontra pajjizna u gideb sfaccat kontra dak, dik u l-ohra ohax iinsertaw Laburisti. II-firda. Ara vera cwiec ahna ta! Sahansitra I-Arcisqof jaqbel maghha! Kieku ma kienx jaghti 'endorsement' lill-Partit Nazzjonalista gabel I-elezzjoni. Imissna nisthu.





Comment

⇔ Share

View 43 more comments Angela Cassar prosit Jeff 50 of 96

Rose Spiteri Prosit Jeff il giddib ghomru qasir

Like · Reply · See translation · 2y



Anthony Grech Aw wahda idisprata qaghlet li bil jobs li ta tela fil gyern flok qalet bix xoghl li holog inset li kien hemm fuq 7000 ma jahdmux mux jacetawa li il pn qiejd jitlef in nies aghx bil faliment il kelhom il pn fil gyern ghanke il kartuna ir rosa li igibu ... See more

Like · Reply · 2y · Edited



Skond I-agent tal-frodista Russa u I-'habiba' ta' frodisti Maltin, Caruana Galizia, Frank Portelli fallut u kisser familja, Adrian Delia fallut u implikat fiddroga u Alex Perici Calascione qarraq fid-dikjarazzjoni ta' I-assi. Verament zvinturati li ma sabux kandidati sura ghal Kap, in-Nazzjonalisti. Darb'ohra imisshom qabbdu lilha tipprezenta l-kandidati li huma accettabbli ghaliha, x'kull wahda! Kif ma japprezzawx is-success kbir li ghamel Simon Busuttil ghax sema minnha.? Kif ma jisthux dawk li jghidu li ghamel hekk biss ghax kien rikattat minnha? Mela Danhne t'hekk!





2 September 2017 - 6

Like - Reply - 2y

DCG-RCC-RIP





⊕ 3











ISSA HA NIKKASTIGAW LIL MIN INADDAF? KEMM QEDIN SEW!

It-Times qed tirraporta li zewgt irgiel gew interrogati mill-pulizija minhabba 'is-serq' ta' xi xemat u fjuri minn fuq il-monument ta' I-Assedju I-Kbir. Dawn tpoggew hemm minn min irid li dan il-monument jintuza biex titfakkar il-blogger Caruana Galizia. Il-maggoranza assoluta tal-poplu ma taqbilx li jsir hekk.

Min qieghed inaddaf il-monumenti taghna ghandu jigi kkastigat? Donnu ilpulizija m'ghandhomx x'jaghmlu bizzejjed biex joqghodu JAHLU L-HIN jippartecipaw f'din il-farsa! Bl'istess ragunament nista nibda nitlob investigazzjoni fuq min johodli I-borza taz-zibel minn wara biebi kull filghodu!







...

Matthew Caruana Galizia:

Why are you regularly spreading falsehoods about your country? Why are you regularly depicting us as a mafia-state? Why are you, for instance, unjustly claiming that your mother was assassinated because the Maltese Government failed to provide her with protection when you know that she refused it? Your pain is understandable. Does it make it any better when you embarrass each and every one of us internationally?

This is what your mother said about police protection:

"I do not WANT even a fixed-point constable at the gate to my home, let alone somebody stuck to my hip and following my every movement while armed or unarmed, because:

I am not a coward (and)... I regard a protection officer as a major inconvenience to be avoided at any cost" (Daphne Caruana Galizia, Running Commentary - 24/11/14 at 8.33pm)

Your personal tragedy has given you a podium which you are merely using to lash out at us all at any given opportunity. Pity.





54 comments 17 shares

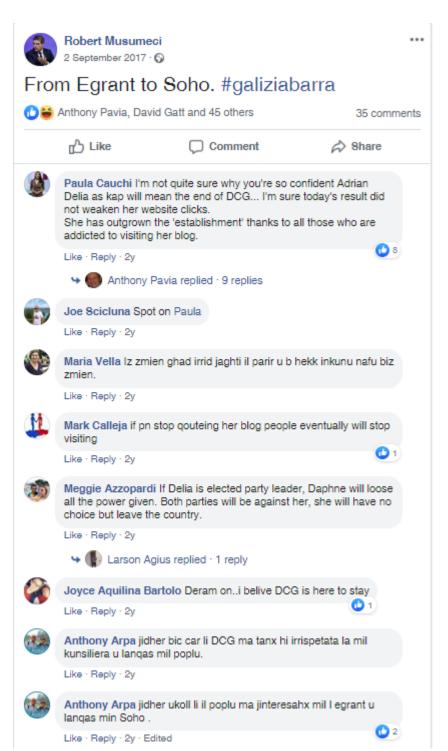


Comment Comment

Share

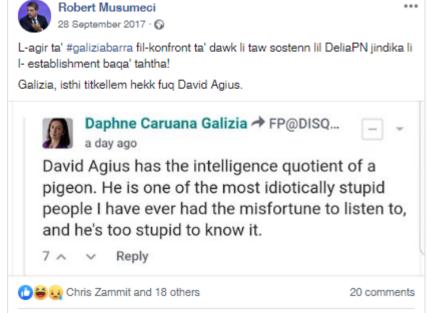
7. Robert Musumeci (OPM consultant)











8. Rosianne Cutajar MP



Rosianne Cutajar · 16/05/2018

Yesterday @The_Shift_News
uploaded an article about Labour's
hate machines, ironically the only
hate machine which people
immediately recall is #DCG's blog.

 \bigcirc 13

17

♥ 16





Replying to @andrewbriffa @mcaruanagalizia and @JosephMuscat_JM

I am just saying the truth. Embarissing is the way you are trying to worship and commemorate a divisive person which was disliked by the great majority.



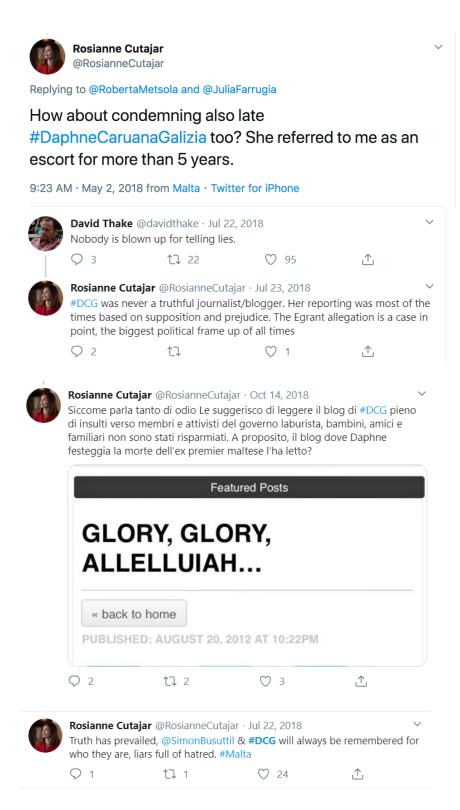
Late #DaphneCaruanaGalizia harassed hundreds of people w/ her writings including innocent children, family members and private persons. Now her sister is assualting journalists in #Malta.



If you were with her when she typed out her last blog, can you please tell us where is her laptop?! @mcaruanagalizia #daphnecaruanagalizia #NoToObstructionOfJustice

The slain journalist's son was with her when she typed out her final blog post: "There are crooks everywhere you look now. The situation is desperate."

6:46 PM · Apr 17, 2018 from Malta · Twitter for iPhone





This is not the real #Malta.Shame on whoever wrote this! Malta is a safe & democratic country. No one will tarnish our positive reputation.







Instead of affixing posters I would have cleared everything. It's about time. The ruthless mastermind behind the Egrant fabrication doesn't deserve being commemorated on a national monument. #Malta @IndependentMIt @Europarl_EN

Updated: Posters branding Busuttil, Caruana Galizia as 'crooks' affixed to Great Siege monument

- Monday, 30 July 2018, 11:52
- C Last update: about 39 minutes ago



The above list of examples (or targets) is far from exhaustive.

Based on its own research of the online landscape in Malta, Bloomberg concluded in July 2018 that Malta ought to be included in the list of countries where state-sponsored trolling takes place.¹ It should be noted that so-called state-sponsored trolling comes in degrees or categories of gravity ranging from Category 4 "State-Leveraged or -Endorsed" to Category 1 "State-Executed".² Based on:

- a) past instances of threats and harassment of journalists, activists or even mere critics,
- b) the involvement of senior government officials,
- c) a marked blurring between political propagandists and government functionaries (state / party separation),
- d) Facebook groups involved in trolling / harassment being administered or moderated by public officers, and
- e) lack of official condemnation and enforcement of appropriate laws,

it is not difficult to reach a similar conclusion as Bloomberg.

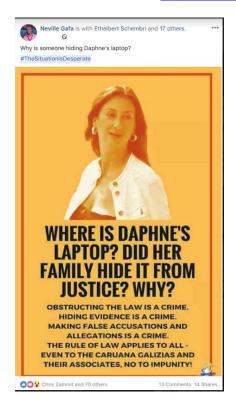
¹ https://www.bloomberg.com/features/2018-government-sponsored-cyber-militia-cookbook/

² http://www.iftf.org/fileadmin/user_upload/images/DigIntel/IFTF_State_sponsored_trolling_report.pdf

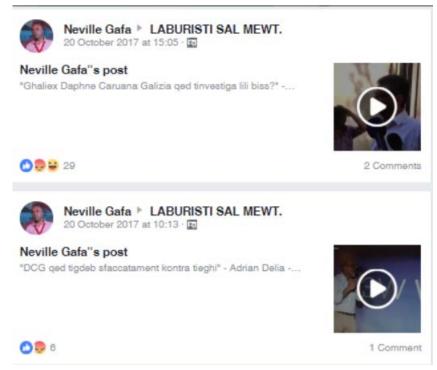
Disinformation

Besides targeted harassment, the above accounts as well as Facebook groups have been used with alarming frequency to flood online channels with competing narratives, often blatantly untrue or designed to trigger an emotional response.

The Shift extensively covered disinformation as well as tactics used in its series "Disinformation Watch": https://theshiftnews.com/category/disinformation-watch/















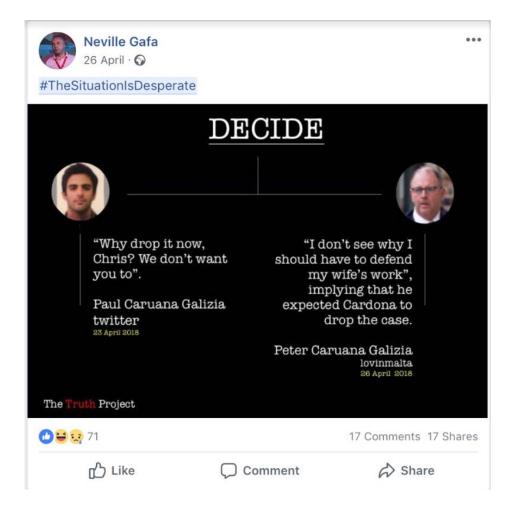




The above examples relate to the aftermath of Daphne Caruana Galizia's assassination on 16 October, 2017 showing a mix of online counter-narratives, stemming from persons within OPM. The Shift's Disinformation Watch #10 focuses on this in particular.

https://theshiftnews.com/2018/07/16/disinformation-watch-10-the-blame-game-governments-reaction-to-a-journalists-assassination/

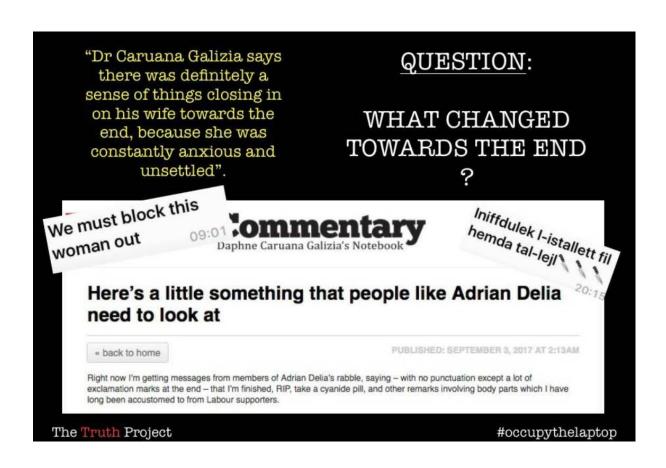
Perhaps the most disturbing online disinformation wave was the "Truth Project" a professionally created counter-narrative to the Daphne Project which was promoted heavily by persons such as Neville Gafa and distributed through Facebook groups.





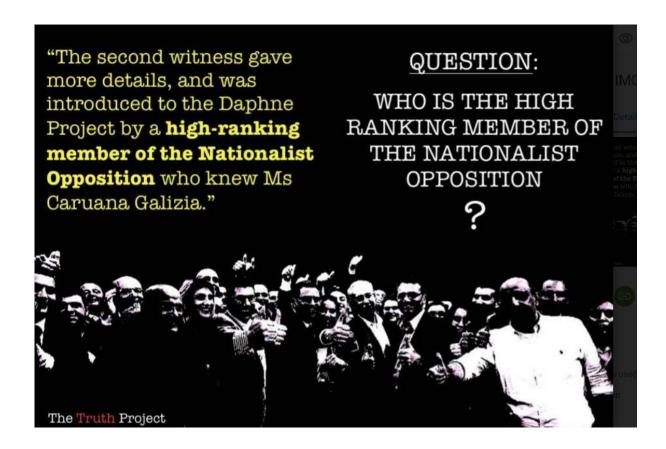














CRIMINAL CODE

Suppression, destruction or alteration of traces of crime.

- (2) Whosoever, in any case not otherwise provided for in thisCode, shall knowingly suppress, or in any other manner destroy oralter the traces of, or any circumstantial evidence relating to anoffence, shall, on conviction, be liable -
- (a) if the offence is a crime liable to a punishment not lessthan that of imprisonment for a term of one year, to thepunishment laid down in sub-article (1);
- (b) in the case of any other offence, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding three months or to detention or to afine (ammenda) of not less than two euro and thirty-threecents (2.33).

Matthew Caruana Galizia is insisting that he does not know where his mother's laptop is and if he knew, he would burn it in front of the police.

QUESTION:

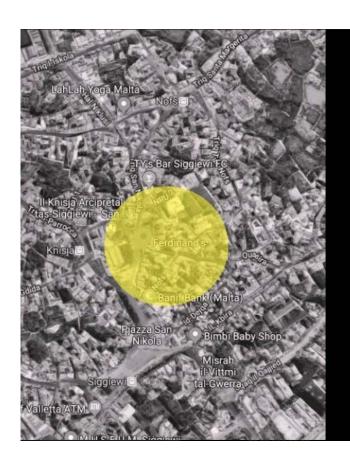
IS THIS NOT A CRIME

Daphne's sister admits family kept her laptop

Corinne Vella told members of the Daphne Project that the family did not trust

The Truth Project

#occupythelaptop



QUESTION:

WHO LIVES
300METRES
4 MINUTES
400 STEPS
AWAY FROM
THE BAR

?



Jason Azzopardi @AzzopardiJa... · 7h Art.111(2) Kodici Kriminali: Hu delitt li xjentement tissoprimi jew b'xi mod ieĥor teqred jew tbiddel it-traċċi jew lindizji ta' reat. Il-Mag tat permess jew le?

Matthew Caruana Galizia is insisting that he does not know where his mother's laptop is and if he knew, he would burn it in front of the police.

Daphne's sister admits family kept her laptop

Corinne Vella told members of the Daphne Project that the family did not trust investigators with her sister's laptop

The Truth Project

#occupythelaptop

#SERIOUS JASON AZZOPARDI ALLEGES THAT A POLICE SERGEANT TIPPED OFF CRIMINALS BEFORE MARSA RAID THE QUESTION IS FROM WERE DID JASON AZZOPARDI GET THIS INFORMATION The Truth Project