



Masterclass: Combatting online harassment

Investigating Malta's State-Sponsored Trolling

Caroline Muscat | The Shift News

Our Investigation.

Findings: A 10 year-long dehumanisation campaign...



...culminating in open celebration for the assassination of a journalist



Findings: State-sponsored Trolling

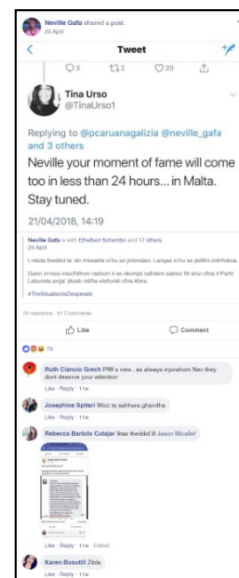
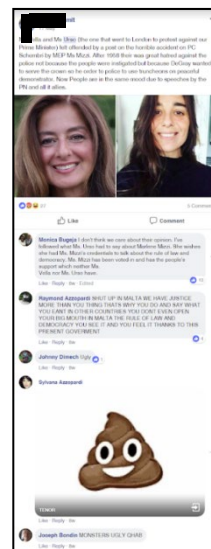
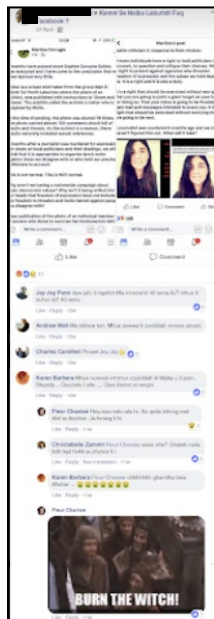
The Facebook Groups were being used to:

- Radicalise supporters in a hyper-partisan environment openly rewarding inflammatory language as well as outright hate-speech and removing critical or opposing views.
- Manufacture and spread toxic narratives (disinformation).
- Co-ordinate astroturfing including online poll manipulation.
- Co-ordinate trolling efforts including insults, threats and harassment against journalists, civil society activists and other perceived enemies.
- Co-ordinate government 'favours' (trading in influence) and cronyism.



Our Investigation.

Findings: Anatomy of a harassment campaign



Our Investigation.

Findings: Distinct government involvement

Group administrators & moderators included public officials



Ministers & MPs were members and actively used the groups



Lack of enforcement / impunity



Centralised control & co-ordination

Gufs ha ndur naqra Imembri ta dan il group ghall id u interess taghkom u tiegħi ukoll hekk kif ninnirgrazzja lmaro ta fiducja li vera fha u għamlini adminJekk għall xi raguni tispiccaw barra għax ma nsibx evidenza li turu li tappogjaw il partit laburista kemm tibattuli pm bit tessera jew ritratt takom waqt xi meeting grazzi inhobbkom qlub homor xxxx

Astroturfing / poll manipulation

23 Jul 2018 · 🇲🇹 · Idhlu fuq il-pagna ta' Times of Malta u vvutaw hbieb. #Simonfalz #BARRA

Open Incitement / harassment by public officials



Our Investigation.

Why State-sponsored trolling?

- direct involvement of government officials & public service employees.
- membership & participation in the groups by Ministers, Parliamentary Secretaries, the President of the Republic & key Police officials.
- Use of Facebook Groups to:
 - ✓ Radicalise & Incite
 - ✓ Co-ordinate harassment
 - ✓ Spread disinformation
 - ✓ Organise government trading in influence

Categories of State-Responsibility

Category 1 – State Executed

Category 2 – State-Directed or Co-ordinated

Category 3 – State-Incited or Fueled

Category 4 – State-Leveraged or Endorsed

Institute for the Future, 2018

- Centralised and tight control (by government officials) around both membership and use.
- Lack of enforcement / impunity.

Effects of our investigation.

- **Shaming:** Government politicians (including President) pressured to condemn or distance themselves from hyper-partisan Facebook Groups.
- **Forcing the government's hand:** Police brought certain prosecutions under insults & threats / harassment as well as hate speech criminal law provisions. Government also hastily established a "Hate Speech Unit".
- **International Awareness:** Malta, previously too small to be noticed, is now on State-sponsored trolling researchers' radars including Oxford University, the IFTF Digital Intelligence Lab and Bloomberg.
- **Daphne Caruana Galizia Public Inquiry Report findings:** A "government-sponsored dehumanisation campaign" against Daphne Caruana Galizia "prepared the ground for the assassination."



Police Charge Labour Candidate For Facebook Harassment Of Maltese 'Justice For Daphne' Activist

By Tim Diacene
March 8, 2019 at 8:34 am

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President leaves Labour online hate groups

Caroline Muscat
16 May 2018

The President has ended her membership of the secretive and restricted Labour Party online groups two days after they were exposed in an investigation by [The Shift News](#) that revealed they were used to manufacture hate against dissidents and political opponents and target citizens.

Thank you.

Caroline Muscat

Managing Editor

**The
Shift**

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