

Dear all,

I hope this finds you well.

This morning there was an incident at Lovin Malta which could have turned very ugly and still could.

While I understand there are no quick fixes and resources are always limited, I would like to take the time to share this experience in case it can lead to better protection of journalists in the future. I also have some suggestions listed below for your kind consideration.

### **Background**

Yesterday at about 7pm, Lovin Malta received a number of very aggressive phone calls from a woman who was insisting we should take down an article from 2019. The woman, named Karen, was an ex-prostitute who had shared her story on Xarabank in 2019. We had reported about this programme and her testimony. Two years later, she now decided the article should no longer exist, so she called screaming at our journalists to remove it. Despite having zero obligation to do so, we took a decision to be extra nice to this woman by removing her name and photo from the article. However, since we have a policy of not removing articles unless they are incorrect or libellous, we insisted the article should remain there. Instead of accepting our extremely reasonable response, she again began calling, screaming and threatening to show up this morning to "force" us to remove the article.

### **Actions taken**

Even though we are used to receiving such threats and harassment on a daily basis, this threat immediately seemed more credible than others, which is why we took immediate action to inform, via email, the Police Commissioner and two officers who had recently been assigned to us: Elliot Magro and Raymond Cassar. I asked them to urgently call the woman to make sure she does not show up and threaten our journalists in person this morning. I also asked for police protection tomorrow since I was not sure who she would turn up with.

I was told to go and file a formal police report in person with the Naxxar police station and to call 112 in urgent need. I once again made it clear that I felt the woman should be called immediately and that I should not have to go to the police station given the short time frame. However, at 7am this morning I did go to the police station anyway, in person, and I filed an official report. I was told that the police would call her.

### **This morning's incident**

After I filed my police report, the police called me to say they spoke to the woman in question but she had insisted she wanted the article removed anyway. This was quite worrying to me because it seemed that the police had no idea how to handle this complaint. Instead of warning her not to show up at our office, it seems the police assured her he would speak to me and try to get the article removed. In fact, she felt empowered to show up at our office at around 9am this morning and she again threatened our journalists, very loudly and confidently, with a total sense of impunity. Thankfully, my journalists, who were left alone to handle this situation managed to get the woman to leave. The police arrived shortly afterwards and did not fill my journalists with any confidence that they took this matter seriously.

### **The problem**

It must be noted that this incident could have turned unnecessarily violent very easily. In fact, it could still turn violent because all it takes is this woman to show up with some bullies. This is particularly worrying given that she is being aggressive towards us despite the fact that her name or face do not appear in the article anymore and that this is an article from 2019. It is clear that she has no understanding of the crimes she is committing by threatening, insulting and harassing us when she has absolutely no leg to stand on.

### The recommended short-term solution

In a country where a journalist has been blown up and a public inquiry is underway to determine the extent of involvement of the police and the State in permitting this murder and covering it up, it seems it would be appropriate for the government to send a message that it is protecting journalists. When the owner of a media house reports an urgent threat, this should be treated with urgency and suitable protection. Without needing me to show up in person to file an official report, the police should have immediately called this woman and made it clear that they would take immediate action against her if she persisted with her threats. They should have also been stationed outside our office this morning to arrest her in case she showed up. And there should be police officers stationed outside out offices for the rest of the week in case she does show up.

### The recommended long-term solutions

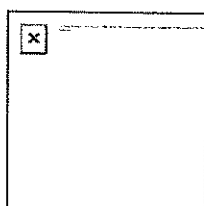
Given the circumstances in Malta, the lack of media literacy, and the Prime Minister's commitment last week to defend journalists, I have these recommendations to make on how this can be done effectively:

1. The police force should have a specific unit tasked with the protection of journalists. This unit should be specialised in media law and should understand the value of journalism and the threats journalists face. They should be an immediate point of contact for newsrooms and journalists who feel threatened (so action does not get postponed until journalists file an official report). And this unit should be able to take focused action rather than have a fragmented situation that does not work, which is what we have today. And if a journalist reports harassment, this unit should be competent enough to help any complainants understand when they are clearly in the wrong.
2. Media houses should also be offered 24/7 protection at their premises. There is a real threat to journalists in this country, which is made worse through online trolling and incitement that is often done by people in power. The least we can demand is some form of protection in case our newsrooms come under attack. We should learn from what happened in the 1980s to Times of Malta for example. To date, this type of incident can easily repeat itself. Why do we offer protection to former MPs but not to current media houses?
3. There should be stricter legislation when it comes to the harassment of journalists. People still feel empowered to treat journalists like dirt. This should be one of the issues that the Media Literacy Board works on: How can society learn to better appreciate the role of journalists? But it should also be something that we entrench in law. Perhaps Malta should become a country that lists attacks against journalists as 'hate crimes', or something similar, to really send the message to society (and the world) that we do not tolerate abuse or violence against journalists.

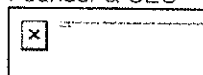
I have other ideas that I would be happy to share, but in the meantime, I wanted to share these initial thoughts in the hope that some action is taken both in the immediate and the medium term.

Thanks,  
Chris

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