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STUDIA UBB EDITORIAL OFFICE: B.P. Hasdeu no. 51, 400371 Cluj-Napoca,  
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## ACTION AND COMMUNICATION IN THE VIRTUAL WORLD OF VIDEO GAMES

ÁRPAD PÉTER\*

**ABSTRACT.** The ambition of this paper is to discuss the possible ways of analysing one of the latest media of our times, the video games.

By way of preliminary, we attempt to define the new media element that we call video game, followed by an investigation into the possibilities of narrative/discursive and medial analyses applied to video games.

We deem our article necessary as video games define our present to a great extent, filling in a considerable amount of time in the life of young and middle-aged individuals alike – still, there are very few domestic analyses on the complex narrative structures, rhetorical practices, and intermedial relationships of computer games. News on the extreme ‘overuse of computer games’ take charge of public discourse, reporting – otherwise rightly – on cases featuring computer game users for whom these media served as sources of inspiration for their engagement in violent acts. But, at the same time, we often tend to overlook the fact that this new medium offers excellent new possibilities for ‘taking possession’ of complex virtual worlds, establishing new types of communication media, and creating first-class narratives.

**Keywords:** computer games, virtual worlds, game theory, new medias, allegory

### Defining Computer Games

Defining video games in their strict sense is rendered more difficult first of all by the dispersion of their morphological, technical, narrative, etc. attributes on an extremely vast palette shaped throughout their history.

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\* *Department of Journalism, Hungarian Line of Study, associated teacher, Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, peter.arpad1981@gmail.com*

We may declare that computer games fit into the postmodern paradigm and we can place them among the new media. As a matter of fact, a video game is a series of phenomenon simulation that draws on the possibilities of the developing digital technology, thus acquiring the potential to assimilate all previous media, integrate them into its processes, and adapt them to its own media in such a way that they continue to be recognizable as well as usable as they are 'per se', that is, as functioning according to their own set of rules and practicabilities. Video games do not realize this by way of modelling, that is, by integrating a – perhaps even readable – newspaper into the virtual world created by them. Such an example would be the fictional *New World Press*, one of the determining media organizations of *Deus Ex Universe*, several 'excerpts' of which can be found scattered about in more or less conspicuous places in the virtual space of the game, assisting the player in understanding the game and fitting together its puzzle-like storyline. We may also mention here the functional TV set (you can turn it on and off as you wish) in *Max Payne 2*, which plays a marginal role in terms of the actual plot, but it provides important pieces of information that confer a fuller meaning to the symbolics and add to the storyline, enhancing the immersive experience.

In our interpretation, technology-centred definitions of the game concept are too vague, as theoretically any electronic device with an interface can be used for entertainment – even a barcode scanner may serve as a gaming device for those gifted with a peculiar sense of humour –,<sup>1</sup> which is why Tavinor & Newman's narrowed down specification<sup>2</sup> becomes necessary, who consider their *origins* and *intentionality* as core characteristics. Tavinor's viewpoint seems to be the most coherent, who, besides the 'roots' of numerical entertainment software – on which he converges with Newman –, qualifies both sticking to the framework of rules embedded in the code and a *fiction-based use* as necessary constituents of its meaning.

We would just like to add to the aforementioned descriptions that we accept as video games only those interactive programs – built for entertainment purposes, formerly running on electronic and more

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., the following video on YouTube:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BVxnfLTBhz4>.

<sup>2</sup> 'X is a videogame if it is an artifact in a visual digital medium, is intended as an object of entertainment, and is intended to provide such entertainment through the employment of one or both of the following modes of engagement: rule and objective gameplay or interactive fiction' (Tavinor, 2009. 26; Newman, 2004. 11).

recently on digital platforms – that are *world-like*, that is to say – as mentioned above –, they are satisfactory simulations of themselves. Consequently, these are interactive media that create a medium so that, through the intertwining of the player's gestures and the simulated world, certain actions can take place, having the capacity of setting in motion the unified operation of the gamer – connecting via some kind of interface – and the numerical medium. Furthermore, this unity integrates the program user's gestures in such a way that regarding the rules of the game the timelines and spaces existing/arising in the gameplay are qualified as attributes of coherent worlds.

### **A Discursive and Medial Analysis of Computer Games**

We come up against the basic methodological issue as to whether we are mistaken or not when trying to carry out a discursive analysis on the *medial*. Since it would be wrong to state either that the method of conveyance could be restricted to rhetorical movements or that medial operations have exclusively discursive characteristics, we will also include in our 'scientific observations' the category of aesthetics, which offers us a lot wider scope for manoeuvre than discourse analysis focused on conversations/narrations. At the same time, I would like to express that, as far as our topic is concerned, we will not engage in the direct application of the discourse analysis methodology as postulated by Foucault because neither the critical, exclusive, monopolizing discourse analysis – which also considers the power interests – nor a genealogical type of analysis, the identification of the examined (discursive) entity's uniqueness, would describe the world-like events of computer games. In the same vein, we will not have our discourse analysis applied to video games broken into the four Foucauldian levels (formation of the subject, identification of statement variants, identification of the concept map's organizational principle, and strategic field)<sup>3</sup> as we believe that regarding numerical games it is sufficient to analyse the 'set of information' the game provides for the player, that is, the examination of those specific 'communications' through which the game outlines its own limitations to the player as well as teaches them how to act correctly (in conformity with the rules) within these boundaries. Thus, a video game is in fact a discourse, a specific language that addresses

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<sup>3</sup> See Foucault, 1998.

the *necessity of entering the dialogue*, the discourse events, the communication process that characterizes the self-referential nature of virtual worlds, or, more precisely, the nature thereof owing to which the discursive and communicative ‘statements’ of the game’s virtual world return through the player’s avatar(s) to the very digital environment they have come from. Consequently, our discourse analysis will analyse the information exchange – and unfold the internal regularities thereof – taking place through the ‘mediation’ of the gestures between the game and the player as well as by way of the more or less consciously and expediently set off signals – doing all of this, of course, while keeping in view the *manner in which a gamer identity is attained*.

We may continue our critical discourse analysis with an interesting allegory that Kálmán Kittenberger tells us in his readable (sometimes ‘suspiciously’ well-readable) book *Vadász- és gyűjtőúton Kelet-Afrikában* [Hunting and Collecting in East Africa].<sup>4</sup> He gives an account of the greater honeyguide’s (*Indicator indicator*) highly intriguing feature, namely its occasional habit of guiding humans to beehives – once the honey is taken, the bird feeds on the larvae of the bees often stunned by smoke. This behaviour of the bird can be explained by evolutionary conditioning (we have knowledge of some even closer symbioses in the animal kingdom between mammals and birds, reptiles and birds, etc.) or some sort of *training* or even chance, but the story described above can hardly be labelled as ordinary: in one of the cases, the bird, instead of leading Kittenberger and his gun-bearers to a beehive, it guided them to an adder, and once the snake was killed, the bird grew quiet again, just like it used to do whenever humans hit upon a ‘honey well’. We must add to the story that Kittenberger and his company of hunters found no beehives anywhere near the place of ‘incident’, not even a swarm of bees.

Kittenberger, as an old Africanist, feels right and proper to interpret the bird’s ‘actions’ as follows:

Now, who could tell why the greater honeyguide led us to the nastiest member of the adder family, the puff adder? Similarly, how could we account for Sir F. Jackson’s adventure with the leopard and the serval? [F. Jackson also relates two incidents when the greater honeyguide would lead him to the wrong species.] My version of the story as to how this could happen is that the greater honeyguide saw the cats and snakes as its

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<sup>4</sup> Kittenberger, 1985. 363–365.

enemies and, since by itself cannot do any harm to them, it would lead to them, whenever occasion serves, the eternal enemy of the inhabitants of wilderness: man himself.

This is an excellent allegory to illustrate the two attitudes the 'user of the discourse' manifests towards the *non-readable parts*. One of them is what Kittenberger and his companions do: they identify the factor that does not fit into the fabric determined by the discourse, put an end to the 'disorder', and interpret its nature. The other potential path of action to follow is that we *do not render the so far unaccountable experience as alien to the system/order*, but we broaden the scope of the discourse as we know (that is, built on the logical positioning of reasons) in a capacious 'philological gesture' as far as the unknown, the unusual, and the unexpected can all find their place 'therein'. But this expansion *should not be a discursive one*, that is, not as Kittenberger acted, who, besides his own reasoning – which *still* holds the bamboozlement committed by the *Indicator* a divergence –, in fact explained the bird's 'action' without bringing forward any sort of evidence for the possibility of another kind of interpretation regarding the bird's action – he did not presume that the bird's guiding humans to the honey as well as to the 'enemy' might be its natural behaviour. But since we, users of discourse, have a predilection for honey rather than for puff adders, we tend to think the real path is the one leading to the honey and a struggle-free, smooth progress is the natural way of the world.

The life-like, or – as we worded above – *world-like* simulations of video games come with a package filled with contingencies of unpleasant surprises that might await those involved in potentially dangerous situations. However, the process comes into its own exactly through accepting these unpredictable factors as a default feature. That is to say, a typical situation in a video game is when the player, upon following on the possibilities offered by the game, comes to certain points where they are forced to take decisions in order to stay in the game, and these decision-makings do not imply the metapositioning of the player towards the game, but the player tries to figure out the meaning of the 'problematic' stimulus as well as its role in the virtual world, and position their avatar accordingly. And, insofar as necessary, *that puff adder must be slain down* as otherwise *it* will overcome and eliminate the player. However, we must learn to accept that this point of decision is part of the game just as unhindered progress is, and we should not argue that the real gameplay is the one already known to us, while those unknown are merely divergent side-

tracks. Therefore, in order to reach a level where gamer identity is an accepted reality, we must first silence our prejudices, and *only then can we take action, rightfully and ethically, against the puff adder*; at this moment, our action will still be ethical even if we 'eliminate' the – virtual – puff adder as a result of our decision.

Thus, Kittenberger, was facing an unfamiliar situation: Nature acted contrary to his expectations; so, he places himself in a metaposition right away, and starts looking for precedents (F. Jackson), interpreting, and deducing, arranging Nature's unnatural behaviour into a valid referential discourse. This way, the bird will be understood, its behaviour is not confusing anymore as it has been integrated into a discourse that – in the gesture of apprehension – renders its speciality as ordinary. At the same time, it might come in handy to specify the fact that *Kittenberger, while acquiring these experiences, was taking part in an expedition, a hunting, that was not driven by survival or search for food supply*, meaning that he was urged by the eagerness to explore the unknown, and this is what took him to Africa to take part in big-game hunting<sup>5</sup> for scientific reasons or to gain novel and thrilling experiences. Nevertheless, this sort of hunting *is more of a game than a hunting*, it is rather performing gestures of ritual occupation, drifting away from the original idea of hunting, which is search for food. But when the game 'takes control' or if the player does not recognize the rules of the alien (in the case of video games: virtual) world accepting him, they are inevitably doomed to a physical or ethical fall. Kittenberger was in fact playing a game in the real world, though not always successful in recognizing and complying with the internal rules thereof (which for the onlooker might as well appear to be devoid of any logic whatsoever).

However, this act of the big 'white hunter' – the interpretation of the situation –, his turning towards the 'physis' by resorting to 'nomos' is more than problematic. From a critical discourse analysis perspective, Kittenberger's act is inexcusable even if we have to bear in mind that his book *had to be readable enough* for publication. The man, the 'naturalist' (in our case: ethologist) facing a problem, the unexpected, cannot always afford himself to have a *lengthy* rumination, a discussion on the complexity of the situation he is involved in – F. Jackson, for instance had to shoot to save his own life, just like one of Kittenberger's gun-bearers killed the snake to avert a potentially lethal

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<sup>5</sup> The hunting of almost always large terrestrial mammals.

attack. Kittenberger did not have to do anything *then* as someone else was acting on his behalf; however, his verbal act is just as *murderous* as his servant's spear or F. Jackson's firearm, as he does not slay the animal in its *physical reality* but in its *cognoscibility*, since – as mentioned above – it is possible to do away with disturbing strangeness both in the virtual and the 'outside' world that carries the potential of real danger. However, we must beware that our discourse is not the one to declare the strange character of the perceived element, especially not in a way that, in the meantime, the discourse considers itself legitimate in a space whose causal system of rules it is unaware of. Actually, Kittenberger ascribes referentiality to his discourse while not being aware of the fact that due to his gestures and interpretation he is the truest outsider in the situation on the ground, he is the unethical one and not the *Indicator* that defies his expectations.

As a matter of fact, the *action ethics* of the video game is that the players, by and in their gestures, must accept the strange nature of the spaces and times emerging before their very eyes as well as that the entities 'found therein' can be interpreted exclusively within the game space, while, at the same time, players are free to act against unknown elements. In terms of discourse ethics, Kittenberger has failed, but he has successfully got away with his behaviour that qualifies as divergent concerning the greater honeyguide. But in order for the player to cope with the borderline situations of the simulated gameplay and to familiarize themselves with the game ethics, the player must first step up against their own aversion to strangeness.

The 'participants' in our example situation above performed some actions that are as close as they get to playing a video game: they set off on a journey to explore unknown territories only for reasons of gaining experience and knowledge (so, not to make a living), that is, in a self-serving manner, just the way it happens in games. However, when they come up against some barriers that function according to principles unknown to them, they take the liberty to *bring the unknown working principles of their game spaces under the sway of their discourse based on their own principles*. Thereby, they left the space and time of their gamer-like exploration and returned to the discourse's medium of linear events, as video game is the very first medium that with its *world-creating capacity* is capable of putting media users into 'real-life situations' – fortunately, without creating the circumstances for the physical dangers that are potentially lurking there. Kittenberger's negative example may serve us well in learning about *the openness towards challenges*

posed by the game and the ability to be attentive to the *capability of the mythical quest to consummate existence*, which succeeds even if the story we are part of lacks the categories of meaning and reference – and, consequently, those of ethical nature.

In what follows, we will touch upon the ethical implications of video game usage, and we continue to maintain the validity of our statement above that roaming about the digital worlds under our analysis cannot be qualified as an *a priori* condemnable phenomenon, but most often the players' circumstances of life are the conducive factors to carrying on experiences acquired inside the game's reality, even after leaving the virtual world, and to using them *in non-game contexts*.

### Interferences of Real and Virtual Worlds<sup>6</sup>

*The Australian's* online edition broke some disturbing news on 17 June 2012: a Taiwanese boy lost his life after having played video games almost constantly for 40 hours in a row. Newspaper editors argue that the 18-year-old boy passed away due to circulatory failure as a result of a strenuous, abnormally prolonged sitting.<sup>7</sup> Further news from the realm of gloomy reality, from far, far away, from the mythical lands of bank robbers with sawed-off shotguns and of Hollywood celebrities with extra-large account statements keep invading our old (crippled, dying?) continent and depict young video gamers (sometimes children) committing massacres in schools and other public spaces...<sup>8</sup> But our overcivilized Europe could not be immune to such series of rampages either. Bringing forward the sole example of the Winnenden school shooting<sup>9</sup> will presumably not entitle us to draw a general conclusion, but it will perfectly suit our purpose to illustrate

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<sup>6</sup> Excerpts from this chapter were also published in Korunk 2012/12. See Péter, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/breaking-news/taiwan-teen-dies-after-gaming-for-40-hours/story-fn3dxix6-1226428437223>.

<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, we could cite plenty of examples here, but we shall consider a few instances only: 20 April 1999 – the Columbine high-school massacre. Perpetrators: Dylan Klebold (18 years) and Eric Harris (17 years). See: <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/columbine-high-school-massacre>.

20 July 2012 – Aurora shooting. Perpetrator: James Eagan Holmes (25 years). Criminalists believe that video games could also influence the shooter in carrying through his gruesome act. See Holmes, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> 11 March 2009 – the Winnenden school shooting. Perpetrator: Tim Kretschmer. See Kaiser, 2009.

that in our globalized world we can easily find people geographically situated far away from one another but with similar backgrounds and behavioural patterns. The articles cited here, mostly referring to experts, note that the juvenile offenders engaged in such shootings have spent a great amount of time playing – mostly the so-called role-playing shooter – video games. Besides, the 32-year-old Norwegian bomber and mass murderer Anders Behring Breivik was also allegedly playing video games during his preparation for the assassinations,<sup>10</sup> but at the same time media organs stress that computer shooting games should not be taken as the triggering cause.<sup>11</sup> Simon Parkin publishes his aforementioned article in April 2012, and in it he convincingly argues that Breivik's motives are not to be looked for in the digitally generated virtual world, but he has been driven towards his 'killing spree' by lot more complex and *empirical* motivations.

Video games have had a 'criminal record' of their own anyway, combined with a negative media coverage and a poor public image; so, the numerous extreme events – a few of which we have already mentioned above – were the last thing the numerical–visual–interactive–entertainment-oriented industry needed. The wrong perception of video games may also be due to that the initial phase of their mass circulation was connected with amusement arcades equipped with analogue-digital, coin-operated game machines built to run some kind of program, basically functioning as sort of money pits, stormed by minors and dozens of adults 'meant for a better life' only to waste a vast amount of time, energy, and money seemingly to no purpose or end. This tendency is also corroborated by the fact that computer games have stayed under the radar of scientific analyses for a long time and only very few noteworthy analyses have come to light to treat this type of *new media*. Miguel Sicart also makes it clear that being ethical in the space and time of computer games means nothing else but following their rules, while condemning or 'blaming' them for their presumed negative effects on someone's lifestyle is at least as unethical as the immorality computer games are often labelled with.<sup>12</sup> As we have also pointed out above, *a game is a game by default*, and only external circumstances can turn it into a constituent of events with negative outcomes.

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<sup>10</sup> Pidd, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Parkin, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Sicart, 2009. 27–28.

Mentally created virtual worlds have always operated like this, providing cultures – regardless of the medium – with projection patterns whose incorporation into personalities had an undeniable influence over the matters of the *non-fictional world*. From this perspective, the verbalism of alterity, the printed publications of the Reformation and Enlightenment, television viewing reaching a global scale in the middle of the last century, and the significant presence of computer games since the 1970s are all analogous media with one another as each one of them offers alternative worlds that change the core being of their receivers as a result of physical actions of various importance performed in or with them. Applying Jauss's interpretation of catharsis<sup>13</sup> on numerical entertainment does not give computer games the privilege to have all aesthetic categories applied to arts so far automatically attached to them, but we must acknowledge that this particular 'subspecies' of interactive narrations, requiring digital mediation, disposes of some features that call for a 'cosmetic' approach – not necessarily that every computer game would or should be an eye-catching piece of art, but that experiencing them can only take place via an interface that, in order to be useable or recognizable at all, needs to appear *wieldy* (in Heidegger's acceptation) and as such has to make possible the mediation between the player and the cyberworld. The internal systems of hyperspaces function by themselves as referentials, and their users and receivers will inevitably implement them – based on 'cognitive handholds' provided by external reference systems – into their everyday non-digital life practices; therefore, the 'life-changing' dimension of video games will unfold only in the process marked by the encounter between the digital and the physical worlds, which process is necessarily *artificial*, that is, an artefact, and, as such, we can trace back on it the process of this making, hidden behind elaboration – ideally, the user cannot see the code, they just use it via an aestheticized interface.

### Digitally narrated worlds

Video games – as we have pointed out above – are in fact *interactive world-like simulations* that create such cultural and even geographical landmarks that can occasionally overwrite information coming from empirical access to the 'real' world and that can require such *proficiency in accessing* (information,

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<sup>13</sup> Jauss, 1999. 175.

data, etc.) that in certain cases cannot always be implemented outside of digitally generated spaces. But – as Breivik’s ‘example’ has already demonstrated – the skills acquired in digital games can sometimes emphatically interfere with the flow of real-life events. Of course, less striking cases have a much stronger presence, but our society tends to pay attention to outstanding events, while the more determining, conditioning operations may succeed practically without any reflection. As suggested before, media, behavioural, and cultural studies alike gave proof of a delayed reaction to the global-scale effects of video games and, unfortunately, they drew the bulk of their conclusions from these extreme examples. At the same time, this form of playing a game, which visibly does not tilt the player’s development in favour of society, seemed an increasingly unproductive activity in the untrained eyes of institutions that bring cultural canons under regulation on the arenas of transaction markets for social goods as well as on forums through their conducts.

Gadamer describes gaming as a hermeneutical activity *par excellence* during what the player assumes a state of total subjection to the gameplay, through which they favour the game’s inherent teleology<sup>14</sup>. From this perspective, not only video gaming becomes legitimate but also all *game-like* activities with an in-built purpose; however, as we have remarked in our introductory lines, owing to a series of events getting wide media coverage, public opinion has stigmatized and science has for long unfairly ignored video games – thus, we might add, it was neglectful, at the same time, of elaborating or even employing the theories providing the hermeneutical legitimation thereof ... whereas it is indisputable that, despite the interactive virtual worlds that adopt computer as their medium, the prolonged aversion on the part of the sciences, and the negative public reaction, video games become an increasingly important part of our daily lives; and now we have to accept it as a natural fact that: for the generations born into the medium of digital devices following the Internet boom and its use becoming commonplace, wandering about the realms of *Elder Scrolls* for several weeks seems a lot more natural than the daily chore of taking out the garbage.

Nevertheless – as we can establish without having resort to any scientific background information –, virtual spaces are not free from the ideologies of the ‘physical world’ either and computer games are more of

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<sup>14</sup> Gadamer, 1976. 53.

a *market player* than entities promoting social accommodation and socialization. But it is undeniable that both single-player games and Internet games, which allow the simultaneous participation of large masses of players, provide particular, novel virtual-world experiences for those playing them, and these experiences can serve as common references outside the virtual gaming worlds too. Regrettably, video gamers are mistakenly subject to a number of stereotypes – especially thanks to the silly movies of the Hollywood ‘nightmare factory’, public opinion classifies them as overweight, frustrated, unwashed freaks locking themselves up in their rooms or, at best, as ‘hacker prodigies’. One need only look at any *active* online or multiplayer (involving several live characters) game to easily acknowledge that, parallel to today’s absurd politics and our daily lives packed with petty compromises along our struggles for everyday survival, there are *virtual realms* of formidable size and complexity unfolding in the hyperspaces of infinite possibilities. Another stereotypical view makes us look for the typical player among underage boys. A detailed statistics would probably be available at companies operating massively multiplayer online games (using random samples combined with, say, questionnaires would not likely hold out the promise of revealing the scale of this phenomenon), which information, however, they would not give away on the grounds of being business secrets; none the less, accounts of Gábor Laufer’s own experiences also tell us about adults using single- or multiplayer video games.

From the increasingly frequently organized video game championships to simulated worlds of immense complexity, countless formal as well as informal gamer forums are constantly emerging and determining to an ever-larger extent the experiencing of cultures, wherever these may be. One blessing of globalization is the evolution of digital devices and communication channels into entities of global complexity,<sup>15</sup> which, on the one hand, catalyses the convergence of cultures and, on the other, it has played a decisive role in the emergence of new models of culture.

It is enough to mention the hundred-thousand-strong crowd of players who enter on a daily basis the parallel reality of the *World of Warcraft*, a 2004 debutante combining mediaeval, fantasy, and hypermodern

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<sup>15</sup> Except, of course, the extreme cases such as the economically underdeveloped, civil-war zones of Africa (e.g. Somalia), the North Korean public communications system paralysed by communist censorship, etc.

elements, where players are enticed by fully-developed alternative mythologies built on archetypes inspired from the various cultures of the physical world. But there is also *StarCraft*, a sci-fi strategy game launched in 1998 with a more modest and not so much mythicized gameplay, which still has not lost its charm to allure great masses of players. Any attempt at taking stock of the numberless MMOs<sup>16</sup> – whose significant proportion is of a science-fiction nature – in order to pick out the greatest, the most successful one that generates the most profit, the most spectacular, or the bloodiest one would be to no avail as the currently available resources could assist us in incorporating them into a meaningful critical narration only if we took no notice of the uniqueness and specific qualities of every experience and mode of use, which, however, would strip them of the very essence of gaming experience. As to their functionality, virtual worlds that include masses of people and are specialized in hyperculture development necessarily relate to some of the real-world structures – occasionally, the program itself is designed in such a way as to expect online players to adapt to certain systems of requirements brought along from ‘outside’. However, the fact that one can stop or quit playing them at any time deprives them of their referential character and actually qualifies them as inconclusive. Since most video games may reward their players exclusively within the limits of their virtual space (otherwise, we would have to include them in the category of online gambles or social sweepstakes), they compensate for their *non-reality* – namely for the fact that we can switch them off without any consequences to the physical reality – with mechanisms causing specific psychological dependence used by game developers aiming at having those joining in spend as much time as possible in their cyberworlds ‘populated’ by people coming from the four corners of our planet. In addition – and this refers mostly to free portals –, they try to maintain their servers and staff with overt or covert product promotions. However, since these procedures are usually business secrets, we must be content with generalizing our empirical experiences. On the other hand, it would not be fair to analyse every (free) mass online game along its specific economic features because all online video games requiring groups of people can be also described along these groups’ behaviours/attitudes and along the transposition of these behaviours into

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<sup>16</sup> Abbreviation for: Massively Multiplayer Online Game.

other media – as those playing, for instance, the Facebook-based *Farmville*<sup>17</sup> or *CityVille*, developed by the San Francisco-established Zynga, will probably meet up in other (hyper)spaces as well, but following up these encounters and information exchanges is considered unethical in the eyes of all scientific disciplines for tracing personal interactions in both public cyberspace and private chatrooms should be subject to prohibition.<sup>18</sup> Games designed around empire conquests, waging wars, or peaceful constructions and developments equally require their participants to pay maximum attention to *internal* events while they are *present*, but, at the same time, they do not always provide contents that are congruent with the values detectable based upon the player's cultural concept.

In addition to self-organizing worlds – that we might as well call democratic – with a barely perceptible, sometimes hidden 'moderation', the video game phenomenon nowadays has an enormous organizational framework as well.

So, foreign literature, awoken from its initial slow reception, is now virtually in full bloom in direct proportion to the exponentially growing titles published by foreign game development studios, while speaking in domestic terms – having remained stuck so far with a culture promoting conservatism that not always yields positive results –, we can rarely encounter video game development initiatives stretching the limits of virtual reality. One can meet extremely few cases of such 'digital white crows' to float above our virtual Hungarian sky confined within the ever-smothering embrace of the Carpathians, whereas acquiring a skill set directly usable in interactive digital worlds would offer a lot more beneficial assistance in maintaining our culture – e.g. lamenting the glorious past – that gradually finds itself at the mercy of international financial institutions.

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<sup>17</sup> *Farmville* also allows the creation of worlds that work analogously to the real one though their 'building blocks' run *shockingly* counter to each other.

<sup>18</sup> Theoretically, these measures are indeed prohibited and in practice we usually do not really care about whether or not the Internet provider, the program used, or the person next to us retains whatever we communicate with our 'virtual friend' (this stays valid, of course, for cases when we are not handling valuable/sensitive data). Besides, the relationship between the Internet and the private sphere is a highly debated issue nowadays, creating a forum for countless ethical blunders and felicitous expressions of opinion alike. According to our observations, the 'inclusion' of neither the currently valid legislation nor the determining patterns of our actions can help us to get our bearings in these virtual spaces with a transparent operating rules not yet formed.

What is more, video games and *life-like*, interactive simulations would ensure an efficient medium of preserving and interpreting the past. We only need to mention historian Tamás Baltavári (student at Zrínyi Miklós National Defence University) and Rómeó Partigh Kis (student at Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary), who used the software of Creative Assembly to create the digital, animated reconstruction of the Battle of Mohács, among others. This is the background for the initiative of the *Történelmi Animációs Egyesület* (Society for Historical Animations) and of the Hungarian National Digital Archive, which aims at creating the possibility to re-enact the significant battles of Hungarian history.<sup>19</sup> But obviously monopolizing the ludic virtual spaces and times for the rehabilitation of actual events would be preposterous – it is much more appropriate to leave them in their *quasi-private/separate reality*, that is to say: to make them as independent as possible from historically charged ideas that are not always ethically coded, and give them the freedom of interpretation that takes place in the course of their happening.

While the numerical monsters' pillar legs are rumbling on the global market struggling to get to grips with reality and cyber dragons take flight from the four corners of the world, their wings blocking the simulated suns, we cannot vouch with all certainty for a home-programed Neo, forged in the very depths of Hungarian culture, that he could truly dodge the bullets of any Agent Smith. The 1983-founded, Budapest-based video game development company, Novotrade International (later Appaloosa Interactive), closed its gates in 2006;<sup>20</sup> after more than a decade of existence, the also Budapest-based Black Hole Entertainment was facing serious financial challenges in 2012;<sup>21</sup> and Philos Laboratories could not stay afloat either, not even for ten years, on the global market of interactive entertainment companies.<sup>22</sup> Zen Studios (formerly known as Rubik Interactive), for instance, is still in business: it is mostly specialized in digital emulations of amusement arcade machines (Pinball, Flipper, etc.), but it also creates low- to mid-range shooting games (e.g. *The Punisher – No Mercy*, 2009). It is our duty to pay special tribute to the Hungarian game developer team of SoftView,

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<sup>19</sup> <http://www.origo.hu/techbazis/szamitogep/20120327-ingyenes-jatek-keszul-a-nagy-magyar-csatakbol.html>.

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.mobygames.com/company/appaloosa-interactive-corporation>.

<sup>21</sup> [www.pcguru.hu/pcguru/cikkek.php?cikkid=21408](http://www.pcguru.hu/pcguru/cikkek.php?cikkid=21408).

<sup>22</sup> <http://modzone.web4.hu/cikk/philos-laboratories-egy-nagy-ceg-bukasa>.

which – according to the interview published in Tamás Beregi’s book –<sup>23</sup> took upon themselves the bulk of the 1987-published legendary *The Last Ninja*, which eventually saw the light under the aegis of System 3 as an action-adventure game developed for Commodore 64 and which the American *System 3* ‘generously’ failed to reward, while, at that, they also liberated them of the source code of the world-famous multi-sequel game.

So, it appears that neither the one-time nor recent ‘virtualia developers’ could spin resounding, Hungarian-‘rooted’ success stories, which could later on – considering the current virtualization tendencies – work even to the disadvantage of the Hungarian culture.

As a matter of course, we do not inhabit the spaces of computer games in our flesh-and- blood forms but through our gestures, our intentions brought into play, and, of course, our attitude that always makes a mark. Each and every game space imposes its own set of rules on those joining them, but they also let their players manifest as individuals in the realm of binary digits. Experiencing mediation into the digital world, that is, the individual’s voluntary subordination to the numerical medium entails that through their virtual actions players have to reflect the simulated world, but – as we have pointed out above – it is not an absolute necessity that these actions be in line with a real-world system of requirements. Thus, digitalia *a priori* alter us and ‘tamper into’ our being, but not like earlier media, which – even though their reception required a ‘whole person’ – could not create such a complex, empirical world as video games can by virtue of their ability to truly captivate players wandering in their hyperspaces, as these games can involve far more senses in their processes than any analogue or high-tech predecessor of them.

## Conclusions

Video games, stigmatized by the *real-world* public opinion as factors triggering dissociative attitude, have developed into activities permeating the lives of generations – so, they are the central characters of much more than play-rooms or (amusement) arcades inhabited by spotty teenagers. By the dawn of the third millennium, video games have also grown out of their adolescence and have developed into top-listed products and

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<sup>23</sup> Beregi, 2010. 194–209.

business activities of global media enterprises. Since by definition they are games, their primary purpose is *game itself*; however, as a few of the above paragraphs have already discussed, they also have a growing economic and social impact (we must note that they are not quantifiable from every aspect), whereas certain interests can be traced down as well behind the events taking place in hyperspaces. There is a generally identifiable tendency that *world-like interactive hyperspaces*, most often named 'video games', are gaining more and more ground in the lives of individuals and communities alike. Too little time has elapsed since the appearance of video games for us to detect clearly outstanding analogue-digital interferences, but we can already ascertain that the series of activities taking place on our planet are inevitably moving towards the increasingly dominant digitalization, virtualization. We are not to give any predictions here, but we assume that this tendency will gradually grow, and very probably we will not enter the *Matrix* but the *Matrix* will interfere with the process of real events.

Furthermore, we believe it is utterly important to accept that digital games cannot be played exclusively *for internal pleasures* due to the current system of ethics, and with our minds liberated by way of this very acceptance it is worth taking on a journey to explore the *brave new world* of new kind of infinite spaces, times, and 'shape-shifting' identities.

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## FAKE NEWS AND THE DIGITAL MEDIA. THE CHANGING BATTLE FOR PEOPLE'S HEARTS, MINDS AND ILLUSIONS

PETER GROSS\*

**Abstract.** This keynote address at the Digital Media International Conference at the Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj, Romania, on May 2017 briefly discusses fake news and the nature of its effectiveness; then addresses the potential, theoretical negatives and reasons for them when fake news is disseminated by via digital media; and concludes with some remarks about the reshaping of the public sphere, an issue that is wide open for scholarly exploration.

**Keywords:** fake news, digital media, dissemination, public sphere

In the fall of 1938, one of the foremost American actors, writers and directors of his time, Orson Welles, used a communication technology introduced in the early 1920s to perform an adaptation of H.G. Well's science fiction novel, *The War of the Worlds*. Welles localized the novel by describing in a radio program a Martian invasion of New Jersey, creating fake news that caused nationwide hysteria. This was a case of literary license with the intent to entertain but not to deceive for any sort of gain or nefarious purposes, which was and is not the case in most other instances of fake news.

Propaganda, misinformation, disinformation and all manner of informational hoaxes have been present in recorded history from one end of the globe to the other, driven by political, economic, cultural, religious, military, nationalist and other ambitions. The speed and extent of dissemination of such fare was dependent on the available information technologies. Today's new

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\* Professor and (former) Director, School of Journalism and Electronic Media, The University of Tennessee, U.S.A.

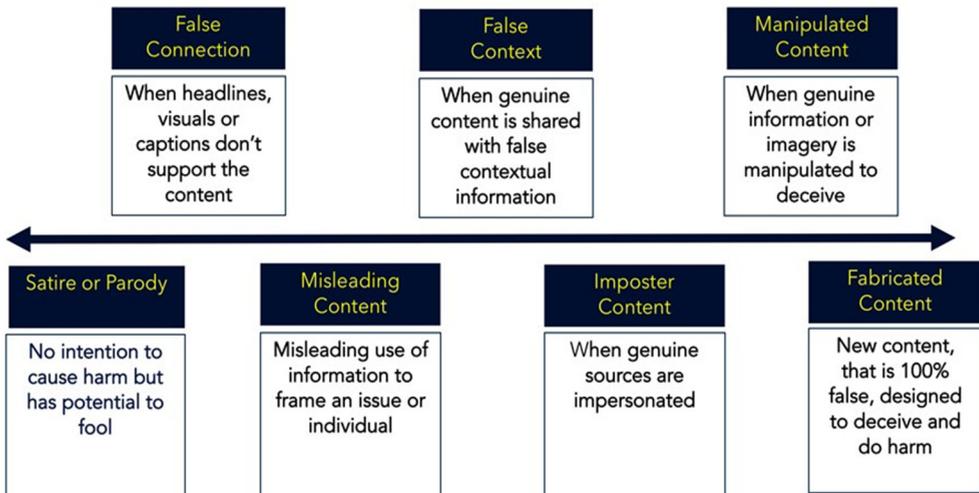
communication platforms introduced new dimensions that change the very nature of mass communication, of the public sphere, and of the potential impacts of fake news.

This article briefly discusses fake news and the nature of its effectiveness; then addresses the potential, theoretical negatives and reasons for them when fake news is disseminated by via digital media; and concludes with some remarks about the reshaping of the public sphere, an issue that is wide open for scholarly exploration.

### Fake news

There are seven identifiable types of fake news (see Graph I). The first six types were relatively common throughout the history of media and continue to be a feature of both traditional and digital media. Hoaxes, the seventh kind of fake news, are the standard fare of consciously organized communication warfare found during hot or cold wars. Their employment by totalitarian and authoritarian countries, usually through their own media and those of their surrogates, is standard practice.

Graph I - Seven Types of Fake News



**Source:** Claire Wardell, First Draft News, 16 February 2017.  
<https://firstdraftnews.com/fake-news-complicated/>

A. Not surprisingly, the most numerous and glaring examples of fake news originate with totalitarian dictatorships – like North Korea, for example; with autocracies – like Belarus; and theocracies – like the Iranian regime. During the communist era, Eastern European countries were quite proficient in continuously feedings their domestic and international audiences with fake news of all types and sizes.

Media in democratic countries are also known to spread politically driven hoaxes from time to time, causing untold harm. Such was the case in the U.S. in December 2016 when, after learning on the Internet that a pizzeria in Washington, D.C. was the center of a child sex ring, supposedly linked to then Democratic Party candidate Hillary Clinton, a man fired a semi-automatic assault rifle inside the restaurant. It was an act, he claimed, meant to make a statement about the sex ring but also a political one against Clinton.

In other instances, hoaxes can launch an international incident, even a war. One of the most recent examples is the fake news on the website AWDnews that Pakistan was planning to send ground troops to Syria. It created additional fake news in the form of a supposed statement by Israel's Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman threatening the nuclear annihilation of Pakistan if it should dispatch those troops. The gullible Pakistani Defense Minister, Khawaja Muhammad Asif, did not recognize any of this as fake news and, in response, threatened Israel with nuclear weapons – for real.<sup>1</sup>

From the global perspective, by far the most prolific fake news, including outright hoaxes, originates from Russia, which uses “disinformation, incitement to violence and hate speech to destroy trust, sap morale, degrade the information space, erode public discourse and increase partisanship,” according to Lucas and Pomeranzev.<sup>2</sup>

They go on to point out that Russia's methods of information warfare differ from those used by the Soviet Union. The Kremlin's agenda is promoted more artfully today, aiming to “confuse, befuddle and distract...to erode

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<sup>1</sup> Matt Broomfield, “Pakistan issues nuclear warning to Israel in response to 'fake news' story. Israeli Ministry of Defense forced to point out initial story 'completely fictitious',” in *The Independent*, 25 December 2016.  
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/pakistan-israel-nuclear-warning-fake-news-story-response-islamabad-syria-a7494961.html>

<sup>2</sup> Edward Lucas and Peter Pomeranzev, “Winning the Information War. Techniques and counter-strategies to Russian propaganda in Central and Eastern Europe.” A report by CEPA's Information Warfare Project in Partnership with the Legatum Institute. August 2016. [www.cepa.org](http://www.cepa.org)

public support for Euro-Atlantic values in order to increase its own relative power." Russia does so by exploiting "ethnic, linguistic, regional, social and historical tensions, and promotes anti-systemic causes, extending their reach and giving them a spurious appearance of legitimacy. "Targeting almost every corner of the world, Russia's disinformation and misinformation is not meant to "convince or persuade, but rather to undermine. Instead of agitating audiences into action, it seeks to keep them hooked and distracted, passive and paranoid."

We do not yet have sufficient knowledge as to how effective all this is, certainly not in a cumulative, long-term way. For the moment, the Kremlin's fake news factory appears to have mixed effects in general. In certain instances, it has limited effects, even if its hoaxes appear to excite those who are fans of Putin's autocracy and his policies. Two recent examples:

1. The Russia Today (RT) news program - a Kremlin controlled network broadcasting in several languages - on 4 January 2017 claimed that NATO was "massively" reinforcing its eastern flank with 3,600 U.S. tanks. In truth, only 87 were deployed. It no doubt reinforced and attracted favorable attention from those who were already inclined to believe in such nonsense but there is no empirical data showing it had any other effect in or out of the region.

2. The "news" on 18 August 2016 that the U.S. "has started" transferring its nuclear weapons from Turkey's Incirlik Air Base to the Deveselu military base in Romania given the apparent breakdown of relations between Turkey and the U.S. Based on two anonymous sources, the story was featured on both the English and Romanian versions of EurActiv.com. It was quickly picked up by *Pravda*, that long-standing Russian stronghold of journalistic credibility, then by Sputnik news - a Russian government news agency, website and broadcaster established in 2014 - and then by RT, which disseminates subtle and not-so-subtle, pro-Russian, anti-Western, and anti-democracy messages, along with sundry tidbits of disinformation and propaganda in almost three dozen languages.

There was no truth to the story. Moving nuclear weapons cannot be done on the spur of the moment. Special storage facilities must be built, which the Deveselu base does not have, and the transfer process is not as easy as putting a kayak on a flight to some destination. Nevertheless, ever so helpful in discovering the truth and providing useful explanations, on the

same day the story appeared on its site, Sputnik news published an unsigned, brief “analysis” titled, “See the destructive effect in the event of an explosion of nuclear bombs at Deveselu.” It was meant to scare Romanians, divide them, and turn them against the government and NATO, or at least shake their confidence in both. The bulk of Romania’s media, which, as a generalization, has some serious professional deficits, did not believe the story, published denials from both Romanian and American authorities. The story did not agitate the majority of Romanians.

B. Let’s return to the other six type of fake news, which are, in fact, far more common – false connections, false context, manipulated content (which facts are chosen, how they are ordered, what sources are used, etc.), satire or parody (like Orson Welles, War of the Worlds), misleading content, and imposter content. These kinds of fake news were always and continue to be part of traditional journalism’s ecology and until 2016 when fake news was “discovered” was called biased, spin, lies and other pejoratives.

Whether found in traditional media or digital/social media this kind of journalism - together with its adjuncts, the op-ed pages and the “analysis” offered up by talk shows, panels and “experts” expressing their perspectives - is no less dis-informing or mis-informing than outright hoaxes. It is meant to exert a spell, to seduce in the name of an ideology, political, national, military, cultural or other goal. The sources of such fake news are the beliefs that “breed smaller and greater biases, malodorous or not, and require proselytizing and reinforcing, which demands narratives containing just the right selection of facts, organized and presented to fit a ‘perspective’.”<sup>3</sup>

Fake news has the potential to mobilize people. However, it mostly it reinforces existing attitudes, beliefs and values, which in itself can set the stage of good or bad behaviors, political and ideological choices, various hatreds, and so on. Of course, this may also lead individuals to militate for policies or actions that are ultimately deleterious to democracy, liberalism, and therefore truth, decency, and rationality.

Unfortunately for the authors of fake news, it does not always work. Witness, for example, Macron’s win in France despite the fake news that was

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Gross, “The Fake Newness of Fake News World faked out by phenomenon known oh so well in Eastern Europe!” May 3, 2017. <http://www.tol.org/client/article/26893-fake-newsmedia-eastern-europe-propaganda-russia.html>

supposed to have been spread about him.<sup>4</sup> Another example is last year's American presidential election when there was an abundance of fake news during the 2016 campaign, which continues to fuel controversy around the new White House administration. A study by economists Matthew Gentzkow (Stanford University) and Hunt Allcott (New York University) shows that fake news favored Donald Trump more so that it favored Hillary Clinton.<sup>5</sup> But Getzkow and Allcott found that ideology-informed "reporting" by the U.S. media, the myriads of small and large fake news, apparently had no noteworthy influence on the election's outcome. There may be a good reason for this.

Since the 1980s, Americans increasingly perceive the traditional media to be biased and untrustworthy, according to Pew Research Center surveys. Undoubtedly, most social media, blogs and other Internet-based outlets with their say-whatever-comes-to-mind, rumor and opinion-based information are making things worse. Let's remember that more than half of Americans get their news via digital/social media, thus exponentially increasing their chances of being exposed to even more fake news. Politically middle-of-the-road Americans were simply not fooled by fake news, regardless of its origins.

For instance, Russian hacking, meddling and whatever fake news for which it was responsible did not lose the election for Hillary Clinton. It did, however, appear to have some effects: it created a myth, it excited politicians and their partisan constituents, which in turn served them well in creating confusion and mistrust that some Americans were all too eager to embrace. It also led the media to "discover" there was such a thing as fake news and drove many outlets to embark on a search for ways to stop fake news, disingenuously and conveniently forgetting that they themselves disseminated news and information sculpted to fit a politico-ideological narrative, i.e. Lilliputian and Godzilla-size fake news, for decades before 2016.

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<sup>4</sup> Tony Romm, "A 'fake news' crackdown could follow Macron's election win in France. The incoming French president could take aim at the role social media sites play in spreading misinformation," on Recode, May 7, 2017.  
<https://www.recode.net/2017/5/7/15573826/macron-france-election-win-fake-news-crackdown-social-media-misinformation>. Accessed 19 May 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election," in *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Spring 2017, 31(2): 211-236.

Evgeny Morozov is quite right when he argues that democracy is NOT in any greater danger from fake news than it was before its discovery in 2016 amidst the chaos of Brexit, the U.S. presidential election, the Italian referendum and other political happenings in Europe and elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> Echoing the findings of Gentzkow and Allcott's study, he writes about political candidates in 2016 and 2017: "Apparently, all these earnest, honest and unfashionably rational grownups are losing elections because of a dangerous epidemic of fake news, internet memes and funny YouTube videos." This applies to the outcome of the recent French elections, mentioned earlier, with Macron defeating the candidates of both the traditional parties and Le Pen's nationalist grouping. And it may well apply to the German elections, despite Angela Merkel's stated fear of fake news.<sup>7</sup>

This is not to minimize the dangers of fake news and Russian fake news in particular. After all, Russia has intensified its information warfare and its fake news is more abundant, sophisticated, integrated into a larger politico-military strategy, and widespread than any seen emanating from any other country in any other historical era. Digital media amplifies the danger of fake news in general and Russian fake news in particular. There are indeed justifiable arguments that the digital media are releasing even more fake news than the traditional media and that it is propagated more widely given the very specific characteristics of the former. These specific characteristics pose the greater threat to democracy and liberalism from the point of view of communicative effectiveness.

### **Social media and the nature of media effects**

The digital media we are discussing here are those allowing individuals to build personal web pages such as blogs, podcasts and wikis and to enter small or large "virtual" communities to connect with friends and strangers

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<sup>6</sup> Evgeny Morozov, "Moral panic over fake news hides the real enemy – the digital giants," in *The Guardian*, 7 January 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com> Accessed 7 May 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Ishaan Tharoor, "'Fake news' threatens Germany's election, too, says Merkel," in *The Washington Post*. November 23, 2016. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/11/23/fake-news-threatens-germanys-election-too-says-merkel/?utm\\_term=.b08cee7b6b42](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/11/23/fake-news-threatens-germanys-election-too-says-merkel/?utm_term=.b08cee7b6b42). Accessed 19 May 2017.

with shared interests - Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, Google, LinkedIn, Reddit, and Pinterest, among others.<sup>8</sup> Audiences for news and information are now hyper atomized, way beyond their tie-in to existing traditional media, constituting billions of one-person audiences that often concurrently double as disseminators of such fare.

Digital media allow for connectivity and interaction that encourages the contribution of personal news and information, together with the forwarding of select traditional media fare and opinions in a two-way conversation. Such conversations thrive on feedback from others, whether they are inside the variously sized groups or "communities," or outside them. Digital/social media's attributes more specifically include participation, openness, conversation, community, and connectedness.<sup>9</sup> As a generalization, they also create communities of mutual support to a much greater degree than the traditional media do. And, these are more immediate and intimate.

On the positive side, they offer an opportunity for their users to act as fact-checkers, identifying real bias and inaccurate facts disseminated by the traditional media. On the negative side, they create echo chambers that potentially heighten the reinforcement of beliefs and attitudes. Even more significantly, digital media generally depend on swift algorithms to sort what is disseminated, instead of on editing done by trained editors.

It is these distinct characteristics of digital media that are of interest to us. Before we address these characteristics, we must mention that there is one important attribute that the traditional and digital media have in common: the fact that both form or offer the possibility of forming communities at the macro-level. The traditional media's macro communities are of various sizes and have local and regional audiences; a few will have national audiences. Whereas digital media do the same but their macro communities are infinite in their sizes and, additionally, they transcend the local-regional-national and are also global in their make-up.

In contrast, however, the digital media communities vary in size to an infinitely greater degree and are continuously shifting as people join and

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<sup>8</sup> Wikis are websites that allow people to add content and edit information on them, e.g. Wikipedia.

<sup>9</sup> Angel Tesorero, "The Characteristics of Social Media." 13 April 2013.  
<http://homeofservice.com/blogs/21/the-characteristics-of-social-media/#.WRIJZrWSOKs>  
Accessed 9 May 2017.

leave them contingent on the individual urges to join a conversation, post something from the traditional media or their own views on a topic, event or idea. They do so one-time or multiple times, and are involved short or long-term creating a liquid communication world is, arguably, part and parcel of the “liquid modernity” that has individuals living fragmented lives, with institutions and social forms constantly changing and providing little in terms of frames of reference and long-term plans.<sup>10</sup> In short, what the digital media offer that traditional media do not is that they create communities at the micro-level of the individual, for the individual.

The audiences of both traditional and digital media share some attributes, specifically their inclination to select the media outlet that aligns with their preconceived beliefs and attitudes, in line with Joseph T. Klapper’s selective exposure theory that historically refers to individuals’ tendency to favor information that reinforces their pre-existing views while avoiding information that is contrary.<sup>11</sup> As the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget noted in his selection exposure theory, when a mismatch occurs, individuals find it “inherently dissatisfying” and so they seek out information that is based on their beliefs, perspectives, and attitudes.<sup>12</sup>

These are, of course, salient characteristics of the effects and influences both in traditional and digital media.

That said, the digital media’s specific attributes inevitably bring us to the issue of both direct and indirect media effects or influences, and the potential increased dangers of fake news.

A. Traditional media’s effects and influences are predominantly limited and indirect. They are so because they are predicated on a view dominated by the context of the audience members’ social relationships and culture. Specifically, the degree of effects and influences depend on the interpersonal influences of opinion leaders with whom audience members identify, with family members, friends, neighbors and co-workers. Traditional media are suppliers of the topics of discussion and consideration, but not the direct authorities for opinion and attitude-formation in most instances and, therefore, not the direct arbiters of people’s decision making.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See Zygmund Bauman, *Liquid Modernity. Living in an Age of Uncertainty*. Polity, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph T. Klapper, *The Effects of Mass Communication*. Free Press, 1960.

<sup>12</sup> See William Hart, et al., "Feeling validated versus being correct: A meta-analysis of selective exposure to information." *Psychological Bulletin*, 2009, **135** (4): 555-588.

<sup>13</sup> This is reflected in the two-step flow of communication theory.

Research has identified some other characteristics of social/digital media that are not shared with traditional media, thus affecting the nature of direct or indirect effects and influences. Among them are the following:

The new media (a) disseminate information and news to a (theoretically) infinite number of individuals, (b) customize this fare, (c) allow individuals in the audience to voice dissent, immediately and publicly, i.e. to those who access the same outlets, and (d) the new media have audiences that do not rank as high in civic responsibility as those of the traditional media.<sup>14</sup>

B. Arguments that the media in general have direct and significant effects on how audiences consider any given topic are predicated on an approach that considers first and foremost what the media do and how they do it - as opposed to considering audience perspectives or behaviors upon which the indirect media effects approaches do. Denis McQuail best articulates the notion of a powerful and direct media influence when he writes, "...the way media select, process and shape content for their own purposes can have a strong influence on how it is received and interpreted and thus on longer-terms consequences."<sup>15</sup> Agenda setting and framing theories dominated - and still do - in this theorizing about media effects and influences, and by their very nature reinforcing the theory that audiences select the media that feed their preconceived beliefs and attitudes. That is, if the agenda setting and framing of news stories are in accordance with the audiences' beliefs and attitudes it may/will have a direct effect and strong influence. Furthermore, both agenda setting and framing presuppose that the media play a gatekeeping function, which the traditional media more or less do but the digital media do not. Digital media may well engage in a form of gatekeeping given that the "discovery" of fake news last year is driving some like Facebook and Google to attempt to engage in identifying what is and what is not fake news.

With this exceedingly brief overview of the two main schools of thought about media effects and influences, we can now finally assess the details of why there is a potentially greater danger in fake news being distributed through digital media than through traditional ones. The following four points should be considered in this regard:

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<sup>14</sup> See for example, Jed D. Brensinger, Rebecca Gullan and Janis Chakars, "The News Media and New Media: The Internet's Effect on Civic Engagement," in *Media Psychology Review*, 2014, vol. 8:1. <http://mprcenter.org/review/news-media-new-media-internets-effect-civic-engagement/>. Accessed 19 May 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Denis McQuail, *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*. Sage Publications, 2010, pg. 458.

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1. Both the empirically observed limited/indirect and the significant/direct media effects theories have in common the fact that people will choose media that reflect their already entrenched beliefs, attitudes and values. This provides fake news with only qualified, that is, restricted ability to effectively recruit new adherents to a specific set of beliefs, attitudes and values that are not already held by individuals. Qualified and restricted does not, of course, mean that there is no chance to do so. Yet, the digital media does not heighten their reinforcing quality.

2. Digital media puts a premium on what causes the traditional media's effects to be indirect and limited: the importance to opinion and attitude-formation, and ultimately decision making, of family members, friends, neighbors and co-workers. This is the decisive, central power of digital media to have direct/significant effects and influences. One reinforcing example for this conclusion is a recent study by the American Press Institute that shows that Americans ignore the source of a given assertion, i.e. the media outlet, and instead rely much more on the trustworthiness of the person sharing the news and information.<sup>16</sup>

3. The fact that digital media are not the gatekeepers that traditional media are, meaning that fringe groups and individuals have direct access to audiences, to proselytize and recruit, again directly and indirectly via those interpersonal networks that potentially have this media have direct effects and influences.

4. Lastly, unlike with the traditional media, the nature of agenda setting and framing is now also in the hands of individuals and not under the control of owners, publishers, editors and directors, as it is with the traditional media. The digital media are not the gatekeepers of old. They and the individuals who formulate and disseminate news and information follow no particular criteria for the selection of this information and news

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<sup>16</sup> American Press Institute, "Who shared it?": How Americans decide what news to trust on social media." March 20, 2017.  
<https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/publications/reports/survey-research/trust-social-media/>. Accessed May 12, 2017.

released into the world other than their own interests and biases. They follow no journalistic standards in judging the veracity of the information, its source, and so on; they may or may not fact-check.

## Conclusion

The nature and processes of the effects of new media are far more complex than those of the traditional mass media and are only now beginning to be studied. What we know to date is that, both at the micro and macro level, audiences select their new media platforms and the nature of their participation according to their existing beliefs and attitudes just like they do with traditional media. Only more so given the refinement and multiplication of choices, whether political, social, cultural, and so on. There are two traits the digital media do not share with their traditional cousins: (1) as already pointed out, the establishment of echo chambers to a greater extent than the latter do, and (2) the enhancement of interpersonal communication; changing, therefore, the nature and interpretation of the agenda setting and framing of the news and information that is disseminated.

The wholesale alterations in the media world and, therefore, in its relationship with audiences, and the addition of different and substantially increased forms of fake news are contributing to an entirely different kind of public sphere. The traditional bourgeoisie public sphere is gone. It was engineered by among other societal elements – such as coffee houses, bars, libraries, etc. – by the traditional media, who were beholden to political parties, corporate interests, the state, or families that controlled them. Today, individuals and technology companies are the most important curators of information and news. Their engineering of the public sphere is quite different than that of the traditional media and merits concerted study.

For now, fake news and the digital media, separately and in concert, are our most pressing problems. They threaten liberal democracy, a non-ideological ideology already suffering from decades of attack from both the Left and the Right.

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## HOW NEWSWORTHY WERE THE PROTESTS IN ROMANIA FOR THE GERMAN QUALITY PRESS? CASE STUDY: SÜDDEUTSCHE ZEITUNG

JULIA SZAMBOLICS\*, MEDA MUCUNDORFEANU\*\*

**ABSTRACT.** In January 2017, the former Romanian Minister of Justice, Florin Iordache, proposed a decree to decriminalize corruption involving sums of less than 200,000 lei, as well as granting prison pardons and decriminalizing certain offences. On January the 18<sup>th</sup>, the first 5000 protesters shouted their disapproval regarding the published bills on the streets of Romania. Their number increased daily. On February the 5<sup>th</sup>, the largest protest in Romania's history with over 500.000 people on the streets was registered.

The international press covered the story of the protests in Romania, but how newsworthy was this subject for the most widely read German quality newspaper, Süddeutsche Zeitung?<sup>1</sup>

How are the Prime Minister Sorin Grindeanu, the PSD-party-chief Liviu Dragnea and the President of Romania, Klaus Iohannis portrayed in the articles?

**Keywords:** newsworthy, protests, Galtung & Ruge, positive, negative.

### Introduction

"News values will determine whether stories are to be pursued. They will determine whether, if pursued, they will then be published. They will determine, if published, where the stories will be placed in the news

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\* Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania Assist. Prof., PhD., szambolics@fspac.ro

\*\* Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania Lect., PhD., mucundorfeanu@fspac.ro

<sup>1</sup> \*No.1 at the cross medial range among the daily newspapers, according to LAE (Leseranalyse Entscheidungsträger: <http://www.lae.de/>), a reader analysis tool.

presentation. Having been placed, news [sic] values will determine to what extent the public will read them."<sup>2</sup>

Walter Lippmann used in 1922 the term "news value" for the first time regarding the selection and presentation of news. According to him, events have certain characteristics that make them worthy of attention or interest. "These properties or message factors determine the message value, that is, the publication worthiness of an event. The more pronounced these properties are, the greater the message value of the event."<sup>3</sup>

The newsworthiness of events is still a widely discussed subject, especially at this moment, where image and text is surrounding us everywhere. Johan Galtung and Marie Holmboe Ruge conducted in 1965 a study<sup>4</sup> and their research focused on international news stories. The goal of their study was to find out what common factors placed them on the international agenda, and what factors did these stories have in common. The two scientists came up with a set of twelve criteria. The first column represents their set of news values. The authors developed their research based on the three news values determined in the same year by Einar Östgard: simplicity, identification and sensationalism.

A second set of criteria relevant for our case study is the one developed by Monika Bednarek and Helen Caple (as seen in column two). They share a "new approach to allow for a systematic and comprehensive examination of how verbal and visual resources that occur in news discourse construct newsworthiness."<sup>5</sup> They're approach, the discursive news values analysis (DNVA), shows how an event is constructed as news, not how it is selected. This approach is relevant to our case study due to the fact that in the content analysis we searched for similar constructions as the ones described in Bednarek<sup>6</sup> and Caple's paper<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> David Conley, Stephen Lambie (2006): *The Daily Miracle: An Introduction to Journalism*, 3rd edition. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Joachim Friedrich Staab (1990): *Nachrichtenwert-Theorie: formale Struktur und empirischer Gehalt*, Freiburg im Breisgau: Alber, p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> Johan Galtung, Mari Holmboe Ruge (1965): *The Structure of Foreign News*, in *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1965), pp. 64-91.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.newsvaluesanalysis.com/what-is-dnva/>, opened on 25.01.2017.

<sup>6</sup> Monika Bednarek, (2016): *Inventory of linguistic devices constructing newsworthiness*, available at [www.newsvaluesanalysis.com](http://www.newsvaluesanalysis.com)

<sup>7</sup> Helen Caple, Monika Bednarek (2013): *Delving into the Discourse: Approaches to News Values in Journalism Studies and Beyond*, available at <https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:hQnv7nhWULEJ:https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:1f5c6d91-bb1f-4278-a160-66149ecfb36b/datastreams/ATTACHMENT01+&cd=6&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=ro>

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Galtung & Ruge (1965)	Bednarek & Caple (2016)	Harcup & O'neill (2016)
Threshold	Proximity	Exclusivity
Negativity	Negativity/positivity	Bad news
Frequency	Timeliness	Conflict
Unexpectedness	Unexpectedness	Surprise
Consonance	Consonance	Audio-visuals
Personalization	Personalization	Shareability
Meaningfulness	Impact	Relevance
Reference to elite nations	Eliteness	The power elite
Reference to elite persons	Superlativeness	Drama
Unambiguity		Magnitude
Continuity		Follow-up
Composition		Entertainment
		Celebrity
		Good news
		News organisation's agenda

Tab. 1. News Values

The third column of news values was developed by Tony Harcup and Deirdre O'neill<sup>8</sup> in 2016. In 2001, the authors published in the *Journalism Studies* one of the most cited articles, entitled "What is news? Galtung and Ruge revisited". Their latest findings related to the news values can be seen in column 3.

### Methodology

The present study aims to examine what the German newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* wrote about the protests in Romania and how it portrayed the main three political actors: the Romanian president, Klaus Iohannis, the newly elected Prime Minister, Sorin Grindeanu, and the party chief of the social-democrats, Liviu Dragnea.

The research question of the study is: *How newsworthy were the protests in Romania for the newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung?*

To find an answer to this question we used a qualitative research method, the content analysis, and reviewed all newspaper articles from the

<sup>8</sup> Tony Harcup, Deirdre O'neill (2016): *What is news?*, in *Journalism Studies*, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2016.1150193>

website [www.sueddeutsche.de](http://www.sueddeutsche.de) which were related to this subject. The analysis focused on the articles published during a two-week period, from the 22<sup>nd</sup> of January until the 15<sup>th</sup> of February. We selected this period, since the protests gathered the highest number of civilians on the streets of Romania in the country's modern history. Our sample consists of 31 articles from the online version of the newspaper.

The content analysis grid contains the following criteria:

Szambolics & Mucundorfeanu
Proximity
Negativity
Emotional impact
Unexpectedness
Consonance
Personalization
Eliteness/celebrity
Continuity
Shareability
Timeliness
Impact/Relevance

**Tab. 2.** Set of News Values by Szambolics & Mucundorfeanu

We developed our own set based on Galtung & Ruge's, Bednarek & Caple's and Harcup & O'Neill's set. The similarities and description of the news values are presented in the following.

**Proximity** = (Bednarek & Caple), geographically or culturally near; cultural references.

**Negativity** = (Galtung & Ruge, Bednarek & Caple, Harcup & O'Neill), bad news, stories about death, violence; references to negative/positive emotion and attitude.

**Emotional impact** = using visual elements such as photographs, depicting stories concerning an unfolding drama such as escapes, accidents, searches, sieges, rescues, battles, court cases, celebrations, festivities or joyful moments.

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**Unexpectedness** = (Galtung & Ruge, Bednarek & Caple, Harcup & O'neill), events out of the ordinary, unusual happenings; stories that have an element of surprise.

**Consonance** = (Bednarek & Caple), references to stereotypical attributes or preconceptions, assessments of expectedness/typicality.

**Personalization** = (Galtung & Ruge, Bednarek & Caple), having a personal/human face; "news stories that centre on a particular person, and are presented from a human interest angle, are likely to make the front page, particularly if they involve a well-known person"<sup>9</sup>.

**Eliteness/celebrity** = (Galtung & Ruge, Bednarek & Caple, Harcup & O'neill), the media pay attention to the rich, powerful, famous and infamous; role labels; status-indicating adjectives; recognized names; stories concerning powerful individuals, organizations, institutions or corporations.

**Continuity** = (Galtung & Ruge, Harcup & O'neill), story which is already in the news gathers a kind of momentum - the running story; stories about subjects already in the news.

**Timeliness** = (Bednarek & Caple), recent, ongoing, about to happen, new, current, seasonal.

**Impact/relevance** = (Galtung & Ruge, Bednarek & Caple, Harcup & O'neill), stories about groups or nations perceived to be influential with, or culturally or historically familiar to, the audience; of high intensity/large scope.

**Shareability** = (Harcup & O'neill) Stories that are thought likely to generate sharing and comments via Facebook, Twitter and other forms of social media.

## Results

The content analysis is based on 31 articles published on the website of the newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, during the time span 22<sup>nd</sup> of January - 15<sup>th</sup> of February. Our findings show that every article contained at least 10 news values.

We determined the news value "**proximity**" in the following constructions:

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<sup>9</sup> [http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:k67iCxrHBmQJ:toolbox.understanding-media.eu/downloads/51396\\_Handout\\_Galtung\\_and\\_Ruge.pdf+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=ro](http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:k67iCxrHBmQJ:toolbox.understanding-media.eu/downloads/51396_Handout_Galtung_and_Ruge.pdf+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=ro), accessed on 15.03.2017

“Romania”, “Bucharest”, “at least 14 other cities from Romania”, “Transylvanian academic center Cluj (Klausenburg/Kolozsvar)”, “Brussels”, “EU-state”, “Romania’s capital city Bucharest”, “states of Middle and Eastern Europe”, “Berlin”, “Brasov”, etc.

**Negativity** could be established by the use of constructions such as:

“demonstrate”, “protest”, “coup”, “criminal politicians”, “suspected of tax evasion and money laundering”, “mourning day and strike against the fight against corruption”, “protesters”, “strong critic from Brussels”, “rioters”, “crisis”, “conflict”, “the notoriously corrupt PSD”, “the biggest setback of the reforms”, “injured and arrested in street protests”, “Molotov-cocktails and knives”, “aggressive sport fans”, “Began to fire with fireworks, torches, stones and other objects”, “the police answered with trauma gas”, “many form errors, which in their totality constituted an attack on the constitutional state”, etc.

### **Emotional impact**

In our approach of analyzing this news value we found 21 images/videos linked to the 31 articles. Many of them came up repeatedly. Some of the most impactful images were published on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of February, when four policemen and two demonstrators were slightly injured and 20 rioters were arrested.



**Fig. 1.** Injured protester

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**Unexpectedness** could be determined in constructions as exemplified here:

“Remained open at first”, “the step of the government came as a surprise”, the government holds on even after the largest protests”, “the third day in a row”, “pressure is increasing”, “surprising”, “already during the day”, “despite frosty temperatures”, “only 161 parliamentarians”, “rare sign of hope” etc.

The news value “**consonance**” was identified in word constructions such as:

“Urged the government once again”, “meanwhile, the protest continued”, “the government justifies this amnesty plan”, “has also condemned”, “another ten thousand on the streets”, “the protests do not abort”, “withdraws controversial decree”, “the police confiscated”, “already”, “For the evening, large-scale gatherings were expected”, “thousands on the street again”, etc.

**Timeliness** is used to determine the temporal dimension of the events:

“for three days”, “on Saturday”, “on Sunday evening”, “in the evening”, “for days”, “later on”, “on Monday”, etc.

**Eliteness/celebrity.** The most referred to celebrities in the 31 articles were:

“Romania’s Minister of Justice”, “president Klaus Iohannis”, “chief of the government Sorin Grindeanu”, “party chief Liviu Dragnea”, “ombudsman Victor Ciorbea”.

**Impact/relevance** was determined in:

“a resignation and minus degrees don’t hold the protesters back”, “hundreds of politicians from the ruling party are threatened by court processes”, “biggest protests”, “hundreds of thousands”, “the most powerful man”, “250.000, about 100.000 only in Bucharest”, “massive demonstration”, “largest mass demonstrations in Romania’s recent history”

The Romanian legislative elections took place on the 11<sup>th</sup> of December and resulted in the victory of the Social Democratic Party, led by Liviu Dragnea, by gaining 45% of the votes.

On the 19<sup>th</sup> of December 2016, Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe) and Daniel Constantin (Conservative Party) signed an agreement with the Social Democratic Party and formed a new coalition government.

Since this protests have started, a few weeks after the new government was formed on the 4<sup>th</sup> of January, the second goal of the present paper was to analyze in which way the main political actors were presented to the readers of the German quality newspaper.

### **Sorin Grindeanu**

He became the president of the Timis County Council in June 2016. He was nominated by the leader of PSD to form the new government. The Grindeanu cabinet was formed on the 4<sup>th</sup> of January 2017.

Our findings show that Sorin Grindeanu is being presented in a neutral manner in the articles that we analyzed. A single negative description, “Dragnea’s marionette”, was identified in the 31 articles.



**Tab 3.** Neutral representation of Sorin Grindeanu

### **Liviu Dragnea**

He is a Romanian politician and the leader of The Social Democratic party. He is also the President of the Chamber of Deputies. The proposed emergency decree which led to the biggest Romanian protests after the revolution from 1989, was rapidly connected to Liviu Dragnea and the charges

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he is facing. The PSD-chief is serving a two-year suspended sentence for electoral fraud and facing charges of defrauding the state of 25,000 \$. The German newspaper repeatedly mentioned what he is being accused of and why he may not be a Prime minister, since he was legally convicted for election fraud.



**Tab. 4.** Neutral representation of Liviu Dragnea

In his case, we determined neutral, positive and negative references as well.

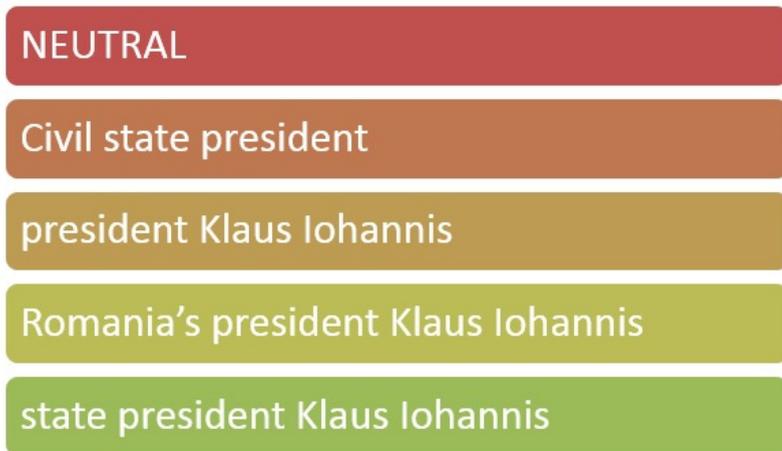


**Tab. 5.** Positive/negative representation of Liviu Dragnea

### **Klaus Iohannis**

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of January, the Romanian president, Klaus Iohannis, dressed in a red ski jacket, decided to join the crowd gathered in Universitatii Square. His words were: “A gang of politicians with criminal problems wants to change the law in Romania and weaken the rule of law. This can’t be allowed. It’s inadmissible to change the legislation so that tens or hundreds of politicians with law problems have their criminal records cleaned and continue their wrongdoings. Romanians are rightfully outraged”<sup>10</sup>

Klaus Iohannis was depicted by the newspaper in a neutral manner.



**Tab. 6.** Neutral representation of Klaus Iohannis

### **Conclusions**

The main objective of this case study was to find out **how newsworthy the protests from Romania were for the German quality press**. We reached our objective by using a qualitative content analysis. We applied a set of criteria on 31 articles, that have been published on [www.sueddeutsche.de](http://www.sueddeutsche.de) in the time period 23.01-15.02.2017.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.romania-insider.com/romanias-president-joins-protest-bucharest-against-changes-to-criminal-law/>, accessed on 17.03.2017

## HOW NEWSWORTHY WERE THE PROTESTS IN ROMANIA FOR THE GERMAN QUALITY PRESS?

Based on our findings, we can conclude that the protests from Romania were newsworthy for the German quality newspaper, with an average of 2 articles/day and a total of 8447 words used in the 31 articles.

Proximity, timeliness, continuity, negativity could be identified in each article and the elite persons are depicted in a neutral way.

### Limits and perspectives

Although we find the value “shareability” relevant for the study of newsworthiness, in this case study we did not put an emphasis on it. From our point of view, this news value is more suitable to be determined on articles shared on social media, which was not included in the sample.

Furthermore, an eventual future article on the matter could use a larger sample, including more media platforms and a higher number of quality press products from Germany or other German speaking countries, in order to render a wider picture of the way German speaking readers have been informed about the protests in Romania.

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## WE ARE RODDIT: AN OVERVIEW OF THE R/ROMANIA SUBREDDIT

FLAVIA ȚĂRAN\*

**ABSTRACT.** With over 57k people following the posts and the conversations, the r/Romania subreddit becomes a relevant online venue for anything Romania, from politics and the fight against corruption to funny images and satire. This research is focused on how the people of Roddit interact and behave, in order to identify if this is a by the book online community. A second point of interest is the content aggregated on r/Romania, and by whom, narrowing the conversation to theories of agenda-setting and digital gatekeeping. The constant debate on r/Romania is jumpstarted by the submission of links and from the forum-like discussions, rendering it mandatory to analyze the content. In doing so, we collected all the posts ever submitted to r/Romania, since its creation in the fall of 2009. Furthermore, in order to have a closer look at the conversation angle, we collected 115k comments from the first five months of this year. The data was gathered by interrogating Reddit's API (Application programming interface). The methodology used combines quantitative large-scale analysis and small sample case studies.

**Key words:** Reddit, Roddit, r/Romania, virtual communities, agenda setting

### Preamble

Jürgen Habermas (1991) envisioned a deliberative and participative democracy when talking about the public sphere, Gutmann and Thompson (1996) argued that deliberation is beneficial for every democracy in order to facilitate healthy public opinions, while Douglas Kellner (1998) went further, articulating how as a result of the Internet's expansion we will witness a new

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\* Ph.D. student, College of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, [flavia.taran@fspac.ro](mailto:flavia.taran@fspac.ro)

public sphere, where debate and participation “contain the potential to invigorate democracy and to increase the dissemination of critical and progressive ideas”. But it is not solely about democratic decisions and political affairs anymore, the discussion can be extended to any type of civic engagement, online and offline.

The deliberation paradigm is shifting, from face-to-face encounters to text-based computer-mediated communication (Luskin, Fishkin, & Iyengar, 2004) (Min, 2007), in the context of our rather newly-formed internet and social media habits. Technology is, probably, the most important vector for this shift in the way people are involved in current affairs, bringing to prominence the effects of the Internet’s decentralized communication model.

This is where online fora, such as Reddit, become of relevance. The way people consume, report on and analyse what is happening in their own countries and in the world might resemble how the aforementioned public sphere operates, but with major structural and behavioral differences: online participation is oftentimes asynchronous and community-based, which can lead to highly polarized opinions.

We argue that the Romanian subreddit is an outpost for deliberation on topics ranging from politics to legislature and humorous content. These topics brought up for discussion are chosen by the users through submitting links, generally from Romanian news websites, and voting using a two-directional voting system in order to filter the popular links and opinions expressed in the comments section. However, this practice raises new and troubling questions about the agenda setting practices conducted, intentionally or not, by the participants in the debate.

There is place for skepticism when talking about computer-mediated communication and deliberation. Some argue that because it is lacking nonverbal cues, the messages are not decoded correctly (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976) and leave way for interpretation. Furthermore, our previous understanding of communication was dependent on colocation, and scholars have shown a great concern in the alienating nature of CMC (Renninger & Shumar, 2002): loss of identity, discrimination, hazing, easily polarizable opinions (Min, *Online vs. Face-to-Face Deliberation: Effects on Civic Engagement*, 2007). It is futile to ignore the social affordance of technology: “pencils «call forth» writing; telephones «call forth» talking” (Parks, 2011, p. 109), and so the Internet must “call forth” computer-mediated communication, deliberation, and creating groups. CMC can erase the boundaries of time and space, and that is the prerequisite for studying any online community.

## **Theoretical framework**

### *A place to deliberate: virtual communities*

There is an underlying taxonomy problem that needs addressing when talking about communities. Bruhn (2011) identified the main differences between three terms used in this line of research: (a) groups – clear boundaries that determine membership → (b) networks – involve relationships or connections that can cross boundaries → (c) communities – connote the strength of relationships in networks. A group can morph into a network, a network into a community.

In his highly acclaimed book about virtual communities (1993), Howard Rheingold presents the three levels on which computer-mediated communication can change our lives: (1) as individual human beings with thoughts, perceptions and personalities, (2) in our person-to-person interaction, and (3) when talking about our political and social views. The second level is the one that shift the discussion into the realm of community research, while the third level brings us closer to the way reddit.com works.

Rheingold makes one of the earliest attempts in defining virtual communities as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationship in cyberspace.” (Rheingold, 1993, p. 5) This definition captured the zeitgeist of his first interactions with online communities, namely the WELL, in 1985. Today, however, this is considered a rosy (Shenk, 1997), emotional (Jones, 1997), and even wrong to its core definition (Weinreich, 1997). Frank Weinreich rejects the existence of virtual communities because he cannot come to terms with the community metaphor: sharing a geographical territory, having a common history, and sharing a similar value system. Komito (1998) even labels virtual communities as ersatz, places where individuals would find meaning within the superficiality of modern society.

There is an impressive body of work dedicated to the study of communities, offline or online, and yet sociologists perceive it as a conceptual turmoil (Parks, 2011). Jones (1997) pinpointed a moment when it could almost be said that sociology threw in the towel: Penguin’s *Dictionary of Sociology* stated that “the term community is one of the most elusive and vague in sociology and is by now largely without specific meaning” (Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner, 1984).

A couple of decades later, Bruce and Yearley (2006) would decide that the term has a quite precise meaning in sociology, referencing Ferdinand Tönnies thesis on *Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft* (1887): *community* is based on the feeling of belonging, and *society* is based on the individuality of interest. This feeling of togetherness that defined the early communities had more to do with the proximity factor, and usually translated into *neighborhood*. It has been inferred that communities and neighborhoods are two distinct issues: one is about social relationships while the other is about boundaries (Bruhn, 2011). That is why, for example, Loewy invokes the strong beliefs of community members are the uniting values of the community (1993, p. 234). However, Jones (1997) insists that just feeling that you are part of a community is not enough to make you be a part of it, membership is interconnected with the actions of the user, and at this point it does not matter if the community is online or offline.

Park amassed a list of five criteria (recurrent themes, as he named them) that come across in the scientific literature on communities. He insists that these can be used as a tool to evaluate if an online group behaves as a virtual community. His five criteria are (1) the ability to engage in collective actions, (seen by Jones as an authenticity test of the community), (2) acting collectively, (3) the group thinks of himself as a community, (4) ritualized sharing of information and in order for the community to be sustained, (5) the information-sharing ritual should be done on a regular basis (Parks, 2011).

### ***Researching Reddit starter pack***

A very short and comprehensive definition of Reddit is given by Singer et al., delimitating it as a “community-driven platform for submitting, commenting and rating links and text posts” (Singer, Flöck, Meinhart, Zeitfogel, & Strohmaier, 2014, p. 517). In broader terms, Reddit is the self-proclaimed ‘front page of the Internet’, where users aggregate and decide what is interesting, newsworthy or funny. In this sense, the main focus of Reddit is not to make a network of friends, but to join the conversation and the debate.

Created in 2005 by web developer Steve Huffman and internet entrepreneur Alexis Ohanian as a democratic community-driven online refuge for even the most niched of topics, Reddit is today the 24<sup>th</sup> most accessed site on the internet (The top 500 sites on the web, 2017), outranked only by five instances of Google, YouTube, Facebook, Yahoo, Wikipedia,

Live, Amazon, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn and nine Chinese and Russian sites, making it a relevant virtual place when talking about a news-driven communities.

A prerequisite for understanding the inner workings of Reddit is to define a series of terms that will be used throughout this paper. Firstly, the name of the website is a play on words – *I read it on Reddit* (Reddit FAQ, 2017). Reddit is a network of sub-communities on specific topics, called subreddits. Each subreddit has at least one moderator, a user (or *redditor*, as they call themselves) charged with the task of making sure that the community rules are being upheld. Users which contribute with content are called authors. They can post or submit three types of content: links, they can start a discussion (a ‘self’ post) or make a combination of the two. Users can leave a comment to the post or they can respond with a comment to another comment, in a threaded conversation. Each post and each comment can be voted upon, using a two-directional voting system: upvotes and downvotes, so each of them has a score displayed in the left-hand side, a sum of the all the votes, making it easy to spot the most popular content, transforming Reddit into a social news site. However, Piet Van Mieghem stresses that “the popularity score is a collective appraisal: individual users are biased in their voting behavior by the current score they observe” (Mieghem, 2011, p. 1404).

Each user amasses karma for their posts and comments (the sum of all the upvotes and downvotes they receive for all their post and comments), this being a prime identifier for the most active users with most popular opinions. Those who want to contribute with money can buy a premium membership called Reddit Gold, which helps buy server time for the website. Users with this kind of membership can award to other users a gold medal, a token of appreciation for a good post or comment.

Each subreddit must be grasped as a distinct community, with its’ own rules, purpose and readership, similar only in structure, not in substance, hence the need to lurk before emerging into the conversation. Given that the rules of conduct differ from a subreddit to another, the moderators usually stress the importance of visiting the FAQ sections in order to comply with the community’s standards of operation.

Almost 57.000 people are subscribed to the r/Romania subreddit, an aggregator for anything Romanian: “We mostly discuss news, society mishaps and cultural controversies, all with a Romanian twist. Feel free to join the

process, which usually involves interesting people, confusing situations and hilarity all around" (r/Romania FAQ, 2017). r/Romania Reddit users call themselves *rodditors*, a portmanteau of Romania and redditor.

### *The people of Reddit*

Media ecology, as defined by Neil Postman (2000) – the study preoccupied with understanding the way technology and communication techniques control the form, quantity, speed, distribution and direction of information, and how all these information configurations affect our perception, values and attitudes – provides the theoretical frame for studying computer-mediated communication, deliberation and the way Reddit fits in this framework.

Given Reddit's architecture and technical features, a series of user characteristics and attitudes can be outlined. Kim argues that there are different stages of membership when entering a community, a life cycle with thresholds to be met in order to move forward (Kim, 2000), corroborated by Lave and Wenger's five phase model of "legitimate peripheral participation" (LPP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Applied on the users of any subreddit, it would look like this:

- › *Peripheral* → *lurker*: subscribes to the subreddit but does not up/down vote or contributes with content;
- › *Inbound* → *novice*: up/down votes certain comments or posts;
- › *Insider* → *regular*: leaves comments constantly, engages in conversations even if he starts controversies, knows the inner workings and the dynamics of the subreddit;
- › *Boundary* → *leader*: recognized by other users, commenting patterns and style are known, engages very often in conversations;
- › *Outbound* → *elder*: has spent too much time already on the subreddit, it stopped providing satisfaction, makes assessments of the state of the subreddit.

But Reddit should not be bounded by the online community framework, given that there are a considerable number of lurkers or visitors navigating the subreddits. With its structure and highly niched content, Reddit can be also perceived as a knowledge repository where people can find answers to their questions or find interesting watercooler conversation starters.

Furthermore, using a framework proposed by Nashir Contractor, Reddit can be heeded as a social knowledge network. Contractor stresses that the developments in Web 2.0 technologies, Semantic Web and Cyberinfrastructure bring forward the need to study these “«multidimensional networks» – where the nodes are people as well as «nonhuman agents»” (Contractor, 2009, p. 744). Applied on Reddit, this translates in the way some users prefer to retrieve information on certain topics not from nonhuman agents (such as documents, for examples), but from other Reddit users which might have a greater insight on the matter, making subreddits like eli5 (explain like I’m 5), AMA (Ask Me Anything) or ArkReddit very popular. This boils down to a constant tug of war between ‘let me Google that for you’ and ‘let me tell you because I am a specialist in this field’.

### *The content of Reddit*

In 1963, Bernard Cohen stressed that “the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (p. 13). Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972) outlined, and later on proved to be true, that our realities are shaped in part by what editors, newsroom staffers and broadcasters choose to be the news. Furthermore, the mass-media can not only shape our reality but also infer “how much importance to attach to the issue form the amount of information in a news story” (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 176), thus shaping the agenda-setting theory.

But agenda-setting does not stop at the level of topic salience. Further refinement of the theory has gone deeper into the matter, outlining two more levels and revisiting the theory in the Internet Age:

- > 1<sup>st</sup> level: The influence of ‘issue’ salience;
- > 2<sup>nd</sup> level: Framing – the influence of ‘attribute’ salience;
- > 3<sup>rd</sup> level: The salience of related, networked elements on the agenda (McCombs M. , 2015, p. 301)

Littlejohn and Foss consider agenda-setting the result of a power struggle between the media and other sources (e.g. influential people, other media sources), suggesting four types of relations between these actors based on a two-dimensional high/low power spectrum (Littlejohn & Foss, 2010):

- › High-power source and high-power media: this can result in a symbiotic relationship or a struggle for power;
- › High-power source and low-power media: external source will probably co-opt the media and use them to accomplish its own ends;
- › Lower-power source and high-power media: the media outlets are largely responsible for their own agenda, with the possibility of marginalizing certain news sources;
- › Lower-power source and low-power media: the agenda is established by the current events, not by media or leaders.

Derived from the agenda-setting theories of McCombs and Shaw, the issue put into discussion when analyzing Reddit is not the way mass-media are setting the agenda, but how individuals curate news stories and create the media landscape in an online environment. Borrowing from this theoretical framework, it is noticeable how Reddit operates in relative terms to agenda-setting, putting together a collage of news stories from different platforms in order to jumpstart debates and polemics. However, preferring certain media outlets over others can create virtual echo chambers on Reddit. The purveyor of information wants instant karma (upvotes) so s/he will post content that will attract appraisal. In this sense, the stories selected by Reddit users will always be skewed, given that the mechanism resembles a popularity contest.

This brings the conversation into the realm of gatekeeping, a media theory borrowed from a 1943 study (*Forces behind food habits and methods of change*) conducted by social psychologist Kurt Lewin on Midwestern housewives and the decision-making process that goes into deciding what food gets on the table, using the 'gatekeeper' metaphor.

Adapted for mass-media and communication, gatekeeping is defined by Pamela Shoemaker as "the process by which the billions of messages that are available in the world get cut down and transformed into the hundreds of messages that reach a given person on a given day (Shoemaker P. , 1991, p. 1). In a traditional media landscape that follows a few-to-many dissemination dynamic, gatekeeping can be transformed in a measurable metric (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009), but when the concept is transposed to a many-to-many model of communication, inherent to the Internet, gatekeeping, a theory that describes the way information moves to the audiences, needs a makeover (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008).

Applying this theory on Reddit, the proverbial 'gatekeeper' is in fact an aggregate of various users with different backgrounds and intentions. A possible result of the relationship between Reddit users and the media can be converted into online appraisal for users and money/clicks for the online media.

### **Research design**

The r/Romania subreddit has gained popularity in recent years, with a total of 57.000 subscribers. Furthermore, as a news aggregator, r/Romania is a hub for information from various sources – both foreign and domestic news media outlets, social media post, memes and discussions on various topics. In this given context, we consider r/Romania of relevance in understanding how and why a group of people with no monetary incentive take upon themselves the task of curating and aggregating news and information of relevance for Romanian media consumers.

The general purpose of this research is to outline the main characteristics of the r/Romania subreddit, both on a longitudinal axis (development in time) and in depth, in order get a bigger picture of who the users of this subreddit are, what kind of content they prefer and to what extend they set the agenda for deliberate on current affairs.

**(RQ1):** Does r/Romania behave like an online community?

**(RQ2):** What kind of content – news and stories – is submitted to on r/Romania?

**(RQ3):** Does r/Romania have an agenda?

**(RQ4):** Does r/Romania have digital 'gatekeepers'?

### **Methodology**

The primary research method used in this paper is content analysis, doubled by case studies on certain sub-sets of data. There is an underlying trend in today's research for working with increasingly bigger datasets that is why a quantitative approach felt best suited for analyzing the dynamics of an online venue as ample as r/Romania. The majority of operations conducted on the corpus of data are automated, using tools for large-scale data analysis and visualization. Small-scale qualitative analysis is used throughout this research to ensure an improved understanding of Roddit and its users.

### Data collection

This research paper is based on two datasets, DS1 = 51.657 records and DS2 = 115.109, both collected from [www.reddit.com/r/Romania](http://www.reddit.com/r/Romania) through API (Application Programming Interface) interrogations.

Each subreddit presents itself as a list of submissions. DS1 is a collection of data regarding all the submissions made on this subreddit from its creation, September 24, 2009, until May 13, 2017 and contains the following information:

- › Title given by OP (original poster)
- › Flair (tag)
- › Author handle
- › Author location flair (tag)
- › Source of the link (domain)
- › Publishing date
- › Number of comments
- › Score (upvotes + downvotes)

Each submission has a comments section, organized as a fully-threaded conversation (users can leave a comment to a post and to another user). Given this structure, DS2 includes data regarding the co-commenting relationship between users. The data from DS2 contains all the comments posted between January 1<sup>st</sup> and June 2<sup>nd</sup> of 2017 (we had to narrow down the timeframe due hardware limitations - a dataset with more comments would have been unmanageable). DS2 is comprised of the following information:

- › Author of the reply (to the post or user)
- › User to whom the reply is addressed to (if the reply is given to a post, this field contain the OP's handle)
- › Full text of the comment
- › Comment score
- › Publishing date

In order to identify and read patterns, the data from DS1 was analyzed using Tableau Public v.10.2, a data analysis and visualization software, and RAW Graphs, an open source data visualization framework. For DS2 we used an open-source network analysis tool, NodeXL, constructing directed graphs based on commenting patters.

## Analysis

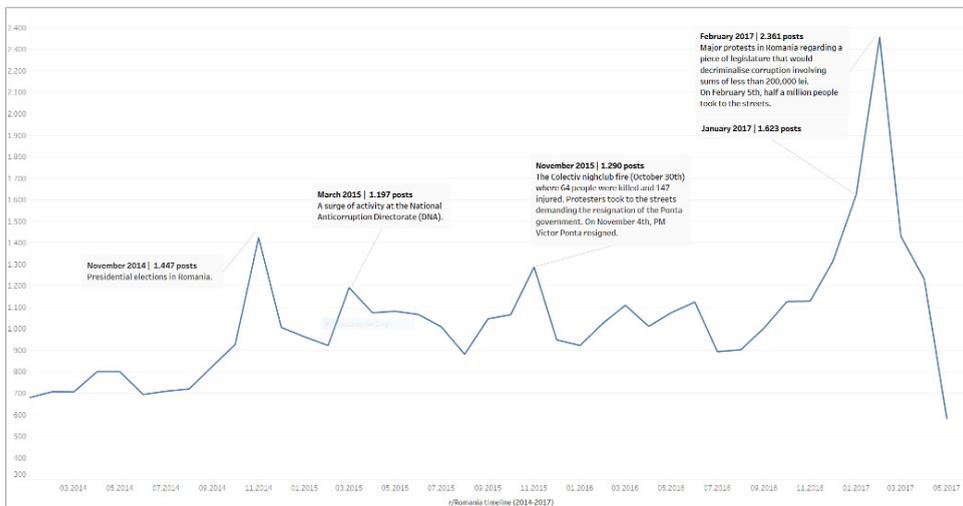
### *Roddit over time*

r/Romania was created in September 2009 and showed a timid interest at first, as displayed in Table 1 (we decided to exclude 2009 and 2017 due to partial data).

**Table 1.** Evolution of number of posts on r/Romania over time

year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
number of post	74	1.088	2.854	5.237	9.998	12.532	12.637

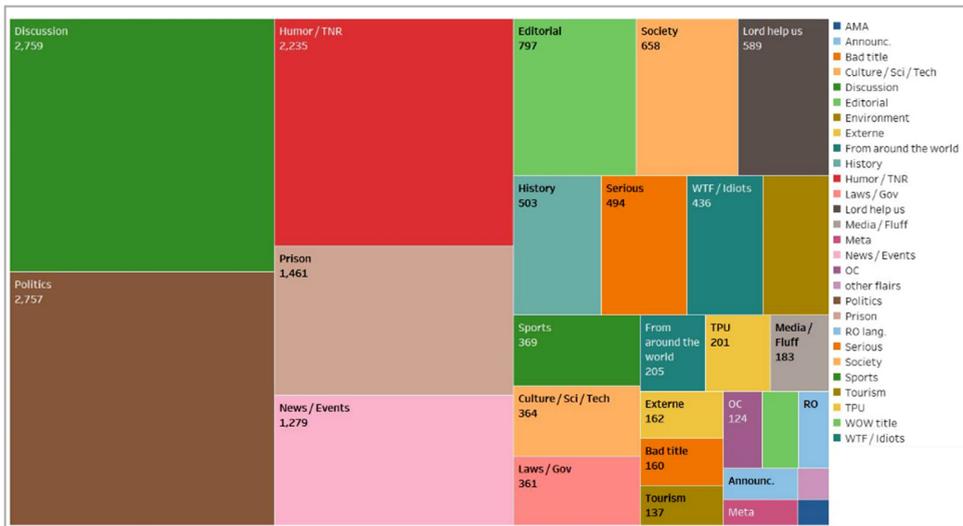
Between 2011 and 2014, the number of posts roughly doubled from one year to the other, plateauing in 2015-2016. This growth rate can be explained by an increase in interest of Internet users in current affairs. Figure 1 showcases the escalation of activity on r/Romania in periods of political and social turmoil, between 2014 and 2017. The four spikes mark highly publicized events happening in Romania: presidential elections in 2014, parliamentary elections in 2016, the Colectiv nightclub fire on October 30th 2016 and its aftermaths (protests and the fall of a government), and the biggest protests in Romania's history, at the beginning of 2017. It seems that in periods of national distress, users turn to Roddit for news, updates and debates, making this virtual venue the go-to fora.



**Figure 1.** Evolution of number of posts between 2014-2017

*Types of content and sources*

As we stated earlier, subreddits are collections of links and discussions (self.Romania posts). For a better navigation, posts are tagged using a flair system. The current flairs available on r/Romania are: News, Culture, Discussion, Society, History, Meta, Romanian language (for foreigners), OC (original content), SciTech, Sports, Editorial, Prison, AMA (Ask Me Anything), Humor, Politics, International affairs, Lord help us, Serious, and Laws & government. However, throughout dataset 1 we found other flairs as well, so we operationalized all of them and made broader groups, as shown in Figure 2.



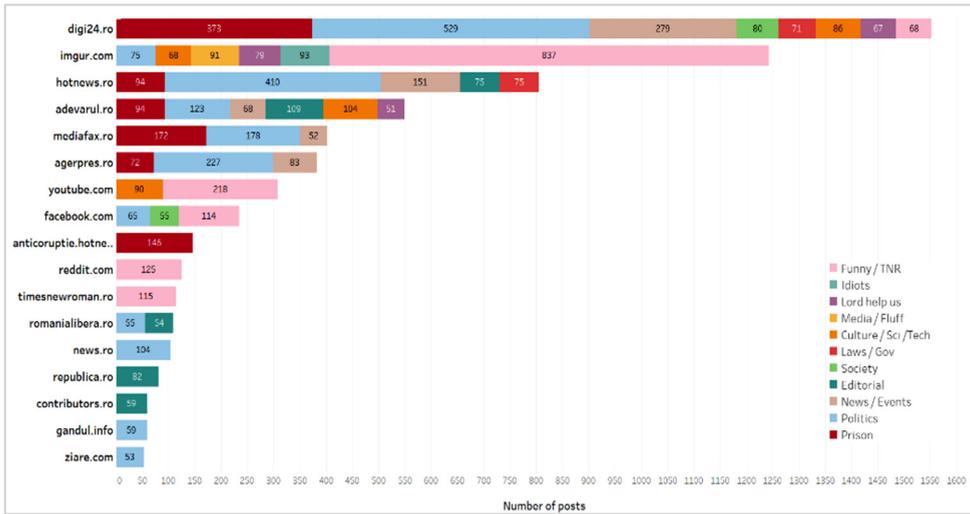
**Figure 2.** Post flares (grouped) and number of posts for each flair group [DS1, excludes posts with no flair, N=17.074]

It becomes apparent that the main topics approached by rodditors are, on one hand, politics, news and the fight against corruption (the tag ‘Prison’ refers to pieces of news about politicians and business people convicted under corruption charges), and, on the other hand, humorous content. The ‘Discussion’ flair mostly includes self-type posts that invite rodditors to debate and to share their opinions.

Nested under these tags are links from various media outlets, both foreign and domestic, social networking sites and other platforms. We consider of relevance the number of instances a platform has been referenced by

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Roddit users, but even more so, what type of content a certain website provides, as perceived by the person making the submission. Figure 3 displays the top sources from which rodditors aggregate information and the flairs used to tag them.



**Figure 3.** Sources for r/Romania posts with a frequency >50 and use of flares [DS1, excludes self.Romania posts, posts with no flare]

This visualization reiterates the idea that Roddit is a place for ‘lulz’ and news. In the first category we have content from Imgur (image hosting site), YouTube, Facebook and Times New Roman (Romanian satire website), while in the latter we have news websites associated with TV channels (Digi24), newspapers (Adevărul, Gândul, România Liberă) and other news platforms (Agerpres, Hotnews). We can identify some top sources for editorial content, republica.ro and contributors.ro, and for news on anticorruption, through a subdomain of Hotnews.

However, it becomes obvious that a significant part of Romanian media outlets are missing from this visualization. In a constant tug of war for audience, the Romania media is not immune to the fake news phenomenon, splitting the media landscape into two parts: the sources presented above and media outlets that are considered highly partisan and associated with media moguls or politicians – romaniatv.ro, antena3.ro, and b1.ro being just three examples.

Digi24.ro is winning the ‘popularity contest’ by a landslide, while other media outlets are flagrantly ignored, from which we can infer that only certain news and opinions make it to Roddit, in a limited agenda, that contains just a fragment of what is actually happening in the Romanian media landscape.

But this proverbial agenda must be set by rodditors. In Figure 4 we can observe some disproportionate submitting done by two top users, dngrs and grgc, which have a visible preference for digi24.ro. A second category of users stands out from this chart: those who only post ‘funny’ content or share images using Imgur. We can also detect a user whose whole contribution to this platform are links from tolo.ro, an investigative platform spearheaded by Cătălin Tolontan from GSP (the Sports Gazette).

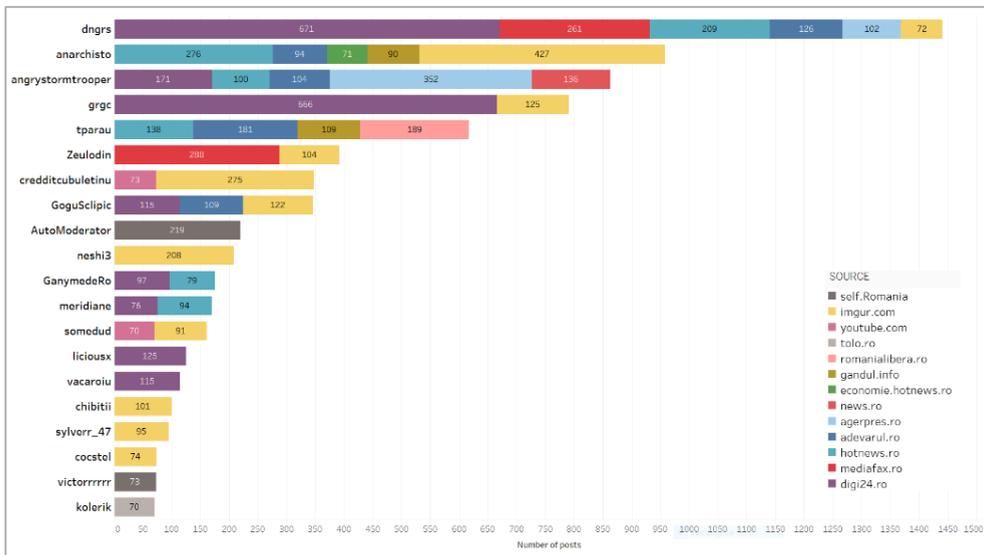


Figure 4. Top 20 users by number of submissions made and the sources [DS1, includes self.Romania posts]

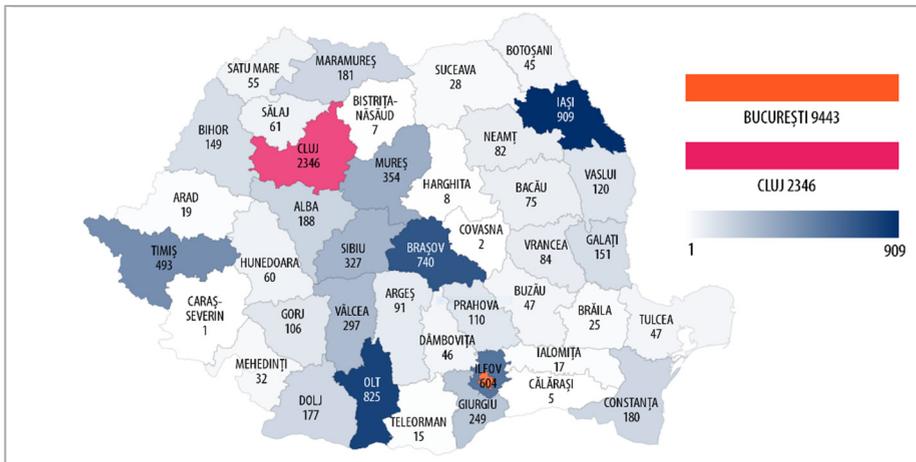
### Who is Roddit?

r/Romania allows users to select from a range of author flairs (tags) that specify the location of the poster, with the following options: all counties from Romania and from Moldova, and Expat (expatriate), as seen in Table 2. 45% of all submission from r/Romania are posted by people using the author flair system.

**Table 2.** Types of author flair

Total number of posts (September 24, 2009 – May 13, 2017)	51.657	%
posts with author flair	23.392	45,3
from Romania	18.803	36,4
from Moldova	205	0,4
expats	4.384	8,5

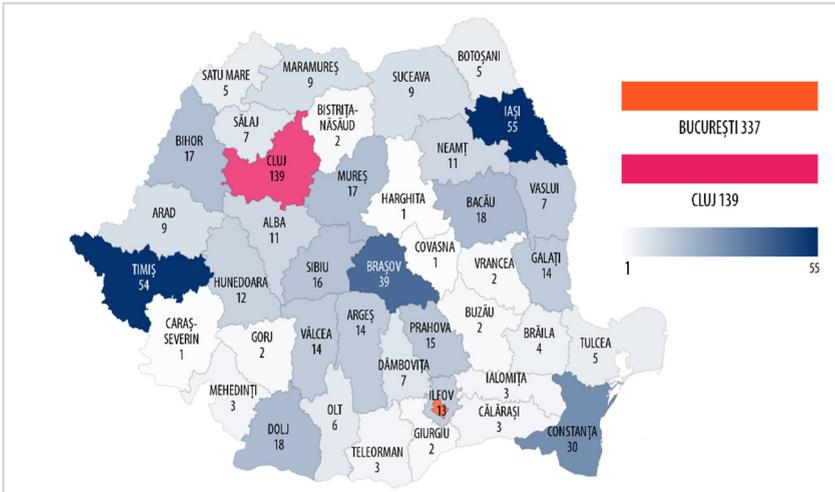
Figure 5a displays the geographical spread of posts from Roddit. Bucharest and Cluj have distinctive colors due to the large number of posts (a proportionate scale with Bucharest at 100% would have rendered the map unreadable for the other counties).



**Figure 5a.** Distribution of posts by author flair [DS1, includes flairs from Romania, N = 18.803]

A considerable amount of activity can be observed in the counties with university centers, like Bucharest, Cluj, Iași, Brașov and Timiș. The activity from Olt County is prominent and stands out. However, there is a rather simple explanation for that: GoguSclpic, one of the 50 most active users on Roddit resides under the Olt flair, with 812 of the 825 submission made by him.

However, the map shifts slightly when the numbers show unique users from each county, especially for Olt. Constanța becomes more visible, while the aforementioned university cities still lead in numbers.



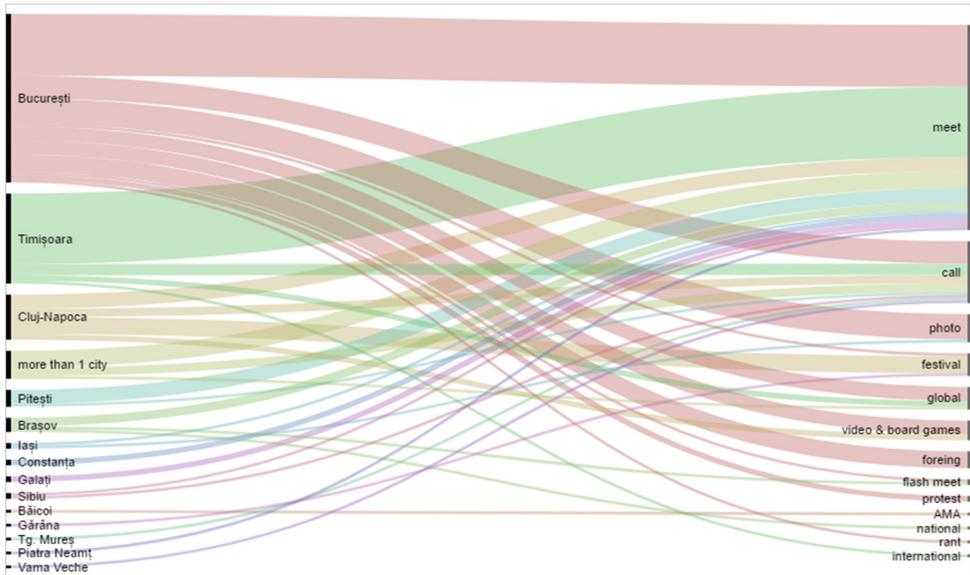
**Figure 5b.** Distribution of users posting on Roddit by author flair [DS1, includes flairs from Romania, N =942]

### *Roddit online and offline*

We filtered the post titles using the keyword ‘meet’ in order to identify the posts referencing physical meetings of rodditors (some manual filtering was necessary). The final list is comprised of 142 posts referencing 14 cities from Romania or the national program for local meetings (‘more than 1 city’). We identified 13 types of posts, following the next patterns:

- › calls from the Roddit community
- › calls from foreigners wanting to meet people from Romania
- › flash / local / national / international meets – specification, date, time, place
- › calls for global Reddit meets that are done by regional subreddits simultaneously
- › meets at festivals / protests around Romania
- › meets for playing video / board games
- › Ask Me Anything (AMA) and rants
- › photographs from the meets

The bi-categorical alluvial diagram (Figure 6) allows us to see the correlations between the location and type of post/activity.



**Figure 6.** Locations for meet-ups and proposed activities/types of meet-ups [DS1, filtered by keyword 'meet', manual filtering, N = 142]

Linking this with the map diagram presented earlier (Figure 5b) we can infer the following: (1) even though counties like Cluj, Iași, Brașov and Constanța have a large number of users (as reflected by the user flair), their need to call for face-to-face meetings on Roddit is less visible than for users from Timișoara; (2) hobbies and leisure activities are a good incentive for organized meet-up between rodditors; (3) r/Romania is perceived by fellow redditors visiting Romania (mainly Bucharest) as a good place for finding people.

### *Roddit as a social knowledge repository*

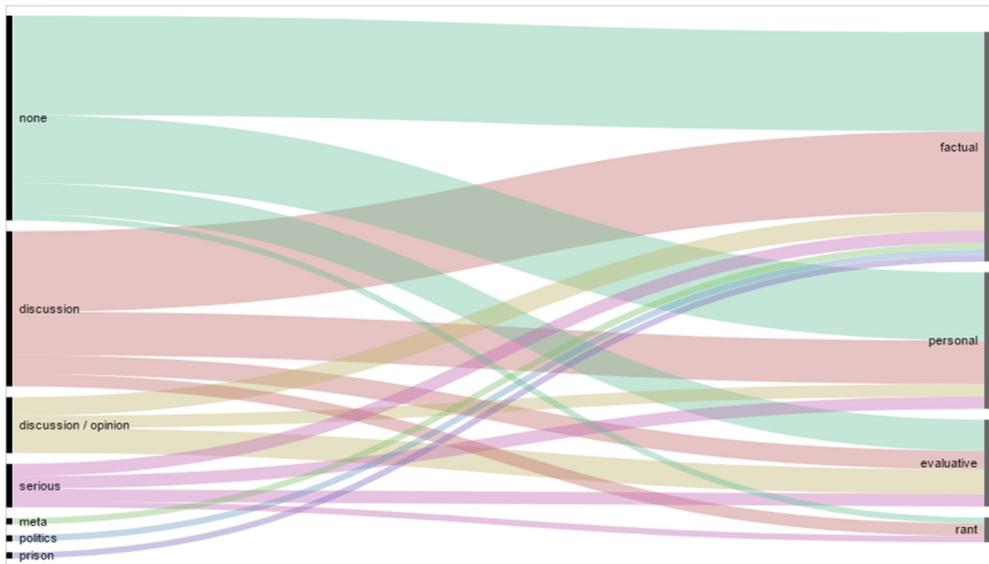
It is a common Reddit practice to address questions directly to the subreddit. In order to isolate this type of posts we filtered the dataset using the keyword 'roddit' and identified the self-referential ones, resulting in a total number of 259 questions (the annex provides a sample, with the top 10% Roddit questions by number of comments).

Borrowing from Socratic maieutics (Brunschwig, Lloyd, & Pellegrin, 2003) we designed a taxonomy of questions that we applied as an analysis grid to the top 30% (77) question-posts by number of comments. This ensured that our case study would be conducted on questions rendered as important for the group.

Our aforementioned taxonomy includes four types of questions: *factual* (questions that require facts as answers, e.g. the name of a video game, a type of coffee), *evaluative* ('what if' questions that require a self-evaluations of choices and values, opinions on current affairs), *personal* questions (e.g. 'what keeps you up at night') and *rants* (angry/emotionally charged questions).

We correlated the types of questions posed with the flairs chosen by the person asking the question using a bi-categorical alluvial diagram (Figure 7). By doing this we could conjecture where the OP wanted to stir the conversation.

If an OP tags a post as being 'Serious', an automated message announces the users that off-topic posts and jokes will be deleted by the moderators, in order to facilitate a healthy environment for a serious conversation. Given this, if the OP wants straight-up answer, factual, personal or otherwise, he will tag the post 'Serious'; if he wants more of a debate he will tag it as 'Discussion' or 'Discussion / opinion'. As we can see in Figure 7, the vast majority of the sample set posts are not tagged, leaving room for jokes and trolls.



**Figure 7.** Correlation between post flair and type of questions [DS1, filtered by keyword 'roddit', manual filtering, N = 77 out of 259 (top 30% by number of comments)]

Following this case study on self-referential question-posts we can infer that (1) rodditors rely heavily on the group as a human knowledge-repository through this practice of asking factual questions; (2) by asking personal and evaluative questions, Roddit behaves community-like, making it apparent that some users are interested in who the rodditors are as people; (3) not tagging a post as being ‘serious’ when addressing a factual or personal question might be intentional, in order to ensure a funny conversation (given that Roddit is also a ‘lulz’ community, as we discussed in section *Types of content and sources*).

### *The Roddit debate*

A big part of r/Romania’s activity includes commenting and engaging in debates. Given that in these first five months rodditors have written comments amassing the lengths of the first *Game of Thrones* book by George R.R. Martin, we were required, due to hardware limitations, to narrow our data collection. However, as Table 3 shows us, in these 5 months over 4.400 subscribers engaged in the debate, a large number given this short period of time.

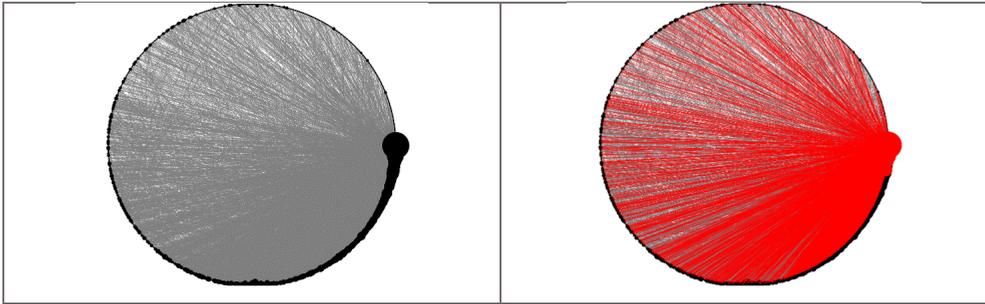
**Table 3.** DS2 numbers (January 1<sup>st</sup> – June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2017)

Total number of comments/edges	115.109
Unique edges	49.929 (43% of all)
Number of subscribers	57.232
Number of users that commented (vertices)	4.418 (7,7% of subscribers)

From the total of comment exchanges, 43% were one time connections, fact which can be translated into a loosely 50-50 chance of user engagement. Furthermore, the data shows us that the top 20 users by number of comments are in charge of 21% of the number of exchanges on Roddit.

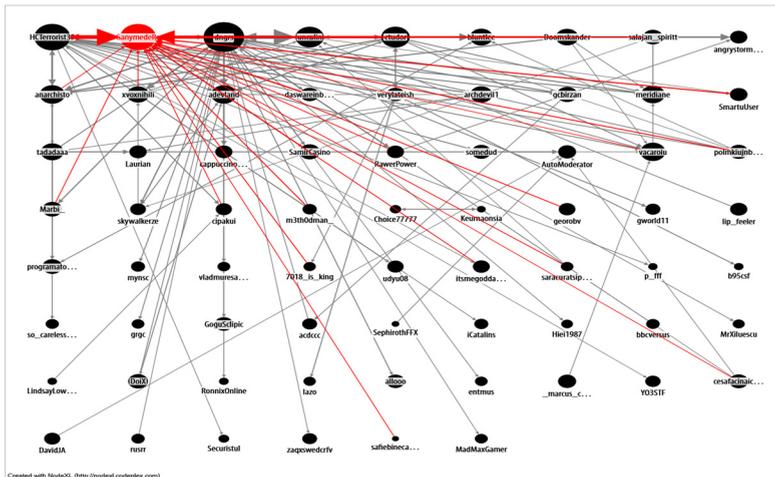
Figure 8a and 8b are created using the MS Excel template NodeXL for graph visualization. The nodes (or vertices) are users that commented, the size of the nodes is given by the total commenting activity, while the edges are the directed connections between the commenter and the person receiving the reply (an  $A \rightarrow B$  type of relationship, called ordered pair in graph theory). All vertices have at least one edge and the weight of the line is given by the number of comment exchanges between those two users.

Figure 8b highlights all the exchanges made by the top 20 most active commentators on Roddit. We used graphs as a visualization method because we wanted to highlight the relationship between certain users, as better seen in Figure 9, a reduced graph with only 69 vertices.



**Figure 8a:** circular representation of a directed graph with replies at comments [DS2 = 115.109] **Figure 8b.** Same data as Figure 8a, but with top 20 users by number of exchanges (replies given and received)

Given that we are working with a directed graph, we manage ordered pairs that can look like this  $A \rightarrow B$  or like this  $B \rightarrow A$ , bringing forward the notions of indegree (number of arrows pointing towards the vertex) and outdegree (number of arrows pointing outwards, to another vertex), shown in Figure 8 by the size of the arrows.



**Figure 9.** Top 69 users by number of comment exchanges, with the user GanimedeRo highlighted

If we take a look at the user going by the handle GanimedeRo, we notice that he receives a large number of comments, but he rarely replies. Furthermore, it becomes apparent that the user HCTerrorist39 is constantly replying to GanimedeRo, but the latter has a lower reply rate.

What we can infer from this type of superficial analysis is that the core conversation is held between a select few people which talk mainly amongst themselves. The answer to the question "About what?" will be the focus of a later research.

## **Findings**

### *Agenda setting and gatekeeping angle*

One objective of this paper was to identify if the content submitted to the 'national' subreddit is skewed and, if so, to see which way.

The analysis on the entire corpus of posts (over 51k) has brought to light that rodditors prefer in a large number news offered by digi24.ro, mediafax.ro and hotnews.ro, while divergent opinions, like those usually presented by other media outlets (like b1.ro, romaniatv.ro and antena3.ro) are largely rejected and rarely find place on the agenda. Furthermore, the most prominent opinions, as reflected in the main editorials shared on r/Romania, come from more independent platforms, like republica.ro and contributors.ro, and in a smaller amount from editorialist ascribed to news sites.

The findings also show that the lion's share of links is submitted by a group of core users with a preference for digi24.ro. The entertainment/humor part of Roddit is kept updated by another group of people in charge mostly with this type of content. In this sense, r/Romania is a place for both humor and serious talk about politics, the fight against corruption and current Romanian affairs.

Given the large number of lurkers – people that never comment or submit any links – this type of agenda-setting can be harmful, even more so if internet users get their daily news digest only from Roddit. However, most controversial news usually find their way to Roddit, given the possibility to organizing the content on various scales (Hot, New, Rising and Controversial).

### *Is Roddit a community?*

The discussion about the status of Roddit as an online community can start from the five criteria presented earlier in the paper, amassed by Parks:

- (1) *The ability to engage in collective actions:* rodditors try to meet in person and organize different types of activities.
- (2) *Acting collectively:* rodditors engage in raids, acting as a hive in order to accomplish common goals.

- (3) *The group thinks of himself as a community*: redditors are self-referential about this virtual venue and they oftentimes turn to the 'community' in order to solve problems, get information or organize offline meetings.
- (4) *Ritualized sharing of information and in order for the community to be sustained* and (5) *The information-sharing ritual should be done on a regular basis*: the foundation of r/Romania is the sharing of information, in different form: a link, a discussion, a threaded debate in the comment section. The activity on Roddit has skyrocketed in recent years and is centered on the aggregation of news and the following debates.

The ties inside Roddit ca be seen as somewhat personal, with a core of users engaging in a large amount of to-and-fro conversations in the comments sections, as seen in Figure 9 in the section above.

With a good proportion of lurkers, novices, regulars and leaders, r/Romania can be perceived as a functional online community, with its tropes, practices, customs, manners and offline meeting.

## Conclusions

An online venue like r/Romania is constantly working on maintaining a status quo, between the content posted and the opinions showcased in the comment sections, between the appraisal of the popular opinions and the need for debate. The topics of conversation are shifting from one week to the other, with developments in politics and the anticorruption fight very prominent on Roddit.

As an online community focused on both the substantial and the trivial, when it comes to things regarding Romanian, the dynamics of such an online fora become of upmost importance, both for society and for research in the field of online demeanors.

Such an overview of an online community can shed some light on how the Romanian people have gotten so interested in politics and social problems, with the number of protests on the rise in recent years, spawning debates and discussions both online and offline.

On one hand, people use Reddit for various reasons: to read the news, to get into arguments, to share their opinions, to laugh, to organize offline meetings. On the other hand, people use Roddit as a social knowledge network, addressing various types of questions, expecting recommendation,

from coffee to videogames, engaging in ‘what if’ and ‘what would you do’ types of debates, as both a leisure experience and as evaluation of the community and its position towards certain topics. This type of behavior translates into a need for online validations by peers, in an attempt to close the virtual gap between rodditors, doubled by the constant need to meet offline.

As a final conclusion, we can state that r/Romania is an online community atop of a content aggregator, with a large following, but with only a select number of members engaging with the platform and with other users. Roddit offers a multi-layered experience, with both serious and frivolous talk, and constant debates. The core users set the agenda and act as gatekeepers, submitting and upvoting the most popular opinion, while the less popular sink the bottom. The conversation is skewed towards more liberal and independent news stories and media outlets, with certain views left out the agenda.

The structure and dynamics of this community make is rather hard to generalize and draw very strict conclusions. However, given that this is a largely quantitative research, the conclusions are drawn from the numbers.

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## Annex

**Sample.** Top 10% Roddit questions by number of comments, their post flair and type of question, as presented in section Roddit as an information broker

<i>Post title</i>	<i># of comments</i>	<i>Post flair</i>	<i>Type of question</i>
Roddit, what do you look like?	831	none	personal
Men of Roddit, how would you react in case of an army mobilization?	232	discussion / opinion	evaluative
Roddit, what videogames did you play lately?	230	discussion	factual
Roddit, what videogames did you play lately?	205	discussion	factual
Women (and men) of Roddit, did you ever have problems with a sleazy professor/boss?	178	serious	personal
Rodditors, what books have you read recently?	150	none	factual
Roddit, what brand/ model of phone do you have?	141	none	factual
Rodditors, what are your guilty pleasures?	139	discussion	personal
Smoking Rodditors, why can't you just admit you like smoking or that you can't quit, instead of using all sort of lame excuses?	132	none	rant
Roddit, what videogames can's you bring yourself to erase?	126	discussion / opinion	factual
Rodditors, what are you doing for New Year's Eve?	124	none	factual
Hey Roddit! What highschoools did you attend and why were they great?	114	discussion / opinion	factual
Roddit, where do you buy free-range chicken?	114	none	factual
Roddit, are we going mad? Anybody with a different opinion is automatically a paid troll*?	113	serious	rant

<i>Post title</i>	<i># of comments</i>	<i>Post flair</i>	<i>Type of question</i>
Roddit, what happy/funny/sad memories from highschool do you remember?	111	None	personal
Rodditors, what are your best jokes?	110	none	factual
Roddit, if tomorrow you would have your first job interview, what salary would satisfy you?	110	serious	evaluative
Rodditors, what do you like about your jobs?	108	discussion	factual
Roddit, what is your most 'cringy' moment that keeps you up at night?	108	discussion	personal
Rodditors, have you ever been at a psychologist? And if so, did it help?	105	none	factual
Roddit, do you sleep in pajamas or 'house clothes'?	105	discussion	factual
Roddit expats, what things do you bring with you from Romania?	104	none	factual
Rodditors that drive with 70-80 km/h on the highway... why do you do that?	102	discussion	rant
Roddit, how do you fight weed addiction?	102	discussion	factual
What coffee do rodditors drink?	99	discussion	factual

## "WHO WRITES FOR WHOM?" BLOG WRITING - AS MIRROR OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

REBEKA TÖRÖK-ÁGOSTON\*

**ABSTRACT.** The study attempts to create a picture about the advantages and disadvantages of blog writing and the importance of the education about online journalism, including blogs – personal sites mainly in high-schools and colleagues. During the last few years online journalism has developed, the digital era flourished so the educational system begins to introduce in the school curriculum the *Mass-Media* subject and its history. What more, begins to introduce in teaching methods social media issues. The paper states how social media, focusing on blog writing, influences youth life's.

**Keywords:** blog writing, online journalism, innovation, youth, education, advantages and disadvantages of blog writing

*"The offence of visual in daily life in the last decades brought to the attention of media products consumers the need of being aware of the conventions by which the significances of visual images can be understood and created. (...) The role of cultural context and aesthetic paradigm in which the visual contents are produced and broadcast has become more and more important. [...] The knowledge and understanding of composition and stylistic principles, of production and broadcasting practices contribute to deciphering of significances and aesthetic qualities of visual texts. For this reason, the visual competence can be considered a means for highlighting the capacity of appreciating the artistic and as antidote against the attempts at manipulation of consumers of visual production: television, advertising, visual journalism and other forms of information and entertainment by images."*<sup>1</sup>

(Elena Abrudan, *Visual competence*)

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\* Ph.D. Student, College of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

<sup>1</sup> Elena, Abrudan, *Competența vizuală*, Rubrica Civilizația imaginii, Tribuna nr.204, 1-15 March, page 25, 2011

With the development of technology blogs have started to appear in Romania. Thus, a new trend of “blog writing” started and became a fashion. It seemed a liberation and a simple method not censored by anyone, which showed an easy path for debates and virtual communication with the world.

The etymology of the word blog, by explanatory dictionary, has origin in informatics, which means: “abbreviation of *Web Log*. Blog is a webpage which serves to the publication on Internet of specific data of a restrained field. Most of the times, blog expresses the style of its author. The blog is an online journal, a webpage frequently updated with information displayed in reversed chronological order, which contains links to interesting pages on Internet”.<sup>2</sup> It can contain different columns: news, culture, reviews, psychology, religion, entertainment, politics, IT, sport, tourism, education, culinary information, fashion, sociology, medicine, archaeology, architecture and so on.

The Blog entered the houses of people as soon as most of families purchased a computer and connected to the Internet. Blog is a method which serves for information, obtaining opinions, without requiring a financial investment, while the newspaper has to be bought from the newspaper kiosk or bookshop. Even if libraries offer these newspapers for free, the travel to precincts and holding of library permits seems to be an effort for some persons. The blog is handy, in everyone's houses, by an easy method, without making any other effort, just surfing the internet. The Blog offer now many advantages: text, image, photographs, opinions, and video. By the style of each blog the content of information has already been outlined. The blog communicates by visual images and audio images.

By visual images we create worlds, develop national effigies, but also models of conduct, which model the knowledge and national conscience. A mirroring implies the faithful reflection of existential elements, but also implies an anticipation of the future image. Mirror implies the tangible concrete element and the person who looks through a mirror is also the sender, but also the receiver. But the most important this is the purpose of action: why does anyone look in a mirror? The answer is quasi-expectable, but much deeper than it seems to be: to know, to form a true opinion, for

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.dex.ro/blog> accessed on 21.12.2016

a prompt feedback. The visual image, since the beginnings, has assimilated this role of being a mirror. We can mention the written press or the television images, in which the mirroring is just as powerful.

Ioan Drăgan, the author of the volume *Comunicarea, paradigme și teorii* (*Communication, paradigms and theories*) states that "Since the 1950s the functionalist perspective offers a theoretical-methodological frame for studying the relation between the use of media as evasion means and certain social-psychological features of receivers." Media answers "a real compensatory need, contributes to restoration of security and psychological balance of the individual, helps the common man to release oneself of various repressions. All these represent **compensatory satisfactions** (J. Cazeneuve). Thus, mass media fulfils an exceptional role in today's world: it fills the existing gap by multiplication of the needs of contemporary man and his limited possibilities to fulfil them in reality."<sup>3</sup>

The visual image is what defines us on national and international level as our micro- or macro-cosmic universe. If we were to delimit the two worlds, which interweave involuntarily, we could offer the following examples: we take a photograph for our family. What we wear, how we make our hair and how we behave is strictly the mirror of our family. But, if these photos were mediatized, it would go out in the wide world; the mirror built for us would be a mirror for the others. The conduct of a family will start to influence someone else by illustration of own image. This particular image becomes public. The visual image reflects typologies and social identities on local, national and last but not least international level.

Do blogs affect our thinking to such extent as the articles from online or printed newspapers or do they have another impact? We asked this question to many persons, and the conclusion is that blog writing is regarded as a personal journal, does not have such high impact as the published articles. The necessary question *why* finds its answer as follows: journalism, actually journalists bear a deeper responsibility than the blog writers by the nature of their job.

The awareness of media and the responsibility it has on youth is a problem which must be treated seriously as a major education; therefore the Ministry of Education and Research implemented the project which

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<sup>3</sup> Ioan, Drăgan, *Comunicarea – paradigme și teorii*, Capitol III. „Utilizarea Mass Media ca mijloc de evaziune (Escapism)”, pag. 96, respectiv pag. 99, vol. II, Editura Rao, 2007.

contains the introduction of optional courses about Media. "Curriculum at school decision is approved by order of minister no. 4730/ 22.09.2004. The curriculum area is presented under the aegis of *Man and society* which is taught an hour a week. The subject is called *Competence in mass-media*, and an integrated component of the project is called *Integrated mass media system for high school- MEDIASIS* – carried out in partnership with the Ministry of Education and Research by the Press Monitoring Agency *Academia Cațavencu*".<sup>4</sup> This subject wants to develop the following values and skills: freedom of opinions, freedom of expression, critical spirit, positive relation with the others, optimal and creative valorisation of own potential and last but not least, the confidence in oneself and in the others. The content units contain a history of media: *Mass media at the beginning of XXIth century*, portrait of consumer: *Consumer of messages transmitted by mass media*, message: *Message transmitted through mass media*, *Manipulation by mass-media*, commercials: *Advertising*, society: *Minorities in mass-media*, role and identity: *Journalist and his role in society*.

It must be highlighted that the understanding of the educational system is a key factor. The reason for selection of students and teachers in the next case study is because they are the pure mirror of the future and present.

The case study entitled *Mirror of development of contemporary media – theories and ideas* is an investigation, conducted in two theoretical high schools of Cluj-Napoca, in National College George Coșbuc and in Theoretical High School Apáczai Csere János. The interviewed subjects were 12th grade students we filmed by a camera. In National College George Coșbuc we asked questions related to the use of traditional media and digital media to four male students and in Theoretical High School Apáczai Csere János we spoke on this subject with four female students. From their confessions it resulted that they use more digital media, are familiar with the latest media sites and sites from abroad, for example they mentioned [www.spiegel.de](http://www.spiegel.de). At the end of interviews we outlined ideas on this issue by the statement of the following teachers: Adriana Mirela Bătinaș, class master of 12th grade from National College George

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.isjcta.ro/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Competenta-in-massmedia-cds-liceu.pdf>, accesat la data de 23.12.2016

Coşbuc, Loredana Caia, blogger, mother and Romanian Language and Literature teacher, Lecturer Vlad Mureşan Ph.D., and last but not least Assistant Researcher Victor Constantin Măruţoiu, Ph.D., president of Vox Napocensis literary circle, from Student's House of Culture (Casa de Cultură a Studenţilor) from Cluj-Napoca. The video was viewed in the XVth National Journalism Symposium, on the subject *Independence of media and freedom of expression*, organized by the Journalism Department of the Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences of „Babeş-Bolyai” University Cluj-Napoca, during the period 14-15 October 2016.

The students were asked why they considered blog writing important. The answers were honest, not censored by life experiences. I quote some of them: *"We have to communicate with the world and this is the easiest method", "We need to feel that our opinion about different subjects matters," "We need to know that someone is listening to us," "Our thinking in this method is not censored."*

It goes without saying that these answers generated a natural question in this case: *"Who writes for whom?"* The answer was clear: *"Everyone for everybody."* A simple answer which seems to be indeed true concerning the appearance of new types of media: digital and social media. In case of social media, which is practically transmitted by digital media, everyone can demonstrate the calling of journalist or playing a role of a journalist.

Practically blog writing is the nucleus where the social media of today began. This trend starts to branch off to such extent that journalism tends to be symbolically a kind of life tree. But can this field become an "Axis mundi"? Eventually blogs just like journals mirror the identity of the world. But the question must be asked as follows: *"How, and in what way can they mirror this identity?"*

First of all, I started to analyse the motivation of students whose article we may read in newspapers in a few years. Their motivation says a lot about their state of mind. But the message transmitted remains to be noticed. In Blog writing the message is priceless, must be analysed. What does the world send to the world? The youth answered this question: *"Everything"*.

Many would say that it is necessary for the world to receive gross, unpolished, uncensored messages, but is it always useful? Does really each blog get only to the target group? How can we assimilate so much information and by what rule do we filter it? Where is the middle path between professional journalism and social journalism?

Lecturer Vlad Mureşan, Ph.D. tried to offer us a middle pathway by which the blending of the new media with the traditional media would significantly improve contemporary mass media: *"The knowledge is based on elaboration and differentiation, distinctions, categorizations, so knowledge is treelike, we cannot minimize it to the essentials of information. The equation must be balanced; otherwise we win in one part and lose in another part."*

*"The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum..."* – the great linguist Noam Chomsky offers us a theory.<sup>5</sup>

From ideological point of view, the social networks have broken the moulds. Certain theories about journalism want the return of new structures to origins or the adjustment of the new structures to classical ones. We can propose the solution of this quasi-return to origins or the implementation of classical methods in modern media by the following steps: revival of fundamental values in contemporaneity, which concerns the journalistic behaviour. Then would follow the stage of profound undertaking of everything that public defence of human values, of the word, of national welfare and international welfare means. In contemporary society there is a stringent need of mirroring the human contemporary values and the thinking level of society. This does not assume an introduction of norms or utopic canons, but the regulation of existing values.

Blog writing, even if it is free for everyone, not censored, yet certain minor moral regulations are required such as: improvement of media texts, critical spirit to own article, sensitisation of oneself to the theme, profound thinking and last but not least, the responsabilization of so-called contemporary journalists. To what purpose do the revival and perfection of blogs serve? Blog itself started to give the outline of *social media*. It is a connection between professional journalism and hobby journalism. They offer the texts displayed on social platforms a narrative discourse and a "quasi-decent" analysis. Blog writing has become a symbiosis between the professional press and the voice of the world.

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<sup>5</sup> Noam Chomsky, *The Common Good* (Textul original: *"The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum..."*), pag. 43, Odonian Press, 1998.

Site: *Third world traveler*:

[http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Chomsky/Common\\_Good\\_Chomsky.html](http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Chomsky/Common_Good_Chomsky.html),

Chomsky.info: <https://chomsky.info/commongood01/> accesate la data de 20.12.2016

## Case study

### *Research Design*

I intended to search the youth, mainly the students' habits concerning blog writing and collecting information from virtual platforms. It is really important to observe how do they use online platforms, how do they collect information and from where. Besides informative sites there are the blogs, from which students need to be prepared in order to choose correctly. They have to distinguish between honest and false news and articles, because blogs are more for creating opinion than for inform about the ultimate news.

The most suitable method for this research can be the content analysis and quantitative analysis.

Starting from this claim, that virtual life interacts massively with the real life, mostly of teenagers, who likes much more to read a blog, however they do read newspaper articles or scientific magazines as well. I made a short survey wanting just to discover students' general habits which concerns their blog consumerism. I draw a picture which presents the following statements:

### *The statistics of the responders*

Total responders: 46

Men: 26

Women: 20

The average age: 23.7 years

### *Synthesis of results:*

#### *1. Did you ever create a blog?*

Yes 22  47.8%

No 24  52.2%

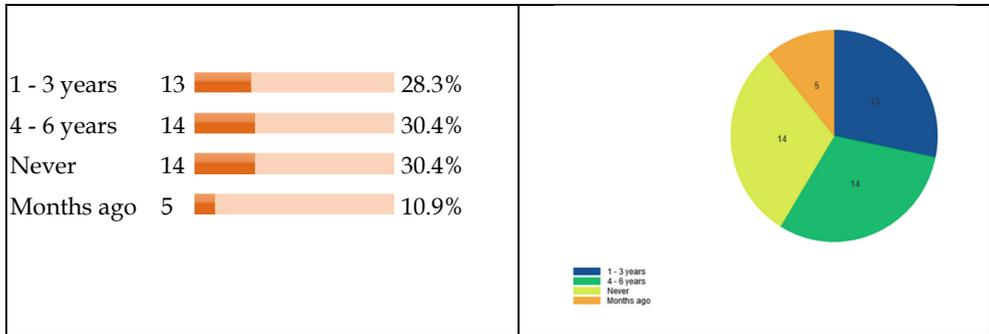
2. *If the answer is affirmative, please describe what kind of blog you have.*

The answers are the followings: literature blog, cultural blog, travel blog, scientific blog about chemistry, entertainment blog, a journey kind blog, life-style philosophy blog, vlog, sport blog.

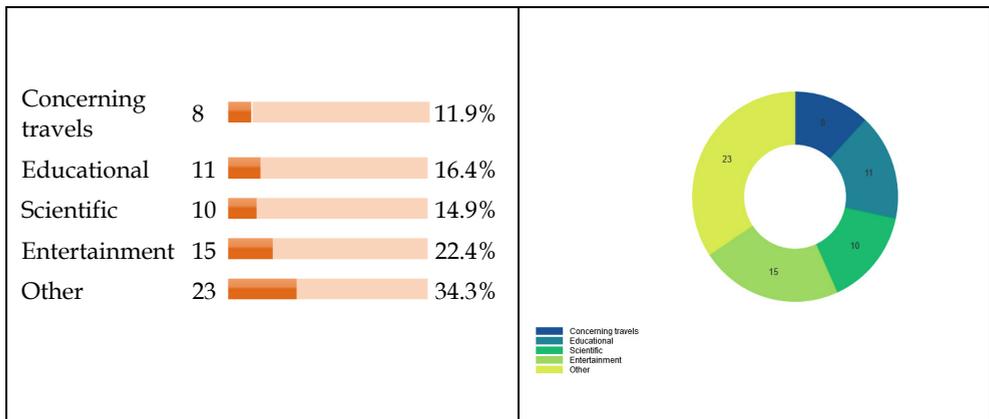
3. *What inspired you to start your blog?*

The answers are the followings: teachers, poetry and literature, life, traveling, documentary movie, chemistry, entertainment, love, life-style philosophy.

4. *Since when do you follow blogs?*



5. *What kind of blogs do you read?*

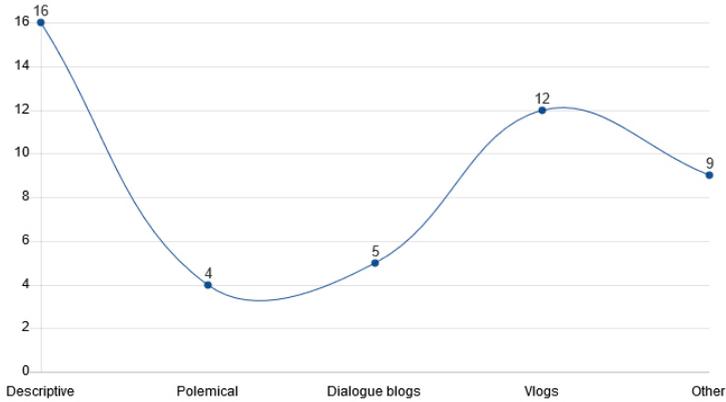


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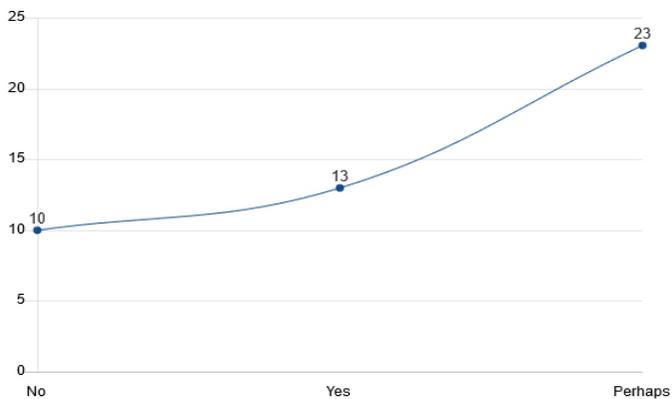
6. If you chose 'other', please specify!

The answers are the followings: religion, technology, culinary, personal development.

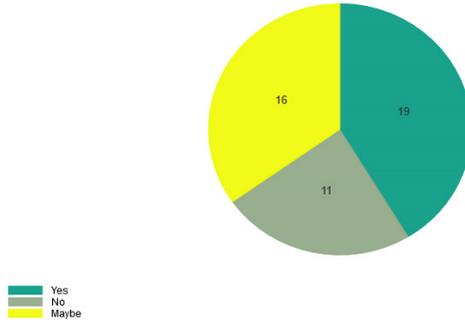
7. Which of the following types of blogs are you interested in the most?



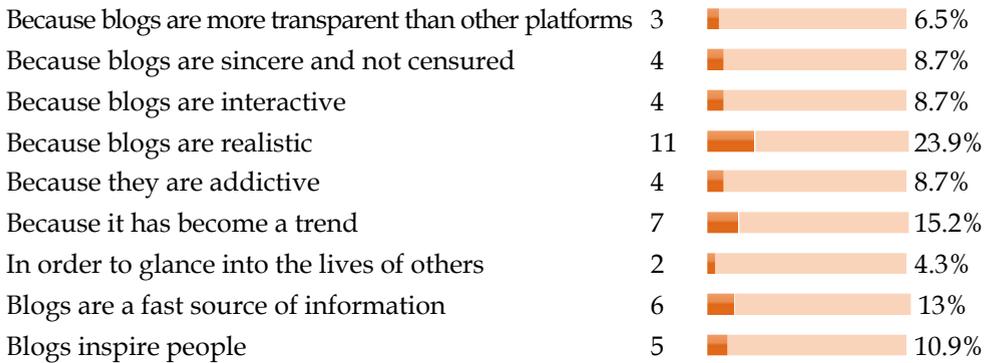
8. Do you think blogs have a future?



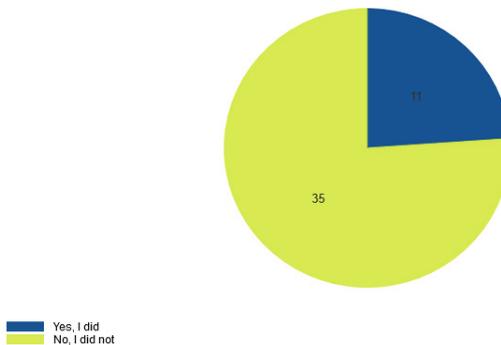
9. Do blogs have influence/impact on your life?



10. Why do you think people read blogs?



11. Did you ever use blogs for educational purposes?



12. *If you didn't have a blog until now and if you would like to create one, what kind of blog would you make?*

The answers are the followings: cultural, educational, blogs about movies and movie analysis, artistic, health care.

Mainly half of respondents do have a blog and the other half do not. The difference consist only in 5%, those who do not have blog are 5% in majority. They have literature blog, cultural blog, travel blog, scientific blog about chemistry, entertainment blogs, journey kind blog, life-style philosophy blog, vlog, and last but not least sport blogs. Students were inspired to create a blog by teachers, poetry and literature, by different events in their life's, by their traveling as tourists or exchange students, by wanting to analyse documentary movies, by focusing on different specializations like chemistry or other sciences or by different types of philosophies. Students follow blogs as the result shows in this case at the equality those who are blogging between 4 -6 years and those who are not following blogs (30.4%). Between 1 -3 years are 28.3% and those who had begun to follow blogs just a few month ago are 10.9%. As the 5<sup>th</sup> graphic shows students read mostly entertainment blogs (22.4%), less educational ones (16.4%), a few of them read scientific blogs (14.9%), and the least do read traveling blogs (11.9%) but most of them are, who didn't choose from the types which I offered them as an example, but choose other types of blogs, like religion, technology, culinary and personal development (34.3%). They are interested mostly in descriptive blogs (34.8%), than about vlogs (26.1%), less are interested of dialogue blogs (10.9%) and just a few are interested of polemical blogs (8.7%) and last but not least 19.6% declared that are interested in other types of blogs. About the future of the blogs 50% declared that blogs might have future, 28.3% said a definitive "yes" and 21.7% declared a definitive "no" to this question. The 9<sup>th</sup> graphic is actually the most important from all of the graphics, showing the influence and impact of blogs on youth life's. 41.3% of the students affirmed that blogs do have influence on their life's and approximately half of them (23.9%) states that blogs do not have influence on their life's; but there were also students who cannot decide firmly if they were or were not influenced by blogs (34.8%). Graphic nr.10 shows students' opinions about blogs. They mostly believe that people read blogs because of realistic reasons (23.9%). Than 15.2%

think that the reason why people read blogs are just for following the trend. 13% of students from this research have the conviction that blogs are a fast source of information and 10.9% affirmed that blogs are a good source of inspiration. In this graphic we have three equal positions with 8.7% where students declare that blogs are addictive, interactive and sincere. 6.5% of students think that people read blogs because they are more transparent than other platforms and last but not least just 4.3% believe that people read blogs for glancing in other people's lives'. Another important issue is the educational purpose: 23.9% of the students actually use blogs for educational reasons and 76.1% did not use for educational purposes. The blog results can be seen in the following site as well: <http://www.isondaje.ro/surveys/results/510295155/>.

After the quantitative research I axed the thesis in a qualitative one as well. In order to provide in-depth insight, the research needed a video material, in order to show opinions and statements about the subject. I made a 7 minutes movie, in order to portrait students', teachers' and parents' opinion about the new media, high lightening the blog writing. In the following lines there is the movie script:

### **The reflection of the development of the contemporary media - theories and ideas -**

Assist. Researcher <b>Victor Constantin Măruțoiu</b> PhD., cultural referent at Student's House of Culture, from Cluj- Napoca	"Nowadays the development of the mass-media has spawned not only a multitude of possibilities but of trials as well both for adults and for children. In the mass-media, we must first have self-awareness and when we become opinion-formers, we must be aware of others as well. Because those who become opinion-formers themselves should be aware of what they filter and what they transmit. When there is a dialog between society and the mass-media, there is also a human evolutionary stepping stone."
<b>Mihai Albu</b> , student, 12 <sup>th</sup> grade, National College "George Coșbuc", Cluj- Napoca	"I use the computer and the internet exclusively when it comes to reading and articles, and I can easily state from experience that it is by far the best way to find, select and to get informed about any subject or topic. If I were to write an article, it would definitely be about the education system of Romania. At the humanities classes that focus mainly on languages and other humanistic topics and optional mass-media course should be available."

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<p><b>Victor Curean</b>, student, 12<sup>th</sup> grade, National College "George Coşbuc", Cluj-Napoca</p>	<p>"For local news, I use Cluj News (Ştiri de Cluj) and for international news, I tend to look at CNN and Spiegel.de. And for political soap operas I use the Romanian Television. I would like to be the type of journalist who relays international stories objectively yet still annexing his personal opinion to it. This is why I appreciate the YouTube videos of Philip De Franco, for example, who treats international stories, local stories and gossip objectively while adding his opinion as well. Thus, you can establish a connection with the viewers, the readers and so on."</p>
<p><b>Adriana Mirela Băţinaş</b>, teacher, National College "George Coşbuc", Cluj-Napoca</p>	<p>"The mass-media is mainly in direct correlation with Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences - specifically with the linguistic intelligence. They are learning to become good orators. They also focus on everyday life, social abilities and on the role of the mass-media in the academic life. So, broadly, I would stay that it has a positive impact on them, the future graduates, and future students. (...) My colleague still teaches those courses (Mass-Media) at the Romanian section."</p>
<p><b>Palocsai Johanna</b>, 12<sup>th</sup> grade, "Apáczai Csere János" Theoretical High school, Cluj-Napoca</p>	<p>"I write articles for the school's newspaper and I like it very much. We write about activities pertaining to the school."</p>
<p><b>Manessesz Kinga</b>, student, 12<sup>th</sup> grade, "Apáczai Csere János" Theoretical High school, Cluj-Napoca</p>	<p>"I would like to be a journalist who always speaks the truth and would even be correct."</p>
<p><b>Loredana Caia</b>, Romanian blogger, mother and Romanian Language and Literature teacher, Cluj-Napoca</p>	<p>"<b>This is why I think that a blog is a direct reflection of the one who has it: this is who I am - I cannot be someone else.</b> <i>The little angel (Ingerica)</i> was the first article for it was the first chapter of a book that I have written a few years ago - Mother's Journal. That's where the idea for <i>The Little Angel</i> comes from. In the end everyone knows what they want and if they don't they should follow their hearts - to be who they truly are."</p>
<p><b>Marc Damian</b>, student, 12<sup>th</sup> grade, National College "George Coşbuc", Cluj-Napoca</p>	<p>"I like to see shorter articles that present ideas that do not allow the writer to bend you to either side, you know? I really like Reuters, for example, where when a story surfaces they swiftly add an article. I appreciate it very much that they do not include uncertain pieces of information. I's like to write scientific articles about any new discovery... of course I would have to do a great deal of research on the subject, but I strongly believe that this is something that I would like to do...if I could. Reuter is my main source of news."</p>
<p><b>Iacob Casian</b>, student, 12<sup>th</sup> grade, National College "George Coşbuc", Cluj-Napoca</p>	<p>"I've recently started reading articles on a single web site - media VICE. It appears most interesting to me. I have started a blog a year ago. I write about trips that I make in my spare time but not only that. Yet, generally, I focus on trips."</p>

<p>Lecturer <b>Vlad Mureşan</b> Ph.D Faculty of European Studies Department of International Relations and American Studies, Cluj-Napoca</p>	<p>"It is very difficult for me to present the direction in which it is heading. I hope that it will revert from Facebook to blogs rather than it migrating from Facebook to Twitter, the most concentrated and fragmented reaction to... you cannot say anything essential, you can post an aphorism... Science is the opposite of aphorisms... aphorism is trying to capture and express only the minimal essence of information, while science tends to elaborate, distinguish and categorise. Knowledge is arborescent. In short, every revolution comes with its advantages and disadvantages; and somehow we must take them both and balance the equation otherwise we may succeed with certain aspects and fail with others. This is the evaluation, mostly."</p>
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## Conclusion

We can conclude that blog writing completes the written press and online press, gives colour to mass media, offers a multitude of information, and offers the necessary time for information, documentation, transmits feelings, emotions, and states of mind. Blog writing is actually like an unpublished book, but does not remain "in the drawer". But probably the most important thing is its sentimental value.

Blog writing becomes a method which offers a rich analysis by the media diversity, which starts already to establish a certain territory in the new digital social media. It is important to reflect the opinions of youth, the future generation to be able to identify the future of the blog. I quote a student who wanted to be anonymous in this analysis: *"Blog writer is like the physician without stethoscope: he knows or assumes that a problem exists, but cannot prove it without the essential tool. Yet, I believe that blogs give a colour, complete the written press and online press. Blogs are the unauthorized voice of the media."*

With the appearance and development of blogs, new analyses and studies, new texts, essay writings, specialized books have started to appear. It is a natural evolution which we, the new consumers of the media have to understand, which cooperates to the advancement of new technologies.

*"Web 2.0 offers the possibility to become journalist, to write and post your own content online for an extremely multiple and heterogeneous audience. The passage from Web 1.0, which was a single-direction web, in which only those*

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*who had technical knowledge could open a website, Web 2.0, democratizes the information: now anyone can open an account on an online platform, without technical knowledge, anyone can produce and publish information. Unknown persons become personalities of public space in a very short time, by online exposure. The first result of this change is the blogs, which operate like individual platforms of opinion expression and turned their owners, bloggers into public persons with substantial incomes. The second result is that anyone can practise journalism: to produce and publish credible information for a qualitatively and quantitatively significant audience".<sup>6</sup>*

(Horea Mihai Bădău, *Manual de jurnalism online*)

The development of these means of communication concerns not only the experts in media and journalists, but also the contemporary society who shifts its focus from classical, traditional press to the new press which already entered our vocabulary as *New Media*.

*"The development of communication means created thus what we can describe as «mediated historicity»: our perception on the past and our perception on the ways in which the past influences us today have become more and more dependent on a tank in permanent expansion of mediated symbolical forms."<sup>7</sup>*

(I. Maxim Danciu, *Mass-Media – Modernitate, Postmodernitate, Globalizare*)

However we can point out a very important aspect from the video: in present the mass-media curriculum is taught by teachers, who have other major subjects, for example geography or history or philosophy, etc. I consider that a subject, a curriculum such important as mass-media should be thought only just by professionals, who have a university diploma, which proofs their knowledge in the subject. It is indeed essential to accomplish this educational require, in fact the education of mass-media which includes social media as well has to start from here.

If we make a universal image of what new media, especially blog writing means in the area of students we can observe that this is a mirroring of their identity. They show us their beliefs, their thoughts, their voice.

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<sup>6</sup> Horea Mihai, Bădău, *Manual de jurnalism online - Cum să produci și să distribuie conținut de succes în online* – Chapter I. „Introduction”, pag. 9, Editura Tritonic, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> I. Maxim Danciu, *Mass-Media – Modernitate, Postmodernitate, Globalizare*, Chapter I, "Mass-Media System in Modern and Postmodern society", pag. 9, Editura Tribuna, 2005.

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## THAI CONSUMERS' SKEPTICISM AND ATTITUDES TOWARD CONTENT SEEDING TECHNIQUES VIA SOCIAL MEDIA

NANTHITA SONGYOTHIN\*, CHOMPUNUCH PUNYAPIROJE\*\*

**ABSTRACT.** Content seeding via social media is one of the most popular marketing tactics in the digital age. However, there are some digital agencies exercising unethical practices by not notifying the contents as the advertisements in order to earn consumer's attention and content sharing. As such, the purposes of this research were to investigate Thai consumers' skepticism toward advertising messages created by content seeding techniques, their attitudes toward advertising messages, advertised brands and media organizations that employed content seeding techniques. Specifically, this study also examined the interrelationships among these four variables. A self-administered survey research was conducted. The participants were selected through convenience sampling. Final sample consisted of 400 Thai consumers aged between 18 and 45 years who had social media usage experiences. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and inferential statistics.

The results showed that there was a negative relationship between Thai consumers' skepticism and their attitudes toward advertising messages created by content seeding techniques via social media ( $p < 0.05$ ), as well as a negative relationship between consumers' skepticism toward advertising messages and attitudes toward advertised brands that employed content seeding techniques ( $p < 0.05$ ). However, there was no relationship between consumers' skepticism and their attitudes toward media organizations that employed content seeding techniques.

**Keywords:** Attitudes, Consumer Skepticism to Advertising, Content Marketing, Content Seeding, Thai consumers

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\* Master student of Department of Communication Arts, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Burapha University, Chonburi, Thailand

\*\* Ph.D. Assistant Professor of Department of Communication Arts, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Burapha University, Chonburi, Thailand, Email: [chompunuch@yahoo.com](mailto:chompunuch@yahoo.com)

## **Background and Significance of the Study**

According to MAGNA of IPG Mediabrands's reports, the global advertising economy is expected to reach UDS 27 billion by the end of 2016. Of this amount, USD 26 billion is coming from increases in digital advertising. Thus, digital will remain the key driver of total advertising industry expenditures, with compound growth of 11% expected through 2021 (Letang & Stillman, 2016). Similar to Thailand, Digital Advertising Association (Thailand) or DAAT and TNS (Thailand) Ltd. conducted a survey regarding the digital advertising spending of 2016 by collecting data from 24 leading advertising agencies. The results show that digital advertising spending in 2016 totaled over 9,883 million Baht, an increase of 22% from 2015. Such figures imply that the digital media has become an important media as much as television nowadays. Thumbsupteam (2016) added, the major purpose of using digital media among Thai marketers is to enhance brand awareness and brand relationships.

Content seeding via social media is one of the most popular marketing techniques in the digital age. Its working process begins when the content creators have created and published brand related contents (or the posts) on online media, including scattering the contents across various social media platforms in various ways. In addition, content creators sometimes hire celebrities or influencers to distribute the contents to the target audiences who are in their own social networks. Most marketers suggest that there are two types of content seeding. "Simple seeding" occurs when the contents are distributed via the brand's own network and a few well-known influencers with low efforts and costs. The contents of simple seeding must have high quality and values to persuade the web users to share the content to their own networks. The chance for content to become viral is much higher through advanced seeding. On the other hand, for the "advanced seeding," brand owners will create any kinds of contents, including videos, articles or infographic and distribute them into social media influencers, blogs, forums, groups, and websites. However, an advanced seeding technique requires a high cost and great effort because the contents can be reached a large target group. The major social media networks have been popularly used are Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Google+ as the first placed to distribute the contents. However, social media such as Instagram, Pinterest and Snapchat are being used for business-to-consumer companies' visual contents, including expert blogs and influencers as a great tool to increase trust (Content Seeding, 2017).

While content marketing has gained its popularity on online media, there are some digital agencies exercising unethical practices by not notifying the contents as the advertisements in order to earn consumer's attention and content sharing. Littleton (2012) states that some marketers use content seeding techniques in unethical ways such as hiring people to use false identities to post or even using software to flood internet forums and social media with positive comments. In a similar vein, consumers in Thailand have faced this kind of problems as well. That is, problems related to content seeding occur when firms try to conceal consumers who are the sponsors in creating contents, hire people to use fake identities in social media accounts to post positive comments in the contents, exaggerate the product attributes in the content reviews and transgress the consumers' personal information database for developing marketing plans (Kamjadpai, 2016). Sher and Lee (2009) further state that while the Internet provides an easy access to product and service information, it may also foster consumer skepticism toward advertising claims.

Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998; 2000) define "consumer skepticism toward advertising" as the tendency toward disbelief of the advertising claims. In this state, consumers come to believe or disbelieve about marketing messages through socialization and purchasing experiences. These researchers further suggested that, based on extensive review of literature, there have been some studies about consumer skepticism toward advertising from traditional media to online media (Boush, Friestad & Rose, 1994; Sher & Lee, 2009; Wang & Chien, 2012). While some researchers examines the impact of consumer involvement on advertising skepticism (Sami & Gull, 2012) or the effect of stated company intent on consumer skepticism (Forehand & Grier, 2003), others develop consumer skepticism toward advertising scale that has been widely used (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998; 2000). Nevertheless, a few studies in Thailand focus on this area. That is, one area of the study is to examine the relationships among consumer's demographics, consumer self-esteem, knowledge, advertising skepticism, and advertising avoidance while the other area focuses on an examination of the effects of consumer skepticism toward attitudes on consumer behaviors toward advertising, including investigating the relationships with consumer's self-confidence, cynicism and media credibility variables (Devahastin, 2008; Lerkamnouychoke, 2007). Most of the research findings confirmed that consumer skepticism in advertising affected their beliefs, attitudes toward advertising claims, and product judgment (Tien & Phau, 2009).

Based on Heider's balance theory, one of cognitive consistency theories which dominated social psychology in 1960's, a person's behavior changes from liking to disliking someone or something by choosing balance state in her interpersonal relations. This is caused by pressure or tension, resulting from the imbalance state in her interpersonal relations, which enforces someone to change her sentiment relation toward balance formation or to lesser force/tension (Hummon & Doreian, 2003; Zajonc 1960). In the advertising aspect, the Balance Theory hypothesizes that there is a reciprocal correlation between attitude toward the advertising and attitude toward the brand, i.e., there is a mutual two-way causation (Edell & Burke 1984). The basic premise of the balance theory is that a person seeks to maintain balance among the components of any cognitive unit. Heider's example involves a person-object-event triad. The cognitive unit is balanced if all three pairs of correlations are positive or if two are negative and one is positive (p. 110). The balance theory triad in an advertising situation would be the consumer, an advertisement, and the brand which is advocated in the advertisement. Since the advertising-brand correlation is always positive, a balanced state will exist only if the consumer dislikes both the advertising and the brand or likes them both. Therefore, the prediction would be that attitude toward the advertising and attitude toward the brand are highly positively correlated. Thus, it is also possible that facing unethical content seeding techniques may have caused consumers disbelieving, resulting negative attitudes toward contents appearing on the Internet and negative attitudes toward advertised brands as well.

As stated above, there have not been any research studies focusing on consumer's skepticism toward advertising messages created by content seeding techniques and its effects on consumer attitudes toward advertising messages, advertised brands, and media organizations. Furthermore, no-known studies have focused on attitudes toward content seeding unethical techniques in details. As such, the purposes of this research were to investigate Thai consumers' skepticism toward advertising messages created by content seeding techniques, their attitudes toward advertising messages created by content seeding techniques, their attitudes toward advertised brands and media organizations that employed content seeding techniques. Specifically, this study also examined the interrelationships among these four variables.

Also, based on the balance theory, three hypotheses were suggested as follows:

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H1: There is a correlation between consumer skepticism toward advertising messages and their attitudes toward advertising messages created by content seeding techniques.

H2: There is a correlation between consumer skepticism toward advertising messages and their attitudes toward advertised brands that employed content seeding techniques.

H3: There is a correlation between consumer skepticism toward advertising messages and their attitudes toward media organizations that employed content seeding techniques.

### **Methods**

Survey Research was used in this study as follows:

#### *Samples and Procedures*

To investigate the effects of content seeding tactics on consumer skepticism and attitudes, a survey research was employed. Participants were selected via convenience sampling of Thai consumers. A self-administered questionnaire was employed and 400 responses were collected from December 2016 to January 2017. In order to participate in the study, there were 2 screening questions. First, the participants were asked whether they had any experiences in using any of these social media (i.e., Facebook, Instagram and website community (Pantip.com)) because these 3 social media are popular among Thai people. If they indicated yes, the participants were then asked whether they have seen the content seeding in these social media types. The researchers then informed the participants about the research objectives and its benefits for the academic purposes. Once the participants agreed to participate in the study, the researcher handed in the questionnaire to complete.

#### *Questionnaire Development*

The questionnaire consisted of 5 sections: the demographics, advertising skepticism toward advertising messages, the attitudes toward advertising messages, the attitudes toward advertised brands, and the attitudes toward media organizations that employed content seeding techniques. For the

consumer skepticism toward advertising, the scale was adapted from Obermiller & Spangenberg's studies (1998; 2000). For consumer attitudes toward advertising messages, advertised brands, and media organizations, the scales were adapted from Punyapiroje's studies in 2011 and 2012. All measured were assessed using 5-point Likert-type scale, where 1 = "strong disagree," and 5 = "strong agree," The researcher also sent the questionnaire to two academic professors and a media manager working at a media agency in Thailand for the purpose of face validity and content validity. The researchers also pretested the questionnaire with 30 participants to ensure reliability of the scales. All measures exhibited an acceptable reliability, ranging from 0.717 - 0.926. Descriptive statistics and Pearson Product-Moment correlations were employed to test all hypothesized relationships.

## Findings

### *Sample Characteristics*

Of four hundred responses, about 67% were females and 33% were males. In addition, a sample was more educated with most participants indicated holding at least a Bachelor's degree. A majority of participants reported a personal monthly earning of 10,000 Baht or less.

### *Consumer skepticism toward advertising messages*

When asking consumers to rank their skepticism toward advertising messages created by content seeding techniques via social media, the results showed that the average of consumers' skepticism was in a moderate level ( $\bar{X}$  = 3.15). The top-five of skepticism sentences that consumers ranked the highest were, "I can depend on getting the truth in most messages that employed content seeding techniques" ( $\bar{X}$  = 3.56), followed by "The objective of messages that employed content seeding techniques is to inform the consumers" ( $\bar{X}$  = 3.54), "I believe messages that employed content seeding techniques are informative" ( $\bar{X}$  = 3.43), "Most messages that employed content seeding techniques provide consumers with essential information" ( $\bar{X}$  = 3.24), and "In general, messages that employed content seeding techniques present a true picture of the products being advertised" ( $\bar{X}$  = 3.00), respectively (see Table 1).

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**Table 1.** Means and standard deviations of consumer skepticism toward advertising messages created by content seeding techniques via social media (n = 400)

<b>Consumer skepticism toward advertising messages created by content seeding techniques</b>	<b><math>\bar{x}</math></b>	<b>S.D.</b>	<b>Rank</b>
1. I can depend on getting the truth in most advertising messages created by content seeding techniques.	3.56	0.72	1
2. The objective of advertising messages created by content seeding techniques is to inform the consumers.	3.54	0.82	2
3. I believe advertising messages created by content seeding techniques are informative.	3.43	0.78	3
4. Advertising messages created by content seeding techniques are generally truthful.	2.96	0.77	6
5. Advertising messages created by content seeding techniques are a reliable source of information about the quality and performance of products.	2.94	0.77	7
<b>Consumer skepticism toward advertising messages created by content seeding techniques</b>	<b><math>\bar{x}</math></b>	<b>S.D.</b>	<b>Rank</b>
6. Advertising messages created by content seeding techniques are truth well told.	2.81	0.74	9
7. In general, advertising messages created by content seeding techniques present a true picture of the products being advertised.	3.00	0.80	5
8. I feel I've been accurately informed after viewing most advertising messages created by content seeding techniques.	2.87	0.81	8
9. Most advertising messages created by content seeding techniques provide consumers with essential information.	3.24	0.79	4
<b>Consumer skepticism toward advertising messages created by content seeding techniques (Means)</b>	3.15	0.55	

*Consumer attitudes toward advertising messages*

When asking consumers to rank their attitudes toward advertising messages created by content seeding techniques via social media, the results revealed that the average of consumer's attitudes toward advertising messages was also in a moderate level ( $\bar{X}$  = 3.21). The top-five of attitude sentences that consumers ranked the highest were, "Attaching the links of advertised brands in the advertising message created by content seeding techniques helps consumers to search product information easily" and "Video clips created by content seeding techniques are mostly interesting and want me to learn more about the advertised products" ( $\bar{X}$  = 4.12), followed by "Illustrators appeared in advertising messages created by content seeding techniques are well-designed

to get consumer attention” ( $\bar{X}=4.08$ ), “Using hashtag in the advertising messages created by content seeding techniques is advantageous for consumers because it aids them to search product information easily” ( $\bar{X}=4.00$ ), “Using the advertising keyword of the brands in the advertising messages created by content seeding techniques assists consumers to recall the product attributes easily” ( $\bar{X}=3.78$ ) and “Using the celebrities to review the products makes advertising messages more believable” ( $\bar{X}=3.69$ ) respectively (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Means and standard deviations of consumer attitudes toward advertising messages created by content seeding techniques (n=400)

<b>Attitudes toward advertising messages created by content seeding techniques</b>	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	Rank
1. I like to view advertising messages created by content seeding techniques because they assist me to better understand product attributes.	3.13	0.84	11
2. I do not believe in advertising messages created by content seeding techniques because such messages tend to be one-sided product information.	2.33	0.88	16
3. I refuse to view advertising messages created by content seeding techniques because the content is exaggerate.	2.63	0.87	13
4. I think advertising messages created by content seeding techniques offer consumers too much product information.	2.36	0.83	15
5. Writing styles of advertising messages created by content seeding techniques are persuasive and believable.	3.21	0.96	10
6. Illustrators appeared in advertising messages created by content seeding techniques are well-designed to get consumer attention.	4.08	0.75	2
7. Video clips created by content seeding techniques are mostly interesting and want me to learn more about the advertised products.	4.12	0.73	1
8. It is wrong for advertised brands to create fake reviews and comments on their posts, making consumers to believe them as the suggestion posts.	1.82	0.88	17
9. It is wrong for advertised brands to create fake reviews and comments on their posts to get consumer attention.	1.77	0.88	18
10. Using hashtag in the advertising messages created by content seeding techniques is advantageous for consumers because it aids them to search product information easily.	4.00	0.84	3
11. Attaching the links of advertised brands in the advertising message created by content seeding techniques helps consumers to search product information easily.	4.12	0.81	1

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<b>Attitudes toward advertising messages created by content seeding techniques</b>	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	Rank
12. Using general consumers for products reviews may help increased the credibility of advertising messages.	3.61	0.94	7
<b>Attitudes toward advertising messages created by content seeding techniques</b>	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	Rank
13. It is unethical for advertised brands to create product reviews and comments on Pantip.com, yet claim them as consumer reviews.	2.56	0.93	14
14. The posts that advertised brands create in Pantip.com but claim as sponsor reviews reflect the brand owners' sincerity.	3.25	0.94	9
15. Using the advertising keyword of the brands in the advertising messages created by content seeding techniques assists consumers to recall the product attributes easily.	3.78	0.72	4
16. Using the celebrities to review the products makes advertising messages more believable.	3.69	0.87	5
17. Using the celebrities to reviews the product makes advertising messages less credible.	3.07	1.03	12
18. Buying "boost posts" for message distributions allows consumers to have more chances to access product information.	3.63	0.78	6
19. Identifying "sponsor ads" words in the advertising messages created by content seeding techniques helps consumers to realize it as advertising and shows companies' sincerity.	3.36	0.85	8
20. Hiring advertorial network companies for distributing the advertising messages as "related articles" assist consumers to search for product information easily.	3.63	0.76	6
<b>Attitudes toward advertising messages created by content seeding techniques (Means)</b>	3.21	0.28	

Note: item number 2-4, 8-9, 12 and 16 are negatively-worded statements and these items were recoded before final analysis.

### *Consumer attitudes toward advertised brands*

When asking consumers to rank their attitudes toward advertised brands that employed content seeding via social media, the results showed that the average of attitudes toward advertised brands was in a moderate level ( $\bar{X}$  = 2.56). The top-five of attitude sentences that consumers ranked the highest were, "Content seeding techniques is a suitable practice because it works effectively reaching out target audiences as compared to using traditional marketing" ( $\bar{X}$  = 3.46), followed by "It is not suitable for brands to persuade consumers by relying on advertising messages created by content

seeding techniques” ( $\bar{X}$ = 2.59), “I do not like brand companies using advertorial network companies to distribute advertising messages created by content seeding techniques” ( $\bar{X}$ = 2.58), “Advertising messages created by content seeding techniques are likely to generate negative effects on brand credibility” ( $\bar{X}$ = 2.51), and “I do not feel good when viewing advertising messages created by content seeding techniques” ( $\bar{X}$ = 2.50) respectively (see Table 3).

**Table 3.** Means and standard deviations of consumer attitudes toward advertised brands that employed content seeding techniques (n=400)

<b>Attitudes toward advertised brands that employed content seeding techniques</b>	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	Rank
1. Advertising messages created by content seeding techniques are likely to generate negative effects on brand credibility.	2.51	0.84	4
2. It is not suitable for brands to persuade consumers by relying on advertising messages created by content seeding techniques.	2.59	0.87	2
3. Brands companies should inform consumers that advertising messages were created by content seeding techniques.	2.14	0.84	9
4. Brands companies should not hire people to review products without notifying consumers that the reviewed messages created by content seeding techniques.	2.47	0.97	6
5. It is inappropriate for brand companies to hire celebrities review products without notifying consumers that the reviewed messages created by content seeding techniques.	2.41	0.94	7
6. It is inappropriate for brand companies to hire media organizations to write product reviews without notifying consumers that the reviewed messages created by content seeding techniques.	2.37	0.90	8
7. I do not like brand companies using advertorial network companies to distribute advertising messages created by content seeding techniques.	2.58	0.87	3
8. I do not feel good when viewing advertising messages created by content seeding techniques.	2.50	0.89	5
<b>Attitudes toward advertised brands that employed content seeding techniques</b>	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	Rank
9. Content seeding techniques is a suitable practice because it works effectively reaching out target audiences as compared to using traditional marketing.	3.46	0.91	1
<b>Attitudes toward advertised brands that employed content seeding techniques (Means)</b>	2.56	0.52	

Note: item number 1-8 are negatively-worded statements and these items were recoded before final analysis.

*Consumer attitudes toward media organizations*

When asking consumers to rank their attitudes toward media organizations that employed content seeding via social media, the results showed that the average of attitudes toward media organizations was also in a moderate level ( $\bar{X}$  = 2.99). The top-three of attitude sentences that consumers ranked the highest were, "Media organizations should be responsible in protecting consumer rights by notifying that the advertising messages consumers view created by content seeding techniques because some consumers are not knowledgeable about the advertising techniques" ( $\bar{X}$  = 4.00), followed by "Media organizations should have ethics when using content seeding techniques because most consumers tend to trust the media organization posts" ( $\bar{X}$  = 3.92), and "It is inappropriate that online media organizations to write product reviews for brand companies" ( $\bar{X}$  = 2.49), respectively (see Table 4).

*Hypotheses Testing*

Table 5 revealed the results of Pearson's *r* correlation. Results revealed that the consumers' skepticism toward advertising messages created by content seeding techniques was negatively correlated with the attitudes toward advertising messages created by employed content seeding techniques ( $r = -0.433, p < 0.05$ ). Results also revealed that the consumers' skepticism toward messages was also negatively correlated with the attitudes toward advertised brands that employed content seeding techniques ( $r = -0.114, p < 0.05$ ). However, the consumers' skepticism toward advertising messages was not significantly correlated with their attitudes toward media organizations that employed content seeding techniques ( $r = -0.018, p = 0.73$ ).

**Table 4.** Means and standard deviations of consumer attitudes toward media organizations that employed content seeding techniques (n=400)

<b>Attitudes toward media organizations that employed content seeding techniques</b>	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	Rank
1. Media organizations should be responsible in protecting consumer rights by notifying that the advertising messages consumers view created by content seeding techniques because some consumers are not knowledgeable about the advertising techniques.	4.07	0.81	1
2. Advertising messages created by content seeding techniques can decrease consumers' credibility toward media organizations.	2.33	0.81	4

<b>Attitudes toward media organizations that employed content seeding techniques</b>	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	Rank
3. It is inappropriate that online media organizations to write product reviews for brand companies.	2.49	0.94	3
4. Media organizations should have ethics when using content seeding techniques because most consumers tend to trust the media organization posts.	3.92	0.83	2
5. Media organizations' posts with online links attached to advertised brands are likely to attract consumers to read more about the brand companies' messages.	2.17	0.77	5
<b>Attitudes toward media organizations that employed content seeding techniques (Means)</b>	2.99	0.32	

Note: item number 2-3 and 5 are negatively-worded statements and these items were recoded before final analysis.

**Table 5.** The correlations between consumer skepticism toward advertising messages and their attitudes (n = 400)

<b>Consumer attitudes</b>	<b>Consumer skepticism toward Advertising Messages created by content seeding techniques</b>		
	<b>R</b>	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>	<b>Direction</b>
Attitudes toward advertising message	-0.433	0.05	Negative Correlation
Attitudes toward advertised brands	-0.114	0.05	Negative Correlation
Attitudes toward media organizations	-0.018	0.73	Not Significant

### Discussion and Managerial Implication

The aims of the study were to investigate Thai consumers' skepticism toward advertising messages created by content seeding techniques, their attitudes toward advertising messages, advertised brands and media organizations that employed content seeding techniques and to examine interrelationships among these four variables. The findings revealed that Thai consumers' skepticism toward advertising messages created by content seeding techniques and their attitudes are in a moderate level, implying that Thai consumers tend to understand content seeding objectives of marketers in providing the product or service information, while some may realize the benefits of such information. Nevertheless, these Thai consumers do not accept that advertising messages created by content seeding technique is exaggerate. The study's findings are

congruent with Lerkamnouychoke's study (2007) in that means values of consumer's advertising skepticism are in a moderate level as well.

Related to hypotheses testing, the findings revealed that Thai consumers' skepticism toward messages was negatively correlated with their attitudes toward advertising messages created by employed content seeding techniques. In addition, results revealed that the consumers' skepticism toward messages was also negatively correlated with their attitudes toward advertised brands that employed content seeding techniques. Such findings are in line with previous studies in that advertising skepticism was negatively correlated with consumer's beliefs, attitude toward advertising claims, product judgment and behavior toward advertising at significant level (Devahastin, 2008; Tien & Phau, 2009). Additionally, this can be explained with Heider's balance theory, stating that one's behavior changes from liking to disliking someone or something by choosing balance state in her interpersonal relation. This is caused by pressure or tension, resulting from the imbalance state in her interpersonal relations, which enforces someone to change her sentiment relation toward balance formation or to lesser force/tension (Hummon & Doreian, 2003; Zajonc 1960). Thus, when the consumers felt skepticism (negative) toward advertising messages, they were likely to display negative attitudes toward advertising messages and advertised brands as well.

Interestingly, there was no significant correlation between consumers' skepticism toward advertising messages and their attitudes toward media organizations that employed content seeding techniques. This reflects that Thai consumers might concentrate on advertising claims and advertised brands appearing in the messages rather than media organizations writing and distributing that kind of content. Such findings are similar to Sami & Gull's study (2012) stating that source credibility does not seem to have a considerable influence on consumer skepticism toward advertising.

In conclusion, the study's findings suggest that advertising messages created by content seeding techniques seem to be well received among Thai consumers, similar the product placement techniques used in various kinds of media in Thailand. In addition, Thai consumers seem to be positive to read product and service information as long as the marketers will not create the advertising messages in unethical ways and exaggerate claims for the advertised brands. However, Thai consumers tend to resist and boycott

social media providers if the marketers cross the boundaries. Thus, it is important that Thai government agencies who take responsible in consumer rights and protection need to enact laws and regulations for controlling the online seeding practices in ethical approach. For future research, the scholars might extend their studies into the content seeding strategies, tactics or presentation styles by interviewing professionals who work in this area. Also, a comparative study related to the types of influencers affecting on consumer skepticism is needed. These kinds of topic can help us to better understand online seeding and discover effective means to better assist online community.

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