

A South African's guide to moving to and making it in Malta: Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens

By  Marcus 'The Maltese Falcon' Brewster

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At the end of August, I wrote that Malta has no hate crime on the statute books. A week later, an initiative has been launched aimed at tackling the proliferation of hate speech and bringing together a basic understanding of the dangerous discourse that has swamped social media.



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The one-year #stop hate project is aimed at cultivating a culture that raises awareness of hate speech and its difference from freedom of speech. Funded by the Voluntary Organisations Project Scheme, it is being steered by SOS Malta in conjunction with *Times of Malta* (ToM).

It is fitting that ToM is one of the guiding lights of the project since it is the newspaper's online site which has created a platform for much of the denigrating remarks and insulting verbal attacks on contributors (of differing political views) to the comments roll.



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Past sins

Although the general tenor of ToM's articles is critical of Prime Minister Joseph Muscat's ruling labour government (labourites who prefer their news to follow the party line have their own newspaper, radio station and TV channel), any and every ToM story posted online will inevitably land up in a slanging match between labour and nationalist (the official

opposition) readers. When Muscat or another government minister is criticised or found with their hand in the vicinity of the cookie jar, labour supporters will always try to deflect the charge by calling up past sins of the nationalist party from when they were in power. No criticism of the labour party is tolerated without it descending into a partisan slanging match.

Hate speech in Malta is a major issue. Research shows that hate speech is widespread and that under-reporting is a contributing factor to its proliferation. It is also clear that hate speech laws are often misinterpreted and underused. Moreover, recent events serve to highlight the need for healthy debate and dialogue in a functioning democratic society.

Death threats

Although the #stophate campaign must have been planned many weeks ago, it arrives on the back of a story about a kitten being killed. (As execrable an act of animal cruelty as that may be, it's also indicative of the benign news agenda of Malta where a kitten's death makes the news.) In an op-ed piece, ToM's online editor Herman Grech [expressed his alarm](#) at the viciousness of the SM fallout (including death threats) that swirled around the twittersphere.

The #stophate campaign will seek to train members of the public to differentiate between hate speech and opinionated debate on online forums, related to journalistic pieces published. It will also attempt to bring together a conscience towards understanding how journalism is impacted by hate speech and trolling.

The project includes research into the phenomena of online hate speech and a rigorous legal analysis. These will feed into the development of a comprehensive training course for volunteers from civil society and also assist law enforcement professionals to help them identify hate speech and hate crime.

Anger and audacity

"The impact of having very easy access for the readers to a medium that allows a two-way communication with journalism has manifested itself in abuse in terms of hate crime," SOS Malta said. "The misconception that we are allowed to say what we want with no repercussions because it is online has allowed a certain level of anger and audacity."

Grech added: "The very nature of journalism advocates for freedom of speech. But with that comes responsibilities and media outlets have a duty to stop fanning the hate rhetoric. The rapid deterioration of public discourse and hatred levelled out at different sectors of society makes it an urgent matter to address."

The #stophate project brings forward an element of research to probe the way the law has been interpreted across several cases and will also train a number of volunteers to assist in the moderation of ToM's online comment boards and social media.

ABOUT MARCUS 'THE MALTESE FALCON' BREWSTER

marcusbrewster is a brand synonymous with PR excellence in SA. An industry innovator, leader, and inspiration, Brewster affiliated his multi-award winning boutique firm with larger

Level 1 BBBEE marketing/comms agency MediaRevolution for scale in 2016 and went on to launch Marcus Brewster International in Europe the following year. Marcus currently lives on - and actively promotes - the Mediterranean island of Malta. For African, S. African and European PR enquiries, contact marcus@marcusbrewster.com or WhatsApp on (+356) 9931 3322

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