


**OPINION
& LAW**
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Muzzling educators

A recently published policy on the participation of educators in the media has led to accusations that the Education Ministry is seeking to censor their freedom of expression.

The mere fact that this policy was issued by the Department for Educational Services is ironic since any attempt to muzzle educators is a disservice to the students they teach.

The policy states that all educators within the educational system must seek approval from their line manager prior to any media appearances. Their request for approval must contain details re-garding the nature of the media appearance, the topics discussed, and the media house hosting them. It is also their responsibility to ensure that the request reaches the Department's Director General, who will then determine whether approval is granted.

If approval is granted, educators are obliged to "adhere to a strict representation policy", which is meant to ensure that what they say reflects the ministry's policies, guidelines and objectives, and avoids any statements that are politically-biased or compromise the "educational system's neutrality".

Educators who are granted approval are reminded that their contributions

to the media need not only be factual, based on data, and aligned with educational priorities, but must not consist of "personal opinions, political ideologies, or any content unrelated to education". Sharing such personal views can apparently "undermine their position as impartial and responsible educators".

An analysis of the language used in writing the policy reveals the underlying beliefs, misconceptions and ideology of the policymaker. Far from the supposed neutrality and impartiality vaunted by the policy, the Director General seems to be convinced that a position of authority entitles her to control what subordinate educators can say in public.

They are expected to sing from the same hymn sheet or else face dire consequences.

Those educators breaching the policy will be reported to the Director General "for review and en-suing action". This threat reveals the skewed belief that punishment is justified for nonconformist discourse by those who have the temerity of speaking about education on the media.

That this policy echoes guidelines included in the Public Service Manage-

ment Code – which prohibits public officers from making statements that are politically biased or controversial in nature – is not a good enough excuse. The belief that any educational system is neutral is laughable at best and betrays a gross misunderstanding of the politics entrenched in any educational act.

Reminiscent of the work of the Ministry of Truth in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, this policy seems to be dictating how education should be represented in Malta by those who choose to speak about it.

Any views that contradict this official representation are either to be nipped in the bud by means of threats to an educator's professional record or penalised in ways that might put one's career on the line.

The fact that whoever wrote this policy entertained the idea of gagging the very professionals who are meant to cultivate an inquisitive, critical and questioning disposition in young people is bizarre and scary.

If we live in a democracy that values the cultivation of open minds that are perennially capable of interrogating the information and discourse shared by a variety of sources – including politi-

cians, lobbyists and the media – then it is highly problematic for someone in authority to sub-vert that civic enterprise by means of a fascist policy.

The policy reveals a fear of dissent and seeks to discourage educators from positioning themselves as the kind of intellectuals described by Edward Said. For him, an intellectual is "an opponent of consensus and orthodoxy, particularly at a moment in our society when the authorities of consensus and orthodoxy are so powerful".

Educators who have the courage, confidence and ability to articulate their thoughts on education in Malta should not be made to toe the line or fear repercussions for expressing unsanctioned opinions and critical views.

In many cases, they are relying on their knowledge and experience to be "the voice of the individual, the small voice... of the individual [that] tends to be not heard".

Educators who position themselves in this way are playing an instrumental role in the ongoing debate on the quality and effectiveness of education in this country.

Just like Said's intellectuals, their role "is not to consolidate authority, but to understand, interpret, and question it".