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SUMMARY OF THE PHD THESIS

Online alternatives to the public discourse in Romania and their actors

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The doctoral research studies the stigmatization of persons, but especially of ethnic, sexual and religious minorities on the platforms of the Romanian publications, focusing on both, the aspects related to the content of the online discourse and the characteristics of the actors in this environment. At a first level, the analysis aims to identify the themes of the opinions expressed in the forums of online publications and to describe the features of this supra-discourse, which sometimes reproduces the themes of the debates between the intellectuals on the Holocaust and the Gulag, in the 90s, often containing violent or stigmatizing accents.

In addition, I was interested on the dynamics of the themes and their combination depending on the features of publication, on the topic of article and on the style in which it's written by the author. At a second level, applying the concepts of field and capital of Pierre Bourdieu, I have observed the relations between the symbolic and social capitals, specific and situational in this space of forums, and the political orientation of the commentator, relating them to the properties of the publication. Furthermore, I have examined the social relations existent in this space and I have identified a number of characteristics of the readers, which have helped me to outline nine main profiles, including the *virtual intellectual*.

The achievement of the goals required a combination of several research methods (content analysis, multiple correspondence analysis, social network analysis) applied on two materials[1]: a) the editorials and their opinions in the forums of four online national newspapers (*Adevărul, Cotidianul, Evenimentul Zilei, Jurnalul Național*), collected every two days, during 1 to 31 December 2012[2]; b) the articles and their opinions in the forums on different types of online platforms (newspapers, magazines, news websites, television websites) collected every two months during June 2008 - June 2010, a partially processed material in a previous collective project (together with Mihai Dinu Gheorghiu, Simona Sînzianu and William Totok).[3] The four authors of the project selected the articles based on their sensibilities, without following a certain pattern of time, due to the fact that our goals were centred more to raise the awareness towards the phenomenon of the online stigmatization and to investigate it at an historical and descriptive level.

The results are augmented with those from the analysis of nine interviews with directors or representatives of organizations and institutions that seek to combat the discrimination and to study the recent past, with journalists and researchers and, of 18 articles

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[1] The two materials totalize a number of 134 articles with 4264 comments of 1016 readers.
[2] This material was formed of 70 articles with 2163 opinions of 641 persons.
[3] This material included 64 articles with 2101 comments of 432 readers.

in *Dilema Veche* and in *Adevărul*, written by public person who took certain positions towards the phenomenon of "writing in the forums".

Thus, the topic of the research required an approach from a double perspective: on the one hand, the analysis of the stigmatizing discourse in Romania involves a presentation of the evolution of public debates, concerning the communism and the fascism, but also of the changes in the journalistic, political and intellectual fields after the collapse of communism; on the other hand, the issue towards the space of forums attracts the discussion about the reconfiguration of the journalistic and intellectual fields after the emergence of the internet.

The first chapter concerns more the media reconfiguration after the emergence of the internet and it is dedicated, among other, to the discussion about its effects on political, social or individual level. I also intended to highlight the way in which the online space had influenced the journalistic field worldwide, and especially in Romania, reviewing the most important moments in the evolution of the Romanian printed press and its situation today, once with the accession of the publications in the virtual environment.

The second chapter is dedicated to the intellectual field and intends to present the effects of the internet and especially of the emergence of blogs, on the activities and on the role of the intellectuals. The second part regards the transformation of political and intellectual fields in Romania after the fall of communism. Therefore, I have identified several key moments in the political path of Romania and I have observed how the intellectual field configured according to these changes.

The third chapter includes three studies that reveal new categories of actors found in the virtual environment, emphasizing both their characteristics and the features of their discourse. The first study presents a comparison between the discourse of the editorialists and that of the readers in the forums, highlighting the features of the second one. Furthermore, the second and third studies represent parallels between the "real" intellectual field and the online field, distinguishing how there are structured the relations in the forums and outlining the profiles of the commentators and, in particular, that of the *virtual intellectual*. Moreover, the studies highlight several connections between the specific variables of the actors, i.e. between their political orientation, the manner in which they express their opinions and their forms of capital.

The fourth chapter approaches the issue of minorities, from general to particular, the key word being "stigmatization". The first part focuses on defining the forms of stigmatization and on describing their specific themes found in the national and international discourse over time. I have also treated briefly the topic regarding the online stigmatization

and the potential of the internet to provide spaces for spreading extremist ideas and for connecting the radical right-wing organizations. Finally, the last section of this chapter is reserved to the evolution of the Romanian public discourse and to the analysis of the intellectual polemics in the 90s, concerning the study of the Holocaust and of the recent past.

The last chapter includes three studies on the phenomenon of stigmatization in the forums of the Romanian publications. The purpose of the first research was to identify the stigmatizing themes and to compare them with the themes found in the articles of the journalists, in order to distinguish the context of their emergence. Another study suggests the qualitative differentiation of the stigmatizing opinions, between those that just indicate the frustration and those that have and ideological and / or propagandistic basis. In the last study, the picture of the phenomenon of "writing in the forums" is detailed from the perspective of the Romanian civil society.

Thus, the results of the content analysis on the editorials and comments have confirmed that in the discourse in forums of the four national newspapers the readers exaggerate the defamation of the individuals or of the political groups and the use of insults and of verbal attacks. Although, desiring to caricature the political opponents, the editorialists slip to insults and attacks, the public discourse is maintained in a civilized tone. The exceptions concerning this civilized tone consist in the use of derisive names and insults against some politicians or political groups in Grigore Cartianu's articles (*Adevărul*), the themes against Hungarians in Florian Bichir's editorials (*Evenimentul Zilei*), mocking remarks against the intellectuals who support the president Traian Băsescu and the nuances of nationalism and xenophobia in the articles of Ion Spânu, respectively of Dumitru Constantin (*Cotidianul)* and the pamphlet style of the journalists from the newspaper *Jurnalul Național*.

Another conclusion has asserted the importance of the journalistic style of writing for the quality and the content of the opinions in forums. The use of a licentious language in an article attracts in a higher degree a similar style of opinions. Moreover, the approach of some topics by involving xenophobic and nationalist suggestions leads to the emergence of such ideas in forum. In addition, the themes which are treated the most often in the articles of the editorialists are the most frequent in the opinions of readers: debates about the governmental coalition, Social Liberal Union (USL) and its component parties, debates about the democrat-liberal opposition, Democrat Liberal Party / Alliance for a Right Romania (PDL / ARD), and the president Traian Băsescu and the parliamentary elections in 2012.

Furthermore, the results have revealed that the most messages reflect the political orientation of the publication, except the case of the newspaper *Jurnalul Național*. This

happens while the newspaper orientation is contrary to PDL / ARD and to Traian Băsescu. A first explanation for this result refers to the more virulent style of the journalists from *Jurnalul Național*, which attracts the remarks of the political opponents, taking into account the fact that the analysis was conducted between the parliamentary elections. Secondly, most readers which support PDL / ARD and the president direct their messages not only against USL, but also against the journalists from the television station *Antena 3*. Therefore, the publication is associated with the television station, both part of the Intact media trust, which leads to a greater involvement of the commentators in the forums, than in case of the newspaper *Cotidianul*, that has a similar political orientation.

In another study I have focused on the actors, aiming to describe the relations between the commentators and the correspondences between the variables related to them and how the social networks are structured in forums. First, the social network analysis has showed that the publications attract readers with similar political sympathies with those of the editorialists, except for *Jurnalul Național*, where the balance of forces is about equal. Therefore, in the forums of *Adevărul* and *Evenimentul Zilei,* there are more readers who declare themselves opponents of the governmental coalition and supporters of the democrat-liberal opposition and of the president Traian Băsescu. Contrary, in the forum of *Cotidianul,* more commentators express their opinions against PDL / ARD and Traian Băsescu and their sympathy for the political power.

Secondly, one can note the polarizations of the readers, on one side are those who support the power (USL) and criticize the democrat-liberals (PDL / ARD) and on the other side are the sympathizers of PDL / ARD and of Traian Băsescu and the opponents of USL. In addition, the commentators who are neutral or whose political options are not clearly defined come into positive and negative relationships with both camps.

Thirdly, in the forums of the newspapers *Adevărul* and *Evenimentul Zilei*, there are clear evidences of solidarity and cohesion of groups, while in *Cotidianul* and *Jurnalul Național* the social network is very fragmented. The readers of the last two publications prefer just to express an opinion without going too much in dialogue. This may be due to the features of the online platforms, given that *Adevărul* and *Evenimentul Zilei* offer their readers the opportunity to create their own profile and to enter in the community of the newspaper, thing that does not happen in the case of the other two publications. Entering in these communities, the commentators may feel more attracted to create a series of relationships and to know others better.

In addition, the multiple correspondence analyses highlighted the relationship between the social and symbolic capitals, specific in the forums, the authorization and the political orientation in various combinations. Establishing more relations in the forum (social capital) and acquiring more votes (symbolic capital) leads to the expression of the opinions in a collective manner, using the plural (authorization). Moreover, a reader who has the same political sympathy promoted by the publication receives more votes and the opposed preferences attract more relationships, especially negative.

The research has also concluded that the population of the commentators distinguishes itself through a plurality of profiles, from which I managed to outline nine of them: *the virtual intellectual, the political analyst, the historian, the revolter, the critic / moralist, the attacker, the extremist / radical, the propagandist* and *the observer*. The virtual intellectual (3% of 1016 commentators) is not an exponent of a new category of intellectuals, but he is an alter-ego or an avatar of those of the "real" field, whether they have already managed or not to be known by the public.

The political analyst (20%) represents the reader who comments frequently and constant the political events and issues, being present in the forums of the editorials of online publications.

The historian (4%) is present especially in the forum of the articles with historical topics and about the recent past. He makes clarifications and provides explanations and certain data to various circumstances, even if they are not necessarily correct.

The revolter (4%) is not necessarily interested in a particular subject, but posts his opinion to express his indignation at certain social, political or cultural aspects of the society. His comments are not directed against individuals or groups, but refer to certain situations, states and behaviours, for example, the corruption in the society, the defective functioning of the institutions or the communist mentalities of the people.

The critic / moralist (12%) plays the role of an omniscient man and is along for a ride, appearing from time to time to attract the attention of the author of the article or of other readers that their opinions are wrong or that they don't approach the subject in an appropriate manner. He criticizes certain public persons for their actions that he considers immoral and the aspects of the society that sees in a similar way.

The attacker (35%) only brings offences, insults or attacks to the author of the articles, to another commentator and / or to a public or political person. Some of these readers are "prisoners" of several themes, repeating them over and over or they criticize always the same

persons even if the subject of the article or of the discussion in the forum has no connection to them. His virulent opinions reveal some frustrations or failures that happened in his life.

The extremist / radical (15%) distinguishes himself through the stigmatization of ethnical, religious or sexual minorities by exposing stereotypes, by sympathizing with radical right-wing organizations, by presenting their ideas, by citing or making references to bibliographic sources of extremist literature and by the violent imagery and the expression of fascist ideas. The pseudonym chosen often reflects his political views.

No matter the political colour, *the propagandist* (3%) spreads opinions that reflect the ideology of a party or of a group, of a movement, including of radical right, in order to gain some followers or sympathizers.

The observer (4%) posts opinions in order only to greet the author and / or his "friends" in the forum and to change a few friendly messages with them, but they are not relevant for the topics discussed.

Regarding the way they interact and the degree of presence, most interactive are *the propagandist*, *the extremist / radical and the critic / moralist*, but *the revolter* and *the observer* post the lower number of comments. Furthermore, *the political analyst's* degree of presence is notable. Although they don't have a very high degree of presence, *the virtual intellectual*, *the historian* and *the attacker* post a large number of opinions.

Another study has showed that stigma represents a significant proportion (30%) of themes of the opinions in the forums of the Romanian publications and has five main forms: anti-Semitism, xenophobia, discrimination against Roma people, homophobia and stigmatization of religious minorities, each with particular characteristics and stereotypes. However, it is important to note the common themes that consist especially in the demonization and self-victimization in order to give a new interpretation of the historical past in which Romanians are seen as victims, without any responsibility, for example, for the tragedy of the Romanian Jews during the second world War, to minimize the negative aspects of Romanian society, such as discrimination, or to suggest the superiority of Romanians who would be guilty just because they are too tolerant and they accept the dominance of the „foreigners". The stigmatizing discourse of any type contains themes of an excessive aggression, pushed even to delirium, manifesting through insults, slander and threats, the violent imagery taking the form of the desire to physically abuse the others, but also of extremist „solutions" such as deportation or total extermination.

Although the stigmatization is sometimes visible no matter the topic of the articles, in general the context of the emergence of themes can not be ignored. The results showed that

sensitive topics that generate the most of the stigmatizing themes are related to a particular criticism of Romania or of Romanian society from different perspectives, to historical themes that arouse resentments and to social and political issues that could be interpreted by conspiracy theories. Moreover, the position of the author is important to some extent, by the direction that he gives to the article. Especially if it contains a conspiracy theory or if it is offensive, the readers continue it in the space of forums.

Otherwise, the discourse of the journalists is offensive or stigmatizing in a small degree, but the commentators exaggerate and emphasize these topics. They also tend to generalize the aspects mentioned in the article and thereby to stigmatize individuals or groups.

With the purpose to deepen the thematic analysis and to differentiate the comments by other grounds outside the content, I have proceeded to a multiple correspondence analysis using the model proposed by Luc Boltanski in *La Denonciation*.[4] Thus, based on the procedure described in his study, which I have adapted it to the conditions and the purposes of the research, I have tried to answer to the question whether in the perception of the degree of virulence of an opinion that goes sometimes to delirium regarding the violence of the language, a person consider the manner in which the reader expresses himself (using the singular or the plural), the "object" of the discussion (individual or collective) and the nature of the relationship between the commentator and the "object" (stigmatization or apology). In order to determine the degree of virulence of a comment, I invited six experts to place every opinion on a continuum from 1 – *Normal* to 10 – *Delirious* and I made an average of these evaluations.

Therefore, the resulted configuration has indicated that a comment is perceived closer to normal (low and average degree of virulence) if the reader expresses himself in an impersonal manner or on his own name, blaming another person or a group. Furthermore, according to the results, if a commentator stigmatizes a minority or a people / an ethic group and uses in his discourse an undefined plural or if he pronounces on behalf of a group or of a people / an ethnic group, it's more likely that others perceive his opinion as being closer to the pathology (high degree of virulence). So, the use of the plural in such a "denunciation" in a forum represents one of the factors that make others to appreciate the opinion as abnormal. A comment that uses the singular is regarded with more indulgence.

In conclusion, one can make a different type of distinction between the stigmatizing messages. There are, for example, opinions in which the reader expresses his frustration and

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[4] Cf. Luc Boltanski, Yann Darré şi Marie Ange Schiltz, „La dénonciation" în *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 1984, vol. 51, pp. 3-40.

anger by such comments, possibly using the singular, the purpose being to show his total disagreement with the author, with another commentator or with certain political, social, cultural aspects. In another category enter the opinions of the commentators, who deliberately aim to stigmatize the minorities. They build several theories of defamation, sometimes attributing these statements to the Romanian people and considering themselves its megaphone. Of course, the exposure of such deeply stigmatizing theories and sometimes inspired from the traditions of the Nazism, in which one advocates for the extermination of certain minorities, does not necessarily have to do with the manner of "speaking", using the plural or the singular, only in terms of "object" of discussion (these racial theories concerns an entire minority or an ethnic group / a people). But, when someone judges an opinion, it's important to consider whether the reader used the singular or the plural in his "argumentation".

The analysis of the articles of intellectuals and journalists and of the interviews brings new information that completes the picture of the phenomenon of posting opinions in forums, but also confirms some aspects already mentioned in the paper. Regarding the possible solutions for the reduction of stigmatization in the forums, which can be drawn from this analysis, they consist in a more careful monitoring, in the application of technical methods for removing the anonymity, in the intervention of the author of the article or of a person from the publication in the forum, or in educating the future journalists to have a politically correct and civilized discourse, but also the general population on the stereotypes related to the minorities and to the Holocaust.

The results allowed me some meaningful comparisons with George Voicu's observations about the "conspiracy culture" in Romania in the 90s.[5] While his studies focused on the literature and the press in the 90s, my analysis concerns especially the years 2000 and the discourse in the forums. His observations on the presentation of the protagonists, who conspire, according to the conspiracy theories, revealed that their identity has an aura of mystery. However, the main actors of the plot are the national minorities, the "West" and the Freemasonry, specifically the Judeo-Masonry. Thus, the minorities would be supported by the neighbouring states in actions against the Romanian state, especially the Hungarian minority, which in connivance with Hungary, would seek the annexation of Transylvania, and the Roma people. In the conspiracy theories, the "West" appears in the overall formulation, or more specifically, the "Germans", "French", "Americans" or "NATO", "IMF" and "European

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[5] Cf. George Voicu, *Zeii cei răi. Cultura conspiraţiei în România postcomunistă [Wicked gods. The conspiracy culture in post-communist Romania]*, Iaşi, Polirom Publishing, 2000.

Union". Anyway, the "Westerners" have conspired to impose communism in Eastern Europe and to its collapse and they intend to destroy the Balkan states. Their accomplices are the "minorities", i.e. in the case of Romania, the most frequently are the "Hungarians" and the Roma minority, but sometimes the "Russians". Including the destructive actions of the Masonry, which is often seen as a creation of the Jews, involve the national minorities, the "foreigners" or the "West".[6]

Similarly, in the forums there are stigmatized the national minorities, plus those sexual and religious. The "West" is considered an enemy, dangerous, most frequently being invoked the Americans, NATO or the European Union as agents of corruption, immorality and degradation. But besides the conspiracy theories, the discourse in the forums is complemented by anti-Semitic, xenophobic, homophobic stereotypes and by prejudices against religious minorities and Roma minority.

About the purpose of the conspirators, the conspiracy theories state that overall motivation is to impose the New World Order and the "planetary domination".[7] Added to this are the intrigues arisen from an anti-Romanian character of conspirators and from their "demonic determination, a kind of curse or - more probably, because these individuals seem to be convicted to life - to wear a gene of evil, as the ultimate substrate of things".[8] Therefore, the character of those who conspire is demonic, their actions being made by instinct or by depravity.[9] These themes are found also in the space of forums, the most common being, as already mentioned, the demonization of minority groups and the self-victimization combined with the anti-Romanian character of "strangers" and of their accomplices.

In addition, George Voicu noted that the authors of conspiracy theories try to impress the readers by affirming a so called scientific character of their works, implying that they can not be questioned and that they represent "great truths".[10] Thus, they use the academic procedures, the citations and references from as many sources as possible and the writing of explanatory notes. Another strategy is to show their own erudition and reputation by excessively presenting academic and scientific titles such as "professor dr.", "researcher", "engineer", "academic" etc.[11] George Voicu also observed that whether the authors are known or they are "illustrious anonymous", the conspiracy ideas do not differ qualitatively. Sometimes to identify the authorship of these ideas is difficult, if not impossible, being

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[6] *Ibidem,* pp. 55-84.
[7] *Ibidem*, pp. 90-99.
[8] *Ibidem*, p. 109.
[9] *Ibidem*, pp. 112-131.
[10] *Ibidem*, p. 197.
[11] *Ibidem*, p. 198.

"suspiciously similar" and entering in an "exasperating syntactic pattern". [12] This proves a "pseudo-erudition, pseudo-honesty and pseudo-reputation".[13] In the space of forums, the commentators use about the same strategy in order to validate their stigmatizing opinions, except that they rarely expose their own academic titles, but they blatantly mention those of the authors of cited sources, appealing therefore to the technique of authority in argumentation.

If the authors of anti-Semitic, xenophobic and conspiratorial discourse are several "compromised intellectuals" and public figures that represent the "rearguard of the elite"[14], in the online space are emerging new category of actors. Thus, in the opinions of seven of the nine types of commentators, who are entering in the reconstruction of the intellectual field, can be found stigmatizing themes, either regarding the minority groups, either one person: *the political analyst, the historian, the revolter, the critic / moralist, the attacker, the extremist / radical and the propagandist*. The *virtual intellectual* and *the observer* have a different discourse in that the first attempts to combat the stigmatizing accents, while the second only shows his friendship without to approach topics thematically significant.

From another perspective, George Voicu mentioned the commercial stake chased by the authors of the conspiracy writings. [15] Therefore, the books that contain such ideas can bring significant economic capital to the authors, some of them acquiring great financial gains. In addition, the social and symbolic capital may be used by the authors, probably, to publish their writings to a serious and quality publisher or magazine. How the stigmatization of minorities brings a certain type of capital, specific in the forums, remains a starting point for the following studies. But, I have already noted that the opinions, in which there are discredited the persons with the political orientation opposite to the publication that holds the forum, often get more votes, i. e. more symbolic capital. Moreover, a higher authority, namely the use of the plural in a comment, intersects with the possession of higher symbolic and social capital, situational in the space of forums.

Finally, it should be taken into account the three stakes of these writings identified by George Voicu: epistemic, commercial and ideological. The epistemic stake concerns the creation of a conspiracy paradigm, the commercial stake refers to the financial gains and the ideological stake is related to the political exploitation of these works, namely to the attempt

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[12] *Ibidem*, p. 199.
[13] *Ibidem*, p. 198.
[14] Mihai Dinu Gheorghiu, *Intelectualii în câmpul puterii [Intellectuals in the field of power]*, Iaşi, Polirom Publishing, 2007, p. 328.
[15] George Voicu, *op. cit.,* pp. 206-214.

to overthrow the present political order and to impose a new, ideal one. [16] Similarly, in the forums of the Romanian publications, the stigmatization of certain minorities or persons clearly has sometimes an epistemic or ideological stake. There is also a commercial stake for those commentators, so-called "postaci", who are paid by a party or a political group to put in the forums posts in order to support that organization or to discredit its political opponents. However, there are situations where the stigmatization is an expression of frustration, the person using the forum just to let loose the anger, of ignorance about the historical facts or of irritations among the commentators who have different opinions. In all cases, often the language in the forum contains insults and remarks of excessive violence.

Thus, at thematic and stylistic level, the discourse in the forums is similar to the anti-Semitic, xenophobic and nationalist discourse in the 90s, the significant differences resulting, rather, in terms of characteristics of the actors and of the distribution space.

Therefore, the doctoral research continues the works of the Wiesel Commission and focuses on the issue of stigmatization in the forums of the Romanian publications diffused on the internet, with an approach that included elements of political sociology and of the sociology of communication and of intellectuals. The openness to political sociology consists in treating the topic of extremism and stigmatization, but also in studying the way in which are structured the groups of readers according to their political choices and the manner in which they receive and interpret certain political, social or cultural aspects. Furthermore, the thesis concentrates on the media field and its transformations, on the one hand after the emergence of the internet, and on the other hand, in the case of Romania, after the collapse of communism, which places the research in the field of the sociology of communication. At the same time, the research is connected with the sociology of intellectuals, by studying the public in the forums that enter in the process of the reorganization of intellectual field.

In conclusion, the originality of the thesis consists in both the theoretical approach and the methodological formula, which reveal a detailed picture of the phenomenon.

Key-words: stigmatization, forum, online publications, intellectual field, journalistic field

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[16] *Ibidem*, pp. 193-233.