

# Press freedom and journalistic integrity eroded by 'conversion therapy' bans

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*The premiere of the film Once Gay: Matthew and Friends has generated a lot of press coverage, but not all of it has been favourable or honest. Carys Moseley looks at what the press coverage reveals about freedom of speech and expression in both the UK and Malta and concludes that the press itself is contributing to the erosion of freedom of speech.*

Press coverage of the screenings of the film Once Gay: Matthew and Friends<sup>1</sup> is highly significant in what it reveals and reflects about press treatment of the debates over 'conversion therapy' and the ex-LGBT movement. In reality, sections of the press are complicit in the push for 'therapy bans' implemented by the mental health professional bodies and national governments. This means that parts of the press are actually eroding freedom of expression, and therefore press freedom. We can see this clearly when we compare treatment of the topic in the UK and Maltese press.

## **'Conversion therapy' is a deceitful term**

The London-based LGBT news site Pink News published an extensive article making the misleading claim that the film was 'celebrating conversion therapy'<sup>2</sup>. The term 'conversion therapy' is a deceitful nonsense term that was originally invented by a gay activist psychologist called Douglas Haldeman in 1994<sup>3</sup>, to lump talking therapy together with electroshock treatment and hormones. The real purpose is to discredit therapy as 'torture'<sup>4</sup>. Clearly in this sense nobody involved in counselling or therapy or spiritual care for unwanted same-sex attraction practises 'conversion therapy'!

## **Biased press focus on protest outside Belfast screening**

The focus of press coverage in Belfast by the Northern Ireland press revolved around the fact that an LGBT pressure group called Rainbow Network NI had arranged a small protest of between 30 and 40 protesters outside the venue of the screening. Characteristically, they had managed to get the press – including the BBC<sup>5</sup>, the Belfast Telegraph<sup>6</sup> and the Belfast Newsletter<sup>7</sup>, among others – to send journalists.

As can be seen from the BBC footage<sup>8</sup> and the footage of Matthew Grech's speech addressing the protesters<sup>9</sup>, the protesters refused all invitations to talk and to come in and watch the documentary. The BBC correspondent characterised this as 'polarisation'. The politically savvy will realise that 'polarisation' is policy-speak for 'manifesting extremism'. It is, as such, a slippery term. Was the journalist meaning to characterise both viewers and supporters of the documentary and the protesters as 'extremists'? By using the slippery language of 'polarisation', the BBC journalist seriously mischaracterised the scene outside the screening.

*The fault does not, in fact, lie primarily with the government. The whole push for a therapy ban has come from questionable elements of the press. Who will call them out?*

## **Deceitful undercover journalism to blame for professional therapy ban**

It is well-attested that the push for a therapy ban in the UK was initiated by a gay activist journalist called Patrick Strudwick, infiltrating a Christian conference where the most eminent therapists in the field were speaking, including the late Joseph Nicolosi Sr<sup>10</sup>. Strudwick went undercover pretending to be a Christian client to Lesley Pilkington, a counsellor, and Paul Miller, a psychiatrist. Pilkington got struck off from her professional counselling body<sup>11</sup>, and Miller decided to restrict his client base to Northern Ireland.

On the basis of these deceitful undercover reports, Strudwick campaigned for a therapy ban via lobbying the mental health professional bodies<sup>12</sup> as well as the Gay and Lesbian Humanists' Association<sup>13</sup>. The result was the publication of the Memorandum of Understanding on Conversion Therapy<sup>14</sup>. Meanwhile, Strudwick also helped Labour MP Geraint Davies to draft a private member's bill<sup>15</sup> to outlaw 'conversion therapy'.

## **Patrick Strudwick's erroneous characterisation of Reparative Therapy**

In December 2018 Patrick Strudwick won the Specialist Journalism prize in the British Journalism Awards for public interest journalism<sup>16</sup>, for an article on a homosexual

man who had been given electroshock treatment to rid him of his homosexual attraction. Whilst this was of historical interest, it hardly qualifies as relevant public interest journalism in the UK, because electroconvulsive treatment was administered by psychiatrists – not psychotherapists – and has not been used in the UK since the early 1980s. It is completely irrelevant to today's policy debates. The real reason Strudwick covered this story is because it fits the definition of 'conversion therapy' as including such treatment.

Just over a week ago, Patrick Strudwick also announced his support for the government's plans to consult on legislation to force social media companies to take down "images of self-harm, suicide and other harmful content".<sup>17</sup> He interviewed a gay activist recently who criticised Amazon for selling publications by Joseph Nicolosi Sr.<sup>18</sup> He makes the following false claim about Reparative Therapy, a type of psychotherapy developed by the late American psychotherapist Joseph Nicolosi Sr which helped people with unwanted homosexual attraction:

*"The practice and ideology of reparative therapy emerged in the 1970s, following so-called aversion therapy, which used electric shocks, hormone pills, and medication to induce vomiting in an attempt to turn gay people straight."*

This is demonstrably untrue, as can be seen in this article by Nicolosi himself<sup>19</sup>. Not only that, but it is obviously dishonest to claim that such talking therapy "followed" 'aversion therapy', simply because it was developed later in time than they were. In reality Nicolosi acknowledged a debt to Anglican psychotherapist Elizabeth Moberly<sup>20</sup>, and saw himself as interacting with the psychoanalytic tradition going back to Sigmund Freud<sup>21</sup>. In addition, it is very important to realise that the term Reparative Therapy has been trademarked in the USA<sup>22</sup> and is used by licensed professionals.

In his article about Amazon, Strudwick writes that Reparative Therapy cannot lead someone from homosexual to heterosexual attraction and behaviour. This is untrue. Here, you can find some stories from clients whose lives were changed for the better<sup>23</sup>. And this is only for one type of talking therapy. There are others which have also yielded good results for clients.

*It is high time for certain sectors of the UK press and the UK government itself to stop caving into Strudwick's obsessive and one-sided anti-'conversion therapy' campaign. It is misleading and not backed up by proper research.*

### **Poor quality of press coverage in Malta**

Press coverage of the debates has been of even worse quality in Malta, partly because the Affirmation of Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Gender Expression Act 2016<sup>24</sup> criminalising the practice and 'advertising' of 'conversion therapy' was passed in December 2016. Astute independent observers have argued that the law was passed in order to target all EU member states,<sup>25</sup> making it harder, if not impossible, for them to have laws which protect people with unwanted same-sex attraction. No such analysis was made in the Maltese press, however.

Amidst the backlash against ex-gay singer Matthew Grech's testimony, broadcast on X Factor Malta in October 2018, the news site Lovin Malta wrongly claimed that he had undergone 'conversion therapy'<sup>26</sup>. From the beginning, there were people in the press and on social media suggesting his testimony was 'conversion therapy', or advertising of 'conversion practices'. Tellingly, whilst not making an outright accusation of 'advertising conversion therapy', the government made the following highly ambiguous statement:

*"While the government condemns all such homophobic comments, broadcasting this message, without calling out the harm caused by 'conversion therapy' is damaging."*

The truth is that Malta already had a big problem with press freedom<sup>27</sup>. Last October, just a few weeks before the testimony was aired, major NGOs campaigning on press freedom had criticised Malta and called for a public inquiry into the murder of investigative journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia<sup>28</sup>. She had uncovered vast corruption among ministers in Malta's current Labour government, in power since 2013.

### **Daphne Caruana Galizia on 'conversion therapy' in Malta**

Daphne Caruana Galizia wrote a little about the ex-gay movement and the (all-too-superficial) controversy in Malta on 'conversion therapy'. In 2011 she wrote a scurrilous, and indeed blasphemous, opinion article<sup>29</sup> for The

Times of Malta about an ex-gay event at River of Love Christian Fellowship, picketed by the Malta Gay Rights Movement<sup>30</sup>. However Galizia later criticised the government of Malta for repealing the country's criminal defamation laws, which allowed imprisonment of those found guilty of defamation, whilst passing a law criminalising 'conversion therapy'<sup>31</sup>. This argument was made in the interests of Galizia's investigative journalism, as she was repeatedly slapped with libel suits by politicians whom she criticised. She accused the government of employing people to "harass and intimidate journalists who are critical of the government", including through use of television stations, radio stations, newspapers and websites linked to the governing political party<sup>32</sup>.

Less than a year later, Daphne Caruana Galizia was dead, murdered by a car bomb<sup>33</sup>. She never got the opportunity to reassess her view on the 'conversion therapy' debate. Malta's 'anti-conversion therapy' law is built philosophically on the logic of hate speech law, namely that 'defaming' a group of people sharing a characteristic should incur criminal sanctions. Galizia failed to admit that this had taken the place of Malta's criminal defamation laws. In light of this, perhaps press freedom organisations ought to moderate their celebration of Galizia. Perhaps instead they should investigate how journalists can be complicit in the decline of freedom of expression and press freedom.

### **Don't let the future of the UK be like Malta**

Press coverage of the ex-LGBT movement in the UK is inadequate and cowed in the face of LGBT activists' deceitful undercover 'reporting' and simplistic and repetitive propaganda talking points. Press coverage in Malta is even worse as there are no people from different professions talking about the issues. Don't let the future of the UK be like Malta is now. For no journalist will now dare to investigate any problems resulting from the ban on 'conversion therapy' if it means being falsely accused of 'advertising' and facing hefty fines or imprisonment. Don't say you weren't warned.

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- <sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KSz7OHGuuWA>
  - <sup>2</sup> <https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2019/01/31/film-ex-gay-singer-london-belfast/>
  - <sup>3</sup> [https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/a/b/394403\\_4.pdf](https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/a/b/394403_4.pdf)
  - <sup>4</sup> <https://christianconcern.com/comment/why-christians-must-defeat-the-global-attack-on-conversion-therapy-for-homosexuality/>
  - <sup>5</sup> [https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-47242579?intlink\\_from\\_url=https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/localnews/2655984-belfast/0&link\\_location=live-reporting-story](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-47242579?intlink_from_url=https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/localnews/2655984-belfast/0&link_location=live-reporting-story)
  - <sup>6</sup> <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/lgbt-protest-as-church-screens-conversion-film-on-former-gay-singing-star-37818216.html>
  - <sup>7</sup> <about:blank>
  - <sup>8</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2a87Dle5alg>
  - <sup>9</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/CCFON/videos/2270957206479880/?\\_\\_xts\\_\\_%5b0%5d=68.ARCZXQBhHU2GFuWq515QcH8vXLSFu2\\_gwW98MbvKToUEGp\\_NfR7qad2FD8qfKvOM76O7fQiom9TXXR2yQthpkRgX9oMHgvlpdJcOIXkksQ\\_1caWoRsQ7eXhmcr1rJqB51yAZU8CLXQfQUWREvh\\_LcbWWRG3EAh384YQdJtrsYQwg9vhSPRY9p-nMPWqEjieiAKKA3sQXD4tDCwRb6HAySf19Y-BhsB2H2QJkO3sa34STKP0gKMqHtb7NmeA\\_nH9tiDVWrKI6lR3iH0oPCpLUhCtKq0BZPvRTzqzRpQ2LWgnYxnLRdcSBV\\_5kN4Xn36SMY7ij\\_EpC5s4IVdTEFQfVxKO6WBSm9W5tZmnVnXGq0jNB7dB0vv5I9Q&\\_\\_tn\\_\\_=-R](https://www.facebook.com/CCFON/videos/2270957206479880/?__xts__%5b0%5d=68.ARCZXQBhHU2GFuWq515QcH8vXLSFu2_gwW98MbvKToUEGp_NfR7qad2FD8qfKvOM76O7fQiom9TXXR2yQthpkRgX9oMHgvlpdJcOIXkksQ_1caWoRsQ7eXhmcr1rJqB51yAZU8CLXQfQUWREvh_LcbWWRG3EAh384YQdJtrsYQwg9vhSPRY9p-nMPWqEjieiAKKA3sQXD4tDCwRb6HAySf19Y-BhsB2H2QJkO3sa34STKP0gKMqHtb7NmeA_nH9tiDVWrKI6lR3iH0oPCpLUhCtKq0BZPvRTzqzRpQ2LWgnYxnLRdcSBV_5kN4Xn36SMY7ij_EpC5s4IVdTEFQfVxKO6WBSm9W5tZmnVnXGq0jNB7dB0vv5I9Q&__tn__=-R)
  - <sup>10</sup> <https://www.josephnicolosi.com/>
  - <sup>11</sup> <https://christianconcern.com/news/bacp-appeal-panel-rules-on-lesley-pilkington-christian-therapy-case/>
  - <sup>12</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/24/mentally-ill-people-at-mercy-of-untrained-therapists>
  - <sup>13</sup> <https://humanists.international/2011/11/gay-humanists-challenge-conversion-therapy-and-condemn-gaystapo-slurs/>
  - <sup>14</sup> <https://www.psychotherapy.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Memorandum-of-understanding-on-conversion-therapy.pdf>
  - <sup>15</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/24/mentally-ill-people-at-mercy-of-untrained-therapists>
  - <sup>16</sup> <https://pressgazette.co.uk/british-journalism-awards-2018-ft-takes-top-prize-amelia-gentleman-named-journalist-of-the-year-full-list-of-winners/>
  - <sup>17</sup> <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/pa/article-6679749/Instagram-announces-ban-graphic-self-harm-images.html>
  - <sup>18</sup> <http://www.buzzfeedu.com/patrickstrudwick/acclaimed-author-criticised-amazon-gay-cure>
  - <sup>19</sup> <https://www.josephnicolosi.com/collection/what-is-reparative-therapy>
  - <sup>20</sup> <https://www.josephnicolosi.com/guide-to-preventing-homosexual/>
  - <sup>21</sup> <https://www.josephnicolosi.com/collection/what-freud-really-said-about-homosexuality-and-why>
  - <sup>22</sup> <https://trademarks.justia.com/876/99/reparative-87699798.html>
  - <sup>23</sup> <https://www.josephnicolosi.com/client-stories>
  - <sup>24</sup> <https://legislation.mt/eli/cap/567/eng/pdf>
  - <sup>25</sup> <https://exgaycalling.com/2016/12/19/via-malta-the-eu-has-been-conquered-overnight/>
  - <sup>26</sup> <https://lovinmalta.com/opinion/reactions/hypocrisy-made-in-malta-gordon-manche-calls-out-critics-of-x-factor-malta-contestants-gay-conversion-comments/>
  - <sup>27</sup> <https://lovinmalta.com/opinion/reactions/hypocrisy-made-in-malta-gordon-manche-calls-out-critics-of-x-factor-malta-contestants-gay-conversion-comments/>
  - <sup>28</sup> <https://ifex.org/rights-groups-call-for-public-inquiry-into-daphne-caruana-galizias-murder/>
  - <sup>29</sup> <https://daphnecaruanagalizia.com/2011/05/queer-no-more/>
  - <sup>30</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AfRgwKZ99Dk&app=desktop>
  - <sup>31</sup> <https://daphnecaruanagalizia.com/2016/12/owen-bonnici-forgotten-promise-repeal-criminal-defamation-laws/>
  - <sup>32</sup> <https://daphnecaruanagalizia.com/2016/12/states-required-protect-journalists-create-favourable-environment-opinions-expressed-without-fear-european-court-human-rights/>
  - <sup>33</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/16/malta-car-bomb-kills-panama-papers-journalist>