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## OPINION

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# What a waste of space

A radio programme presenter was recently issued a fine for claiming that he would never allow the 'xenophobe and racist' Norman Lowell on air. The case raises serious questions about the presence of people with extremist views on mainstream media.

While initially one might be tempted to think that hindering someone from publicly voicing their opinion is tantamount to curtailing their freedom of expression, the act of giving certain characters the space in which to express their skewed or hate-infused ideas is a waste of airtime.

The fine the Broadcasting Authority imposed on Andrew Azzopardi and RTK seems to ignore the fact that Norman Lowell has been convicted of charges of inciting racial hatred. In 2013, an appeals court confirmed Lowell's guilt of inciting racial hatred and handed down a 15-month jail sentence suspended for three years.

By upholding Imperium Europa's complaint that Lowell was treated unfairly and unjustly, the BA is threatening media houses with severe consequences if an editorial decision is taken not to invite a man who describes himself as a 'racialist'. Is it an innocent coincidence that the secretary of the board responsible for this decision was an active member of Imperium Europa?

The BA's decision is an affront to those media houses guided by the principle that views which discriminate against people's race or ethnicity should not be promoted. It is also a contradiction on the authority's part given that in the past it fined certain channels for giving Lowell airtime so that he could deny the holocaust and foment racial hatred. For instance, this is what happened to TVM in 2010 and FLiving in 2019.

Lowell has repeatedly been invited on different programmes to share his unpalatable views. In some cases, his presence was tolerated because over

the years he has unsuccessfully contested several elections. The BA's rule that political candidates be given airtime has meant that the public has long been exposed to his disturbing rhetoric. This included a 90-minute interview in which he eulogised Nazi Germany and the killing of disabled human beings.

In other cases, presenters invited Lowell on their programmes in the hope that his extremism would bump up viewership. While such cheap sensationalism is likely to attract the bigoted, the risk of turning a programme into a freakshow and legitimising hurtful and dangerous views is all too great.

Unfortunately, Lowell is not the only controversial figure that some presenters use for the sake of luring viewers. For example, this season's first episode of the TVM programme Popolin inadvertently revealed the continued existence of shortcomings in editorial oversight on the part of the national broadcaster.

With the excuse that it is necessary to discuss the role that religious communities in Malta play in people's lives, the host Quinton Scerri gave prominence to two individuals that have occasionally abused of their presumed holiness to utter hurtful comments in relation to others.

As the pastor of River of Love, Gordon Manche is no stranger to controversy. His pronouncements on the sinfulness of homosexuality are well known. A prominent member of the community he leads has been charged with promoting gay conversion therapy. The case is ongoing and Manche has denied that either he or his community have ever practiced gay conversion therapy.

But by instituting legal proceedings against satirists and comedians, Manche is seeking to muzzle his critics and snuff out any hint of ridicule in his regard. In the process though he has only managed to con-



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firm his foolishness.

It is simply preposterous that a PBS programme helped to further thrust into the limelight someone who justifies his intolerant views through the conviction that he was chosen by God. In his usual pompous manner, Manche explained how the founding of his religious community occurred after he saw Jesus.

His 'supernatural calling from God' seems to have inspired him to establish a congregation of acolytes who have been misled into seeing something special in what is clearly a deluded man.

While those who choose to attend Manche's sermons are free to get all muddled up about the significance of love, compassion and tolerance, the national broadcaster should not provide a platform to someone whose misconceptions and fundamentalist views can prove hurtful to others and damage their self-worth.

Another guest on the same TVM programme was Phyllisi-

enne Brincat, whose unspectacular singing career seems to have motivated her to occasionally flirt with notoriety. Despite describing herself as an avid Christian, she seems to embrace highly uncharitable views on those not as blessed as she presumably is.

On the programme, Brincat described illness and disability as the products of original sin. In the past, she even went so far as to suggest that autism can be cured through prayer. The ignorance and lack of empathy manifested through the sharing of such misguided views are astounding. The pain caused to others is all too real.

Just like Manche, Brincat justifies her fanaticism by cherry-picking verses from the Bible. These constant references to scripture are meant to convince the impressionable that the dogmatic beliefs they drum into them are in some way validated by a higher power.

A few months before that Popolin programme, another PBS presenter gave space to a

Hitler apologist with the excuse that it is important to hear about alternative interpretations of World War II history. From that embarrassing episode, the national broadcaster failed to learn a lesson about the importance of properly vetting its content.

When media houses give space to people with absurd views, they achieve nothing of value. Such disastrous misjudgement only serves to produce asinine discussions that attract either those beguiled by the sensationalistic or those easily duped by the false authority vested upon nutjobs spouting rubbish on camera. That is why the BA's decision in the case of Azzopardi and RTK is ludicrous.

Lowell, Manche and Brincat might whine that not being welcome on media programmes is a curtailment of their freedom of expression; however, as judicial philosopher Zechariah Chafee points out, "Your right to swing your arms ends just where the other man's nose begins."