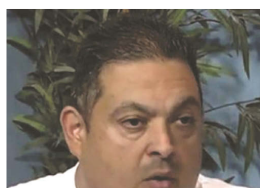


The criticality in public broadcasting

TALKING POINT

DANIEL XERRI



Ronald Bugeja (inset) was given space during a TVM interview. PHOTOS: TVM NEWS+/CHRIS SANT FOURNIER

In two recent interviews, we saw representatives of national broadcasters failing to ask the right kind of questions and being woefully unprepared to challenge their interviewees.

In a TVM interview with Ronald Bugeja, broadcast on March 23, seasoned television presenter John Demanuele merely accepted the revisionist narrative spun by the author of a book that seeks to reinterpret Adolf Hitler's intentions, behaviour and policies.

In what can be seen as a propagandist attempt to make the public reconsider what happened in Nazi Germany, the Hitler apologist sought to describe the dictator as being an innocent bystander in one of history's worst genocides and most abominable series of war crimes.

Demanuele listened to Bugeja's bilge without ever contradicting him or asking uncomfortable questions aimed at undermining the account of Hitler the author was imposing on the programme's audience.

By politely going along with what Bugeja was saying, Demanuele was allowing the audience to get the impression that the author was an expert historian whose interpretation of Hitler's behaviour rests upon solid foundations and is widely accepted by the academic community specialising in this historical period.

Demanuele's inability to ask pointed questions and counter what Bugeja was saying by referring to well-established documentary evidence for Hitler's crimes shows how ill-prepared he was for this interview. Knowing the unorthodox nature of Bugeja's book, the least he could have done is to have gone to the interview armed with a set of questions that would have put the author in the hot seat and forced him to defend his interpretation of history.

Instead, we got to see Bugeja plugging his book as if the interview was only meant to serve a promotional purpose. This is not the measured approach to information that viewers expect when watching a programme on a television channel operated by the national broadcaster.

In another interview that made headlines for the wrong reasons, on April 12, BBC technology correspondent James Clayton sabotaged a golden opportunity to probe Elon Musk's running of Twitter by being negligent in his preparation of critical questions.

When he accused one of the world's most powerful men of allowing the social networking platform to facilitate the spread of hate speech and misinformation, Clayton was unable to provide concrete examples upon being pressed by Musk.

Despite the existence of such evidence, Clayton was evasive and offered weak excuses for his inability to support his claims, so much so that Musk was able to wipe the floor with him and accuse him of lying. He transformed Clayton into a figure of ridicule for the millions of people who watched that segment of the interview.

Even though the interview revealed some interesting things about Musk's leadership of Twitter, Clayton's botched attempt to hold him accountable for the rise of misinformation also led to several accusations being levelled at the publicly-funded BBC for employing journalists who are

incapable of displaying well-developed criticality.

What both interviews demonstrate is a lack of preparation for the task of deploying criticality to get to the truth. While criticality does not necessarily imply being negative about people's views and assumptions, it means having the capacity to interrogate those views and assumptions in light of existing evidence and through logical argumentation.

In the case of Demanuele, there was no attempt to exercise a critical perspective. He was content to merely ask questions and make comments that comfortably gave Bugeja a stage from which to expound on his misrepresentation of one of history's most cruel leaders.

Clayton, on the other hand, naively thought he could criticise Musk without needing to substantiate his claims, thus allowing the interviewee to turn the tables on him.



The Hitler apologist sought to describe the dictator as being an innocent bystander

By failing to engage in criticality, Demanuele and Clayton risked eroding the public's trust in the national broadcasters they work for. Given public expectations, the backlash against their errors was far-reaching.

As argued by veteran journalist Simon Jenkins, when a public broadcaster like the BBC "experiences a professional failure, it has no shortage of critics to supply vilification". However, he believes that such episodes should not detract from its capacity for critical journalism, which is one of the reasons why the public sees it as an unbiased and trustworthy news organisation.

To ensure that the public's trust is not jeopardised, a capacity for criticality needs to be properly cultivated in those working for a public broadcaster. According to the journalist Warren Berger, this involves learning how to examine assumptions by asking the right kind of questions since these force people to think about things differently.

If this fails to happen, then Mark Lewis, a professor of literacy education, would be right in maintaining: "Much of today's media lacks such criticality and caution; rather, it is full of talking heads spouting biased opinion either without thought or worry about the repercussions of their statements or with exact purpose to influence the electorate with unsubstantiated claims about social and political issues."

Daniel Xerri is an educator.

WHAT'S ON

Chair

Adrian Buckle is presenting *Chair* by Edward Bond at *Spazju Kreattiv*, in Valletta from today to April 30.

The play, certified 16+, is a trip to an apocalyptic future, one where family means nothing and people are divested of their humanity.

Directed by Clive Judd and with a set design by Romualdo Moretti, the cast features Erica Muscat, Ann-Marie Buckle, Alex Weenink and Faye Paris.

For tickets, visit kreattivita.org.

Wonderland Wives

MADC is staging the comedy *Wonderland Wives* by Buddy Thomas at the MADC Playhouse, in Santa Venera from today to April 29.

The show is a twisted fairy tale featuring the beloved characters of Cinderella, Belle, Alice, Snow White and Prince Charming, whose happily-ever-after story has gone terribly awry.

Directed by Francesca Briffa, the play stars Pia Zammit, Jean Pierre Busuttill, Joe Depasquale, Kate De Cesare, Stefan Farrugia and Stephen Oliver.

The shows, suitable for an audience aged over 14, start at 7.30pm. For tickets, visit madc.com.mt.

Room on the Broom

UK theatre company Tall Stories is bringing to Malta the bestselling children's book *Room on the Broom* by Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler this weekend.

The shows will be held at St Aloysius Theatre, Birkirkara tomorrow at 11.30am, 2.30 and 5pm and on Sunday at 11.30am and 3pm. For tickets, visit bookingoffice.com.mt.

Italian Opera Scenes

The Opera Studio within the Malta School of Music, in collaboration with the Manoel Theatre, is today presenting an evening of Italian arias.

The programme includes Puccini's *Le Villi*, *La Bohème*, *Suor Angelica*, Pergolesi's *La Serva Padrona* and Donizetti's *L'Elisir d'Amore* & *Rita*.

The Opera Studio singers will be led by Malta School of Music teachers sopranos Miriam Cachi and Andriana Yordanova and mezzo-soprano Graziella Debatista.

They will be accompanied by pianists Maria-Elena Farrugia, Julia Miller and Sofia Narmania.

For tickets, visit teatrumanoel.com.mt.

For more events and updates, look up the What's On guide on time-sofmalta.com.