


Potential murderers surrounding us - Paulann Grech

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If a single hate thought can lead to a murder, then we urgently need to do something about the zillion such thoughts that are seemingly floating out there. Photo: Shutterstock.com

As further details and political gymnastics are unveiled in relation to the real-life telenovela that Malta has landed itself in, one is left with a persistent urge to flee to Ghar Dalam and hide in its darkest corner for the next 20 years or so.

Among the plethora of articles that our hardworking and dedicated journalists have been providing us with, certain pieces tend to particularly catch the eye. One such article that

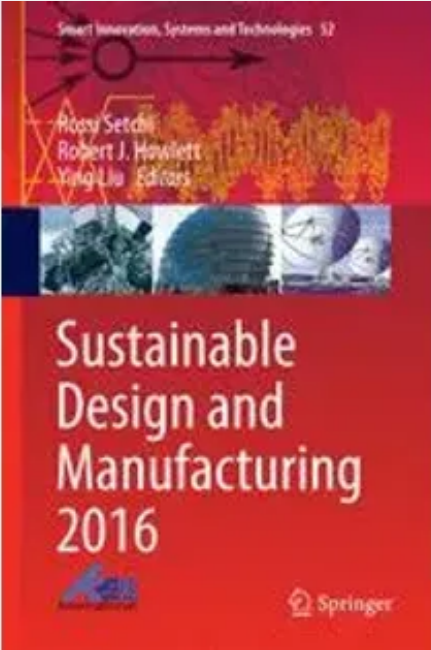
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has grabbed my attention is focused on a 16-year-old activist who dared open her mouth and express her opinion in public.

It is not an everyday happening that a local teen has the guts to put herself on the frontline in relation to national affairs. In fact, I recall how the 16-year old version of yours truly used to spend most of her time in the La-La Land of fantasies, with a total disregard for politics and national situations. It was thus shocking to discover that this gutsy Eve was the recipient of vitriolic comments targeted not at her arguments but at her very being.

It is, of course, common knowledge that when someone voices an opinion, s/he would be vulnerably exposing himself/herself to possible criticism. Despite the discomfort that this might trigger, oppositional stances are actually needed since they lead to healthy debates. However, what is shocking, sickening and unacceptable is an attack on a person's gender, age and looks just because s/he says something that diverges from another's opinion on the matter.

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On trying hard to understand the rationale behind insulting another human being in such a personal way, the obvious hits me in the eye – the attacker wishes to make a point of strong disagreement.

Unfortunately, though, the way s/he goes about it totally defies the whole scope. For it seems as if the attacker does not seem to have the capacity to come up with a convincing

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counterargument and so has to resort to attacking the person beneath the argument in an attempt to scare him/her away or harm his/her mental well-being.

“ A murderer and an individual who indulges in hate speech start off from the same thought platform ”

I question: what do looks, gender and age have to do with putting an argument forward? Are we implying that opinions can only be voiced by male supermodels who are over the age of 18 years? Does it mean, then, that we have created the concept of the ideal opinionist and the rest who do not fit in this pigeonhole have to shut up? My oh my... we are really treading on dangerous ground.

However, what is even more worrying is that while we are all obsessed with the Kohhus, Fulus and Yorgen Fenechs of the world, it so happens that there are many people out there who harbour similar thoughts as the ones that featured in this whole saga. Let's face it: no one pops out of the womb clutching a mafia-style bomb and a sniper. While genetics play a role, the decision to murder someone does not manifest itself serendipitously as one is eating his/her breakfast cereal.

Most commonly, it is the ultimate outcome of a chain of events that starts off from a very basic thought along the lines of: “This person irritates me. His/her words/actions irk me.” Gradually, the line of thought transgresses to “S/he has to be stopped” and eventually it is transformed into an action that actually harms the target.

The worrying realisation here is that a murderer and an individual who indulges in hate speech start off from the same thought platform. It just happens that the murderer has the additional resources and ingredients needed to actually convert a series of thoughts into a malevolent action.

Thus, hate speech is not simply annoying and hurtful to mental well-being and to the societal aura, but it can eventually lead to very serious situations such as the ones that we are currently experiencing. With the high accessibility of social media, it is now easier than ever to lash out at others during periods of unsettlement and moments of fury. While this is healthy, it only remains so if attention is given to attacking arguments and actions and not people or personal characteristics.

It is evident that a filter is desperately needed between some people's minds and their busy hands that type hurtful comments just because they differ in opinion. If you thin

normal to counterargue by battering people and attacking their personal and private characteristics, then, my friend, you need help. And help is luckily available.

While finger pointing and blaming are hardly ever fruitful, individuals who find themselves engaging in malicious thoughts and comments can be educated on how to funnel their anger into a valid argument which places them in a better light than the act of bitter hatred does.

I guess it is only logical to conclude that our newly inaugurated Hate Crime and Speech Unit has its work cut out. For it seems as though, in our country, it is not only asylum seekers who are the unfortunate recipients of sharp-tongued comments.

While hate speech can never be justified, it is sad to realise that some of us do not find any problem with launching a cruel and personal attack on other Maltese. If a single hate thought can lead to a murder, then we urgently need to do something about the zillion such thoughts that are seemingly floating out there.

We cannot afford to go through all of this again, and one fundamental way of preventing it is through education on the simple acts of being civil towards each other and on constructive ways of engaging in debate.

Dr Paulann Grech is a mental health lecturer.

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