



ANDREW ON WEDNESDAY

We need to gather around the fire

If there is one observable fact that has particularly dominated the socio-political scene these last four years and in many ways contributed extensively to the rise and fall and vice-versa of political parties, politicians and community leaders, it has been the media.

Verifiably known as the fourth estate, media in Malta as in other countries of the world, has taken a front row in all that is happening from political controversies to corruption, from referendum campaigns to environmental debates.

Even though our news on 'paper' and other traditional formats might be losing ground in terms of readership, people still form most of their opinions from the way our media transposes arguments. This definitely places a great deal of responsibility on journalists, broadcasters and opinion leaders.

This phenomenon is one reason that triggered the long awaited need to have a vocational degree that focuses on journalism. As a matter of fact this last year, the Tumas Fenech Foundation heartened by Tony Debono and in collaboration with MCA:1 (in particular lecturer Ian Attard) and the Institute of the Maltese Journalists fronted by Karl Wright, I contributed to the design of a BA in Journalism that is due to start in October 2016. This course will be embedded in the schedule of the Institute for the Creative Arts. The need to have trained journalists, organised newsrooms, good scriptwriters and good storytellers has become even more vital. We need to keep in mind that curiosity might kill the cat but it will give life to truths – and that is why journalism, of the good sort, is very important to have around – it is what keeps power in the balance. Yet in a modern democracy like every other institution, it will come under a barrage the moment that it kicks up.

I caught up with a colleague, Professor Marilyn Clark from

the Department of Psychology of the Faculty of Social Wellbeing. Marilyn is currently leading an international team that is researching unwarranted interference on journalists. This research has been commissioned by the Council of Europe that has a platform called the 'Protection and Safety of Journalists'. On this dais, sits a number of partners focused on trying to understand and react to the challenges in journalism. Associates include the Index on Censorship, the International News Safety Institute, the International Federation of Journalists, the European Federation of Journalists and Reporters without Borders. Perceptibly the Council of Europe promotes the right of freedom of expression as one of the basic and fundamental human rights. It is essential that if we want to protect our democracy we also need to safeguard our journalists from fear of unwarranted interference. Professor Clark said that unwarranted interference on journalists has become, or rather has never stopped to be, the rule of the day all over Europe. This abuse varies from physical to emotional to psychological exploitation. It is correct to claim that truth comes at a price. The irony of it all is that this violence and oppression is not only happening in countries that are politically unstable or are in a state of war but even in countries that traditionally champion democracy. She continues, 'the situation of journalists in Europe is precarious'.

Clark quotes *Reporters without Borders* who are repeatedly stating that a number of countries in Europe are overbearing on the media. She claims that data such as the World Press Freedom Index (<https://rsf.org/en/ranking>) indicates that even in countries that have held democracy in high esteem, journalists are being cut off. In other words, journalism is being endangered. The silencing of journalists as a result of unwarranted interference is a serious threat against democracy and has in recent years come to the forefront as a result of a number of particularly brutal attacks on journalists, most notably that on Charlie Hebdo and John Foley.

Clark makes reference to the 2014 World Press Freedom Index that underlines the negative impact of international and civil strife on freedom of information and those who provide it.

In Europe, freedom of information has a good legal framework and is exercised in a relatively satisfactory manner overall in the EU, but "it is put to a severe test in some member countries including those that most pride themselves on re-



Marilyn Clark

specting civil liberties". There was a drastic decline in freedom of information in 2014 in all continents.

Western Europe saw numerous countries in decline. Italy (73rd) fell 24 places after a difficult year for journalists for whom threats from the mafia, among others, and unjustified defamation suits, skyrocketed. Iceland (21st, down 13) paid the price of worsening relations between politicians and media. The drop was an alarm call for this "model of democracy". In the Caucasus, Azerbaijan (162nd, down two) suffered an unprecedented crackdown on critics and registered the biggest fall in score among the index's 25 lowest-ranking countries.

With media freedom already limited by one-sided regulation and control of the advertising market, the few remaining independent publications were either collapsing under the impact of astronomical damages awards or were simply closed by the police. The number of journalists and bloggers who were jailed turned Azerbaijan into Europe's biggest prison for news providers. Georgia (69th, up 15) continued to rise for the third year running and is now close to where it was before the 2008 war. Finland (1st), Norway (2nd) and Denmark (3rd) continued to head the index but their performance scores fell. In Finland, growing competition drove media groups into mergers in order to be able to lay off staff. As a result, there was an inevitable decline in the volume of media content available to the public. A collateral effect of the reduction in the number of newsrooms was a loss of independence.

Professor Clark states that the 2015 Index shows some interesting developments. Ranked 2nd in last year's index, the Netherlands fell to 4th position as a result of direct violations such as a ban, adopted in September, on filming inside parliament without an explicit agreement by

parliamentarians. Norway returned to the top three.

Journalists also face violent threats from non-state groups which pursue various goals including expansionist, political or financial and criminal aims. Some countries are using prohibitions on blasphemy and sacrifice to censor political criticism. Some leaders go so far as to use these prohibitions to pass laws banning any criticism of themselves or their political actions. Journalists – professional and amateur, local and foreign – are insulted, threatened, attacked, even killed, while covering demonstrations. "Some are directly targeted; others are collateral victims," Clark explains.

Spain (33rd) adopted a law on public safety in December, 2014 that includes a fine of up to €600,000 for taking or circulating images that damage the honour, image or safety of security forces.

Maybe there are some lessons that we need to take up even in our country.

For example, citing the need to remove the outdated criminal libel law might sound like a platitude. The government has also committed itself to looking into the censorship and freedom of expression law as well – but unbelievably so no tangible action was noted. Added to this is the lack of accountability that comes with community leaders who choose not to speak to the media when it is their duty to do so, the aggressiveness witnessed on a number of occasions when politicians are faced with journalists who expect proper answers to their questions, the lack of information given even if media houses go through the Freedom of Information Act and the responses that are either not forthcoming or are completely ignored by ministries. Professor Clark said that we shouldn't fear confrontation and combative conversation because it is through this exchange that things move forward and change happens.

Her concern is when we start locking people down. Once you start shutting people with threats of defamation, libel laws, terrorism laws and all the rest it becomes profoundly problematic and journalists might start developing trepidation. Clark states that the whole reason of this project is that the Council of Europe wants to see the prevalence and incidence of violence, what type of unwarranted interference exists and what forms of violence are applied. Fear might not be the result of direct action on the broadcaster or media person but it could be that journalists feel threatened and uneasy just the same. Apprehension threatens the application of self-censorship and the Council of Europe

is concerned about this.

If we are not vigilant, media will go sour.

The research that Professor Clark is fronting covers 47 countries all over Europe. It is envisaged that the research will be completed by November 2016 and a clear situation of the impact of the journalists work on their personal relationships, on the relationship with their family and the bearing of self-censorship will be mapped out. From the initial indicators, it appears that unwarranted interference might make journalists resilient and keen to dig deeper, despite the threats. They do worry about their families but it seems that the greater good takes precedence. The objectives of the research are:

- 1 To statistically measure the prevalence of unwarranted interference emanating from economic, political and judicial intimidation in a sample of active journalists in COE member states.
 - 2 To quantitatively document the extent and prevalence of fear, feelings of alarm or dread caused by a number of contingencies including the expectation of unwarranted interference, prevalent among active journalists in COE member states.
 - 3 To investigate the relationship between experiences of unwarranted interference, levels of fear and self-censorship among journalists in COE member states.
 - 4 To explore how unwarranted interference and fear is influenced by a number of both occupational contingencies e.g. length of journalistic career, specific media platform (e.g. print or digital media), type of contract (if any), employment conditions, professional affiliations and / or a number of structural variables such as age, gender, ethnicity and country where journalistic work is being carried out.
- Clark concludes that journalists are at a crossroad. Good and ethical journalism is essential for a healthy society. I'm particularly curious were Malta will feature in the outcomes of this research.

For more information, you might want to contact Professor Marilyn Clark on marilyn.clark@um.edu.mt

"Ghandi Nghid"
Is-Sinjor RABUJ MALTA mal-025em 'il qadim

Dr Andrew Azzopardi
Head of Department
Department of Youth and
Community Studies
Faculty for Social Wellbeing,
University of Malta &
Broadcaster – Ghandi xi Nghid
www.andrewazzopardi.org