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Editor: Andreea Eșanu

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New Europe College
Str. Plantelor 21
023971 Bucharest
Romania
www.nec.ro; e-mail: nec@nec.ro
Tel. (+4) 021.307.99.10

RĂZVAN NICOLESCU

AMEROPA Fellow

University College London, UK
orcid.org/0000-0002-5404-3618

Biographical note

Răzvan Nicolescu is a digital anthropologist with a research focus on the social consequences of digital technologies. Trained in both anthropology and telecommunications, Razvan has worked at University College London and Imperial College London with several technologies, including social media, IoT, Distributed Autonomous Systems, and cyber insurance. Razvan is the author of *Social media in southeast Italy: crafting ideals* (2016) and co-author of *How the world changed social media* (2016) and has published in different mainstream journals.

'I'M NOT A CONSPIRACIST, BUT…' CONSPIRACIES, DISINFORMATION, FAKE NEWS, AND LONELINESS IN BUCHAREST*

Răzvan Nicolescu

[T]he more literally we believe in the axiom, ''To see is to know,'' the more haunted we are by what hovers beyond the edges of the visible. (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003: 288)

Abstract

The paper reports the results of a long-term ethnographic research on fake news, disinformation, and conspiracies in Bucharest, Romania. Most participants in the research tend to engage with alternative explanations to make sense of the contradictions and inconsistencies in their lives. Such explanations are commonly labeled and dismissed as conspiracy theories. In contrast, research participants believe that the world is controlled by globalist powers who plot to control and limit population and their general welfare. They believe that mainstream politics and media are the main perpetrators of such tendencies. In this context, research participants objectify alternative explanations into online social relations that are based on a common effort to navigate a complex environment dominated by fake news and disinformation. They aim to uncover the 'truth' that they seen as hidden or restricted in terms of access and governance. But this process comes at the expense of close personal relationships and leads to various forms of

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marginalization. The quest for 'real truth' represents a continuing critique of the state of the world, which participants hope will fill an important social breach, including an existential sense of loneliness and exclusion.

Keywords: fake news, disinformation, conspiracy theories, ethnography, social media

This paper reports the results of an ethnography of the consumption of disinformation and conspiracies, of what is commonly described as fake news in Bucharest, Romania. The initial research questions aimed to understand how people make sense of what is commonly known as 'fake news.' How do people distinguish between fake and genuine, between real and false, and between intention and inadvertence? How can people believe in what is generally proved as false or unreliable information? Most of the relevant literature on fake news and disinformation comes from media and communication studies and explores such issues in terms of production, distribution, and audience. In contrast, my own research looks at individuals and their social relations and the kind of communities they establish in relation to a shared understanding and consumption of what is commonly known as 'fake news.'

But this investigation soon led to bigger questions and claims regarding the sources of truth, trust, understanding, and representation. Most people in my research were not necessarily concerned with whether a particular news item was fake or not, but with a broader process of disinformation they sensed. Many research participants shared that they have been living for some time in an information environment that is unreliable, often paradoxical, and constantly saturated with news items that cannot be checked for authenticity and provenance. In such an environment, many people believed that 'fake news' is merely a tool in the hands of those who try to manipulate and distort reality, one expression of the ongoing and systematic disinformation process present in mainstream media, both online and offline.

This brings us to the third and more profound level of my research findings, represented by high-level conspiracies. A few months into my research, I discovered a clear link between people's belief in various conspiracies and their reluctance to trust mainstream media reports on

fake news. Beliefs in global conspiracies are both deeply personal and inherently social, as they are shared and trusted within communities. Most of the conspiracies I encountered offer non-mainstream explanations that help people make sense of the contradictions and instability they face, as well as the lack of perspective they experience. At the same time, these conspiracies converge towards a high-level, secret, and sophisticated conspiracy against humanity. The following sections explore the way people tend to objectify these conspiracies into practices and social relations.

1. Methodology

The ethnographic research took place between November 2023 and July 2024, with some data collected before this period. The research was both qualitative and quantitative, combining offline and online methods. Most of the participant observation, discussions, and interviews were conducted offline. The key questions in my research were: 'Where do you get your information from?'; 'How do you determine if it is genuine or not?'; 'Who are the people you usually discuss news with?' A couple of months into my fieldwork, I realized that those most engaged with 'fake news' where individuals who had little to very little trust in mainstream media and were actively looking for alternative sources to trust.

A total of 39 research participants took part in my study, most of whom lived in Bucharest, while four lived in London, UK. There were 21 women and 18 men. Their age varied between 34 and 71 years old and one research participant was 26 years old. I could not find people in their 20s or younger who were interested in fake news, disinformation and who had a strong adherence to some sort of conspiracies. This is an interesting finding in itself, which I will discuss later in this paper. With a third of the research participants, I met more than once on different occasions and had multiple discussions on several themes related to the project, including fake news, disinformation, trust, conspiracies, geopolitics, and consumption. In 28 cases, I conducted semi-structured interviews. 27 interviews were face-to-face and one interview with a Romanian living abroad was conducted via webcam. Interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 42 minutes and 3 hours and 20 minutes. All interviews except one were audio recorded. In 13 cases, interviews were followed-up by subsequent interactions and in-depth

discussions with research participants. I knew around one third of the research participants from the period I prepared for research, which was roughly November 2022 – October 2023, or from before that period. Many agreed to put me in contact with at least one other person, including members of their families, work colleagues, and friends, who emerged from the interview as potentially relevant to, and interested in, my research. This snowball method assured coherence to the study and opportunities to cross-check and follow-up information in different contexts. Therefore, the research was not limited to some places, time periods and individuals, but it unfolded organically as it progressed.

I preferred to open discussions starting from a news item, a controversy, or a question the research participants had recently. This question and the method selected was particularly successful as it made people feel safe and in control rather than vulnerable and targeted. Typically, all discussions and interviews had a strong online component. All research participants used their smartphone to access their preferred news outlets and to conduct research on various news items, including to establish if some news were fake or not. Most participants used to share the results of their research via social media with people they knew they shared their views. Many considered social media is a trusted environment to navigate a world saturated with fake news and disinformation. Most people used to have a relatively small circle of online friends who shared their views regarding fake news and disinformation and who were seen as whistleblowers on major controversies, such as the alleged frauds in local elections, the disinformation behind the major armed conflicts in Ukraine and in Palestine, and the criminal cases against Donald Trump. Research participants shared such materials with me during the interviews and, in some cases, several months after we first met. We used such materials to discuss their content, their aesthetic and communication qualities and sometimes check their claims.

I tried to follow the process research participants used when they wanted to find out if a particular news item was true or not. This process could mean anything from a simple Google search followed by a systematic selection of the information sources and engagement with the respective contexts to fact-checking particular news outlets like personal and collective blogs, Facebook pages, and Telegram channels that research participants were considering relatively reliable and independent. We also looked for alternative sources of information and compared the facts and the ways in which facts were presented in such sources with

their counterparts in typical sources of information. In each interview, I challenged several assumptions and concepts people had, providing alternative ideas that came from me or from other research participants. This method proved to be particularly effective as it opened new directions to explore, arguments, evidence to support these arguments and insightful discussions on the different consequences to research participants' personal and social life.

Conducting interviews with couples or romantic partners was particularly rewarding, and I had the opportunity to do so on seven occasions. In most cases, life partners disagreed on most of the themes of my research. In five cases, one member of the couple agreed that could be seen as a conspiracist while her partner stated that he would not be considered one. Alternatively, one member of the couple felt strongly that fake news was dangerous, misleading, and purposefully promoted by the higher levels of the political economy, while his partner considered that fake news was not that bad - for example, it just represented a typical consequence of the proliferation of data and digital communication. In two cases, life partners mostly agreed that we are living in a world that is manipulated by global powers that use mainstream media to control public opinion and impose their secret agendas. But there were major differences in the way in which the two partners expressed their views. For example, a 35-year-old man was actively searching for evidence of how this manipulation takes place and tried to identify the main forces behind it. He followed tens of Telegram channels of individuals from all over the world, which were renown for constantly trying to unmask global conspiracies. Meanwhile, his wife was not interested at all in following, gathering evidence, and trying to understand why the world is in a very bad shape.

An important aspect of my research was focusing on the daily routines of the research participants. I tried to understand their work, their domestic lives, social relations and how their routines and practices related to their consumption of media, news, and conspiracy theories. When do people access different news outlets? On what devices? When and how do they discuss, comment, and share news items within their families and with peers? Responses to such questions helped me understand better the everyday context in which people consumed, analysed, classified, and distributed information.

2. The problem of fake news

A comprehensive definition of fake news is proposed by philosopher Axel Gelfert, "Fake news is the deliberate presentation of manipulative and misleading content as news, where the content is manipulative and misleading by design" (2021: 320). Gelfert uses the phrase "by design" to draw attention to the strategic intentionality behind fake news, which "manifests itself as the result of a specific convergence of ongoing social, political, and technological developments" (idem). But fake news itself is not recent phenomenon. Historians have long documented instances of fake news, misinformation, and propaganda dating back to ancient times. What is new is the proliferation of the internet, social media, and peer-to-peer distribution, which have dramatically amplified the risks posed by fake news, disinformation, and hoaxes (e.g. Posetti and Matthews 2018: 1). In a relatively short period, people have discovered that they share a vast and unfamiliar media ecosystem with others who hold very different worldviews, social positions, cultural backgrounds, and deeply rooted beliefs. This growing awareness of differences within a shared space can easily foster strong partisan and polarized positions (Marwick, 2018: 509-510). Thus, fake news can easily be associated with notions such as post-truth era (Lindquist, 2021), the rapid proliferation of digital technologies and platform economies (Pangrazio, 2018; Marwick, 2019), and technological affordances and information abundance (Molina and Sundar, 2019; Apuke, 2021).

At the same time, there is strong evidence that fake news content is produced to be monetized. For example, between August and November 2016, several unemployed teenagers from Veles, Macedonia, earned several tens of thousands of USD designing and curating around one hundred pro-Trump sites (Subramanian, 2017)[1]. They created the sites and published regularly fake news content as clickbait to generate enough Internet traffic to be rewarded by Google's AdSense – Google's automatic advertising engine. But this can be brought to another level. US entrepreneurs can own several fake news outlets and earn anywhere between USD 10,000-30,000 a month (e.g. Sydell 2016). Jestin Coler, the founder and CEO of a company called Disinfomedia argued that he started his business because he wanted to build a site to "infiltrate the echo chambers of the alt-right, publish blatantly or fictional stories and then be able to publicly denounce those stories and point out the fact that they were fiction." But he admitted that this kind of gaming with

false information used to bring him at least USD 100,000 a year. Finally, we can find fake news and disinformation campaigns at the highest level of political economy. A 2019 Facebook internal report obtained by MIT Technology Review showed that before the highly contested US 2020 elections, troll farms reached 140 million Americans a month on Facebook only (Hao, 2021). This figure was reached not through user choice but primarily as a direct result of Facebook's own platform design and algorithm that stimulates user engagement. The most popular pages for Christian and Black American content on this platform were being run by Eastern European troll farms. But troll farms that implement state and private interests can be found in almost any global place (e.g. Wasserman and Madrid-Morales, 2022; Ong and Cabañes, 2019; Ayeb and Bonini, 2024).

Fake news, therefore, poses a fundamental problem. It rides on a huge public-facing algorithm-led infrastructure to reach a much wider audience that it ever did. Production, distribution, and consumption of fake news require a certain authority, resources, and knowledge. In this sense, fake news is similar with disinformation that can be described as a culture of production that exposes broader systems and cultures of practice existing in different parts of the society (Ong and Cabañes, 2019: 5772).

> "But while disinformation is a process, fake news is just one product of such process. Disinformation concerns an international process of collaboration and competition involving hierarchical and distributed labor" (idem). For example, the target of a disinformation orchestrated campaign is represented by disjointed audiences for whom the psychological impact of ambiguous and misleading information, false and violent allegations, techniques to constantly and uncomfortably put someone in the spotlight, and viral spread of fake news items is rather immediate and has a sense of urgency with important long-term consequences (Polage, 2012). Then, emotions expressed on social media can lead to massive contagion (Kramer *et al.*, 2014) and rapid polarization (Del Vicario *et al.*, 2017: 7; Spohr, 2017)

My point here is that while disinformation is about the production of fake news, among other things, fake news items are objects that tend to become semi-autonomous and with a life of their own during the process of consumption. Consumption means that people understand and engage with such objects in very personal ways that often have strong social components. This is where my ethnographic inquiry comes in. How do people make sense of what is fake news and what is not? What significance

does this awareness have in their lives? How and why do their social relations, practices, ideas of normativity, and perceptions of the broader political economy and the state change with the rise of pervasive fake news and disinformation? This paper offers an ethnographic response to such questions.

3. The problem of truth. 'Real truth'

Most participants do not consider themselves conspiracists, but rather seekers of truth and meaning. Some believe that it is the mainstream media that invented and has been promoting the term 'conspiracy theories' to hide, deliberately or not, the 'real truth.' Many research participants believe that mainstream media and the mainstream exponents of the higher level of the dominant political economy label alternative views as fake news. Participants acknowledge that fake news items exist, and they have a significant impact on the world. But they argue that powerful people and institutions from all over the world have an interest to place alternative views in the same category with items that are simply false or misleading. However, many participants in my research feel that it is their responsibility to dig out and reveal the truth hidden in the midst of the overabundant and misleading information around us. They believe that knowing the truth, people can do something to solve the problems of our times. They objectify their quest for truth in a particularly conspicuous consumption of non-mainstream media outlets and a use of social media and online networks to trace and analyse any kind of information and connection they believe has a potential to lead to such ultimate truth.

Eugen invited me to explain all these over a cup of herbal tea in his large office in one national institution in Romania. He has been working there for several years. He does enjoy his work intellectually but also because it gives him enough autonomy and free time. Eugen defines conspiracies as those truths that are not yet revealed. But most of the times, these truths would emerge as truths, he believes. Eugen is looking for that kind of information that gives him the possibility 'to see' the truth [*discernământ*]. He believes that only 0.5% of the information available is true, while the rest is propaganda. He goes on to explain that a few large media corporations set the tone for communication [*dau tonul*] across the globe.

For Eugen, the pandemic was a turning point. He believes the pandemic was a lie that produced a global mass hysteria and it helped different affluent people and corporations, such as big pharma and big data companies, to consolidate their power. With his office in a state institution closed during pandemic, Eugen spent a lot of time reading about Covid-19 and the conditions that led to the pandemic. Eugen is 41 years old and lives by himself so he had a lot of free time during the pandemic. He points to a series of books that expose the 'real truth' about the pandemic. These includes quite popular books, such as *The contagion myth. Why viruses (including "coronavirus") are not the cause of disease* (2020) written by Thomas S. Cowan and Sally Fallon, and Amazon and New York Times bestseller *The Real Anthony Fauci: Bill Gates, Big Pharma, and the Global War on Democracy and Public Health* (2021) by Robert F. Kennedy Jr. The first book questions Pasteur's 'germ theory' to suggest that electromagnetic waves, from the old telegraph to modern WiFi systems and 5G, are responsible for the rapid spread of diseases, including the Covid-19. The second book puts Dr. Anthony Fauci, who became the face of the US response to Covid-19 pandemic, at the center of a global conspiracy designed together with Big Pharma and Bill Gates to control a multi-billion global vaccine enterprise with controversial results. Like in the case of multinational elite organisations, claims presented in these books are supported by academic work that reported that electromagnetic fields can lead to severe health deterioration, (e.g. Pall, 2013; 2018).

Eugen told me that the mainstream global response to pandemic made him realise how essential it is for him to understand whether people are on the side of truth or not. "If so, we resonate, if not, we do not talk," he adds. Many participants in my research share Eugen's view on the Covid-19 pandemic and the worsening state of the world. Many believe that the pandemic brought to the surface many issues that used to be hidden or unknown. They believe the pandemic was a large-scale experiment to test the world population's level of tolerability. But who conducted the test and what exactly has been tested for tolerability?

4. The global plot

Most stories that I gathered converge towards a bigger, meta-theory of a high-end, secret, and sophisticated conspiracy against humanity. The main narrative is that there are a few extremely rich and powerful people –

mainly based in the US, but also in other places like China and the Middle East – who have a secret plan to subdue or suppress humanity as we know it, to reduce and engineer population, and to drastically limit freedom and autonomy. The most obvious public manifestations of this plot are the World Economic Forum (WEF) and public figures like its founder and president Klaus Schwab, together with high-profile figures such as Bill Gates and Yuval Noah Harari. But Eugen explains to me that most current political leaders, including Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, Emmanuel Macron, and Joe Biden went to WEF meetings one way or another to implement different phases of a globalist master plan.

> "Now, they do not hide themselves anymore. Probably they are in the final lap. Schwab is good friends with Xi and he particularly likes the social credit system in China. He intends to implement this in Europe. But everything is done in small steps, so that people would not have a strong reaction against these changes. With small steps you get where you want." (Eugen, 41 yo)

The WEF grew over a few decades from the summer school of Davos to a place where future world leaders come to affirm themselves as future leaders. Eugen claims these leaders have always been local dictators [*vătafi*] who implemented locally what they were told at the center. What holds all these people together is their extreme wealth, freemasonry, and the US – the fact that most of them live in the US and deposit their money in US banks. He argues that the entire US is built on masonry and the layout and patterned streets of Washington DC seen from above represent one clear evidence of this claim.

There have been claims that the Washington street plan represents a Masonic message, particularly a pentagram located above the White House. Apparently, this idea gained traction after Dan Brown launched his second bestseller titled *The Lost Symbol* (2009), a thriller set in Washington D.C. that focusses on freemasonry and attempts made to decipher the symbols hidden in the city.

But there is no evidence of a Masonic message in the city's street plans. The street map was designed by painter-turned-architect Pierre L'Enfant in 1791, who was not a mason. L'Enfant was a graduate of the Art School in Paris. He worked with mathematical concepts that were used in ancient Rome, Greece, and in the construction of the Egyptian Pyramids and the Temple of Solomon.

One significant consequence for people who believe in conspiracy theories is the perception that news items from mainstream media are fake. Many research participants cited the Great Reset initiative as a common example of a global conspiracy being dismissed as fake news in mainstream media. This proposal consists of a 280 pages book and a Great Reset podcast that were launched in June 2020 by members of the WEF, among which the then Prince of Wales and Klaus Schwab. The proposal, characterized by the BBC as "a vague set of proposals" (Robinson *et al*, 2021), argued that the post-pandemic period represented "an incredible opportunity to create entirely new sustainable industries." The proposal got traction as a global conspiracy throughout 2020 and went viral by the end of the year after Canadian Prime Minister allegedly said at a UN meeting in September that year that the pandemic provided an opportunity for a global 'reset.' However, it is unclear whether he was actually referring to the WEF plan (Robinson *et al*, 2021). On the 15th of November, a video showing Canadian Prime Minister addressing the UN in these terms went viral. Posts on X and Facebook argued in different ways that the Canadian Government failed the Canadian population and it knelt to the WEF and that the Great Reset is just the most recent chapter, after the Covid-19 pandemic, of a global conspiracy staged by the global elite. More sophisticated accounts were elaborated for different audiences. For example, books titled like *Great Reset and the Struggle for Liberty: Unraveling the Global Agenda* (Rectenwald, 2023) argue that the Great Reset is a clear milestone in an enduring race towards population control ran by the WEF and related globalist organizations, climate change scaremongers, and transhumanist ideals. Elsewhere, Rectenwald argues that "the goals of the Great Reset depend on the obliteration not only of free markets, but of individual liberty and free will" (2021: 7).

The Great Reset document circulates in different formats on the internet, including memes, short videos, and longer comments by public figures. A woman in her 70s promised me a copy of the real Great Reset document, as this is something I cannot find on the internet.

But many participants in my research believe the WEF does not work by itself. They bring examples of other organisations, including the Bilderberg Group (established in 1954), The Trilateral Commission (established in 1973 by David Rockefeller), and the The Club of Rome (established in 1968). What these organisations have in common is they were established in the post-WWII era to promote free market Western capitalism and its interests around the globe. Iustin, a man in his mid-thirties thinks these are

elite organisations with a restricted number of members – between 100 and a few hundred members in each case – who set agendas and conduct discussions in ways that are not transparent. For Iustin, this is evidence that the organisations have something to hide. I suggest this kind of suspicion represents a more popular response to neo-Marxist inspired reports of the organisation of transnational capitalist class (e.g. van Apeldoorn, 2000; 2014; Kantor 2017), practices of favoritism and political upholding in global organisations (e.g. Kantor, 2023), and the raise of 'shadow elites' as power-brokers in the recent political economy (Wedel, 2011).

Other participants see the High-frequency Active Auroral Research Program (HAARP) as a major technology developed to control the world. Officially, the HAARP was a program managed by the U.S. Air Force and U.S. Navy that took place between 1993 and 2014 in the rather remote area of Gakona, Alaska. In 2015, the ownership of the facility was transferred to the University of Alaska Fairbanks and is now a public facility. The program's goal initially was to provide an ionospheric research facility.[2] The Ionospheric Research Instrument (IRI) is the world's most powerful high-frequency radio transmitter – a network of 180 radio antennas disposed in an array of 12x15 units spread over an area of 13 hectares.

A couple of research participants read a book titled *Chemtrails, HAARP, and the full spectrum dominance of planet* (2014) written by a US-based researcher Elana Freeland, which basically argues that the HAARP instrument controls weather. Such claims are supported by online videos showing the former Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez saying that the HAARP was used to cause the devastating 2010 Haiti earthquake. A former governor of Minnesota, Jesse Ventura, claimed that HAARP is a mind-control device. Eugen believes that the HAARP does not only use radio waves, but also a laser beam that is launched into the ionosphere and it is then reflected uncontrollably onto Earth's surface. Here, the laser beam can interfere with tectonic plates and produce earthquakes, tsunamis, devastating floods, areas of extreme drought, and violent ice storms. He believes that the US army have deployed such facilities across the world – in military bases, including in Romania. He invokes a Pentagon document written in early 1990s, which estimated that the US Army would completely control weather by 2025. The scope, he says, is to allow the US to govern the climatic chaos and bring solutions to extreme weather conditions.

Conspiracy theories are often complex, and people frequently invest significant amounts of time reading about them and searching for materials

to support their beliefs. In contrast, individuals who believe in such conspiracies often perceive news items published by mainstream media to counter these theories as shallow, unconvincing, or outright false.

5. 'The problem' with mainstream media

Many research participants believe that the root cause of the difficulty in revealing the 'real truth' is revealed is that mainstream media presents information that is simply misleading or false. So, many actively look for alternative sources of information, such as blogs and social media channels run by independent journalists. Marina is a teaching assistant in her mid-thirties who has been living in England for several years with her family. Marina rarely watches mainstream media. She believes most media outlets follow some secret plans to present information to confuse people. A confused person is easier to manipulate, she says. Therefore, Marina does her own research online on the topics she considers really important, such as the truth behind the insistence for vaccination, the truth behind the 'obsession' with climate change, the truth behind research in nanotechnology, the truth behind the anticipated demise of cash and the introduction of the Universal Income, and so forth. These topics are not necessary up to date and do not follow a chronological order. Rather, Marina sees them as constant key topics that try to be pushed by different stakeholders especially when the citizens' attention is directed elsewhere, as it was the case during the Covid-19 pandemic and as it is now because of the deeply upsetting wars in Ukraine and between Israel and Hamas. So, watching mainstream news outlets is not only useless, but also dangerous because being 'bombarded' with everyday problems can be overwhelming and can put citizen vigilance to sleep. She considers that being up to date with manipulated content is not worthwhile. Marina prefers to be 'conscious' and select her own ways to look at the world. She believes humanity is facing a decisive culture war. She attended with great expectations the launch of the Alliance for Responsible Citizenship (ARC) that took place at the O2 Arena at the end of 2023. She believes this alliance has the courage and resources to speak 'the truth' in the face of disinformation and manipulation and to restore trust in each other as citizens and in institutions if they are freed from obscure interests.

But non-mainstream media is not always seen as holding the truth. One man told me he is aware that even alternative news outlets cannot

be trusted. He can tell from the content of the news itself and from the way a news item is presented. For example, he questions the items with big dramatic titles, the texts that are overly polished, the high-quality and impactful images that appear to be professionally edited. "But I prefer to be informed 2% by such a media than 98% by the others [mainstream media outlets]", he adds.

Now, it is important to mention that the main source of information is the personal smartphone, namely the news feed provided by Google or social media platforms. This poses multiple problems. First, it has been argued that algorithms and recommender systems are designed to function as 'hooks' that entice people into frequent and enduring usage (Seaver, 2019).

Second, there is an important distinction between how people perceive algorithms and recommender systems and the people and news stimulated by these algorithms. For example, people may not necessarily trust a social media algorithm, but 'they may trust opinion leaders and leader-seekers who are incentivized by those algorithms' (Dubois *et al.*, 2020: 11).

Thirdly, while online news feeds seem to be diverse, they are actually generated by one platform at a time. It is rare that people consult more news feeds at the same time. Most people have their own preferences and convenience in choosing one particular news feed at a time. For example, a woman in her late 40s uses the Google news feed while commuting to work and during work but uses the Facebook news feed when she returns home in the evening and checks in on her online friends. Therefore, despite the diversity of media infrastructures, most people in my research have one preferred way to use each platform and rarely check news items across multiple platforms.

This results in a fourth problem. News feeds are fueled by personal data, including personal browsing history and social media behavior. This can lead to what has been coined as the 'filter bubble,' that is the mechanism that keeps individuals intellectually trapped together with fellow individuals with rather similar ideas. The term was proposed by activist and entrepreneur Eli Pariser (2011) who argued that filter bubbles can lead to intellectual isolation and social fragmentation. 'Echo chambers,' the cognates of filter bubbles, have been described as online mechanisms that reinforce individuals' own views. Both filter bubbles and echo chambers have been criticized on the grounds of lack of empirical evidence for their existence (e.g. Bruns, 2019a). Then, these rather ambiguous but appealing concepts can be instrumentalized in political

and social arguments, potentially leading to moral panics that "point to the persistence of a simplistic and naïve understanding of media effects both amongst the general public and amongst media and political actors" (Bruns 2019a: 8; see also Bruns, 2019b).

Research participants had very precise views on each of the points discussed above. For example, they have different mechanisms to solve the repetition and the captive audience feeling set out by algorithms and recommender systems. The most popular mechanism is to conduct individual research to check the integrity of a news item. They search for relevant keywords on Google and social media platforms or verify the information through trusted alternative sites, blogs of independent journalists, and whistleblowers. Often, people share online news items that look suspicious, not because they believe they are valuable, but because they want to see if their online friends share similar doubts or if they can comment on or validate the news.

6. The problem of authority

Most of my research participants pointed to a clear hierarchy of authority: who holds the truth versus who lies or has an interest in lying. The point is that with the advent of social media, a lot of social life has become relatively anonymous and challenges previous notions of authority, such as thse coming from the state, a public intellectual, or a medical doctor. So, there is a relatively new understanding of anonymity that many people see as opposing the rather unfit and corrupt conventional hierarchies.

But this new anonymity produces its own hierarchy. At the very top, we have anti-mainstream public intellectuals, whistleblowers, and radical politicians, like sovereigntist politicians, who enjoy a relatively recent popularity. Further down the hierarchy, there are influencers and pundits who can work as new agents of knowledge, including in areas such as economic, environmental, cultural, political, and parenting (e.g. Beuckels and De Wolf 2024). Then, among research participants I found a strong sense of authority regarding the kind of special knowledge they believe they have. This authority is expressed especially by means of a strongly negative discourse:

> "You know the present, but we know the future! (…) OK, leave it, you do not understand" (Mara, 70 yo)

"We are led by Securitate (...) We don't have anything left. And our faith is sealed." (Paul, 71 yo)
"Where do you think the world is heading to?" (Valentina, 37 yo)
"I look with fear in all directions… I don't know what to believe and where to take [this belief] from." (Iustin, 38 yo)

In a further section I suggest this kind of authority expressed negatively can be seen as similar to witchcraft understood both as a very personal belief and a magical way to phrase and use words. Witchcraft implies talking about witchcraft – that is not very visible – spreading rumors, blaming, and jinxing [*a cobi*]. Similarly, believing in global conspiracies implies talking about major things that are not very visible, spreading news that are considered fake by non-believers – including mainstream media – constantly blaming different daunting forces and an expert vocabulary.

Let us consider the example of a relatively new person at the top of such a hierarchy of authority. Diana Șoșoacă is quite popular among the research participants. A mainstream politician typically appears on talk shows, in public spaces, or on TV and other mainstream media outlets and usually delivers polished speeches. Diana is different. Diana is how most of her sympathizers – including my research participants – call her. She would travel all night by car, sleep in the car, and wake up early morning in a remote village in Oltenia (south Romania), enter a local shop to have a cup of coffee – then sip it in the company of a handful of supporters who bring their relatives and neighbors to an apparently impromptu discussion about anything: from peoples' everyday problems, memories, *manele* (a genre of pan-balkanic music), to Christianity, the war in Ukraine, the EU, and the global elites. Then, the discussion goes back to personal issues, prospects of marriage young people have, and so on.

Diana creates an electric attraction among her followers. They can spend hours in front of their smartphones, watching her talk. Paul, a retired mechanical engineer is one of them. He has been living in London for several years where he works on different construction sites on a temporary basis. Paul is divorced and decided to emigrate to earn extra money to pay some important debts. After having paid these debts, Paul decided to continue living and working in London. He feels he has no important reasons to return to Romania too soon. In Romania, he would live by himself as well and he would probably live a sedentary life as he believes he would not find a good job at his age. Paul is 71 years old. He shares a house in a city north of London with other six people, five of

them Romanians. But they are much younger than him and he does not find many reasons to spend time with them. Paul lives a predictable life. He wakes each morning at 5:30, has a quick breakfast and a coffee and goes to work. He returns after 5pm. He enjoys cooking, but cooks only twice a week for himself. Paul feels extremely lonely in the evenings and especially at weekends.

Especially during the local election campaign in May and June 2024, Paul used to watch live sessions streamed on the Facebook account of Diana Șoșoacă for a few hours each afternoon. Paul's daughter visited him for a few days in May 2024. She told me she was very concerned when she found her dad one early morning sitting in the middle of his kitchen in his pyjamas listening loudly to a video of Diana Șoșoacă on his smartphone. She said that Paul was stiff, seemed distant, and just stood there for almost one hour holding his smartphone close to his ear. Paul was convinced that "Diana is our last hope as a people," "a true patriot that has not knelt to the Western forces." Paul invited me to vote for Diana, and if I want to convince myself to follow her live streams. Paul also explained to me where I can find each morning short clips that highlight the main moments in the live streams that happened the day before. These clips are edited by Diana's followers or volunteers in her campaign. Much shorter versions of such clips, five to 20 seconds long, circulate on TikTok and Facebook in the weeks following the live stream itself. Paul was fascinated by such video materials especially because they condensed some key messages he completely agreed with, such as opposition to implementing EU policies on a number of themes, including environment, agriculture, and immigration, and support for Ukraine. Paul considers Diana is one of the very few politicians who speak out the truth.

In *The Internet Imaginaire* (2007), French sociologist Patrice Flichy argues that the internet is basically a collection of visions of different users, including creators and promoters of the internet, as to what such a medium should be. The "immaginaire" is the materialisation of individual and collective visions, desires, and search for community. In his solitude, Paul does look online for a community that would share his visions and desires. Nobody in his family shares his political preferences. Each time he tries to tell them what the dangers of the current political establishment in Europe and Romania are, his family do not listen to him or challenge him. So, Paul finds an online environment that resonates with his own ideas and where he finds himself included and safe.

There is a good body of literature that argues that with the proliferation of technology, social media and Big Data, people are overwhelmed by paradoxes, such as opacity in the age of transparency, and pervasive surveillance in the age of autonomy and free movement. For example, writer and computer scientist James Bridle (2018) argues that the proliferation of data has not led to better and fairer governance but rather to a raise in fundamentalism and paradoxes that ultimately undermine public trust in the current political economy and its promoters. Investigating the implementation of automatic systems in public systems in the US, investigative reporter and political scientist Virginia Eubanks (2018) argues that automation did not bring fairness or transparency, but rather increased surveillance and punitive control over the poor.

In this context, most research participants claim they cannot follow, organize, and make sense of the sheer quantity of available information that is often paradoxical and contradictory. In other words, they accuse a general problem identified above – Information is not organized into accessible narratives that make sense to different categories of people. I suggest that what Paul needs – and politicians like Diana Șoșoacă deliver – is a constant translation of big questions of our time into simple and legible narratives that can be followed by the general public in ways they feel comfortable with. Diana and many far-right politicians simplify and stereotype complex political economy ideas and paradoxes in ways that seem frank and spontaneous. Paul feels he can actually talk to Diana, spend time with her, and engage in a conversation. But this is not happening with other mainstream politicians and with members of his own family.

7. Trust and loneliness

We have seen that people form ad-hoc online communities where they feel safe to share their ideas, allowing communication to persist as society changes. However, outside these online spaces, their version of 'truth' is often vehemently rejected or mocked, particularly when it comes from mainstream outlets. Individuals who live alone, are less socially active, and feel isolated particularly resent this as an additional form of marginalization. These individuals express a deep mistrust of ideas presented by mainstream outlets.

For example, we have seen that, among people I interviewed, there is a quite popular literature which claims a long tradition to create

viruses in labs, release them, accidentally or not, and in relation with communication technology. In *The Invisible Rainbow A History of Electricity and Life* (2020), Arthur Firstenberg argues that electricity has been from the early eighteenth century to the present the root cause of numerous environmental problems and diseases. For example, Firstenberg argues that the Spanish Flu from 1918 was caused by the proliferation of radio technology, rather than by a virus, that modified the electromagnetic environment of the Earth. The flu began on U.S. military bases where soldiers were being trained in wireless telegraphy. It spread throughout the world on ten thousand U.S. Navy ships equipped with state-of-the-art wireless stations. The flu was not contagious and did not spread by direct human-to-human contact.

Such theories are very popular among participants in my research. They do not see these theories discussed at all in mass media. They believe mass media censors such theories as they censor the public appearances of far-right politicians like Diana Șoșoacă. Therefore, many people told me they have lost trust in mass media. One consequence is the polarization of trust. People reported very high to extremely high trust in people who reveal or defend the hidden 'truth' and little to very little trust in everyone else.

We have seen that people are psychologically impacted by fake and alarmist news items that are presented with a sense of urgency (Polage, 2012). There is a whole discussion here of the impact of mass media and the monetisation of such an impact. Dramatic soundscapes and impactful images and lines are presented to a public that is not necessarily trained to critically reflect on the meanings of these forms. Attention economies do not incentivise critical thinking, but rather immediate responses. This creates situations in which psychological mechanisms simply take precedence over the wider cultural context and social relations that are the premises for critical reflection and awareness. In this context, it is difficult to create opportunities for more stable and predictable notions of trust. While trust in fake news items, and exposure to these, can be transitory in nature and work over relatively short periods of time, trust in social mechanisms is more transcendental in nature, needs constant and reciprocal effort, and work over much longer periods of time.

In my ethnography in southeast Italy (Nicolescu 2016), people used to search for a similar kind of 'truth,' but in a very different way. There were severe misunderstandings, conflated with political divisions, controversies about environment, the building of a Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) oil

terminal in the region, the use of solar power plants in the agricultural fields, and so on.

It Italy, in different communities and contexts, people used to work out the news received from the internet, TV and local journals, as well as rumors and gossip. This was a continuous process in which people gradually filtered out massive amounts of information both online and offline. So, establishing truth was a process, a genuine part of the social fabric.

Now, the situation is quite different in my current ethnography in Bucharest, Romania. Here, research participants feel much lonelier and less connected to the offline social fabric, while craving to connect online with like-minded peers. Because people cannot rely on close and personal relationships to reveal the 'real truth,' they tend to look elsewhere. So, they form distant relationships with 'people like us,' which are based on a common goal to establish the 'truth.' A common way to express such distinction is to say 'we don't go with the sheep' – where sheep are people who are easy to manipulate, naive upholders of mainstream propaganda. Sheep either do not think or do not care much about the 'situation we are living' and who will find themselves at some point lined up to the slaughterhouse. The problem almost all participants in my study reported is that most of their close friends and family do not share their non-mainstream views. So, they have to find online communities and occasional offline encounters with like-minded people to discuss their concerns. These communities are founded on a belief in the existence of a concealed truth – definitely non-mainstream, if not outright anti-mainstream – and a shared effort to uncover it. These communities are not necessarily stable, they change in time, but they prvide permanent psychological and social support in a setting of a constant feeling of marginality and relative loneliness.

There is some good literature on how kinship and friendship have changed with the advent of social media in the last 15 years. The key element of his change, it has been argued, is a "shifting balance from the obligations represented by kinship to the choices idealized as friendship" (Miller 2017: 381). This balance relies on sharing some sort of ideal. If kinship implies the ideal of common ancestry and substance and ideal behavior, the ideal of friendship has centered increasingly on notions of "autonomy, voluntarism, sentiment and freedom" (Bell and Coleman 1999b: 10, cited in Miller 2017: 381; see also Paine 1999: 41 in the same volume).

All these four elements can be found in the new distant relationships that are based on a shared notion of trust in non-mainstream explanations, which my research participants establish and try to maintain. Most people crave for each of these values. They express the need for autonomy by tending to reduce their reliance on the state, the mainstream media, or the sheep. Autonomy and a desire for 'freedom' will be discussed in the next section. But now, it is important to mention that such attitudes range from choosing to not watch TV, to systematically check alternative news sites and to spending a few years searching the Subcarpathian area to find a good piece of land with a stream running on it, in order to build a house and move there with your young family – to be self-sufficient, to have no bills and taxes to pay, except the property tax.

Most research participants express voluntarism as an urge to use these distant relationships to do good. They share online materials that are considered 'fake news' by the majority not because they have to or because they have an interest to do so, but rather because they have volunteered in a risky and derided quest to reveal 'the truth' to an 'ignorant' or 'cowardice' world.

> "From here, from my gut [she points her fist to her stomach]. If it [the news item] hits me in the gut, I ask myself why? (…) And I told you, first my feeling of trust in news items comes first from here [she points to her stomach] and then from here [she points to her head]." (Mara, 70 yo)

Finally, sentiment is expressed by a shared emotion to being close to finding the secrets of all evils, to be united against the mainstream beliefs and propaganda, to have some sort of courage as opposed to the sheep-like attitude. Many research participants feel they can trust someone. They told me they have a gut feeling, an urge to follow their intuition, some even reported seeing trustworthy people in a positive, bright, and calm light. At the same time, many research participants have a genuine and deep feeling they have to rescue other people, including the closest ones, such as their own families and friends, from ignorance and complacency with a state of the world that is controlled by globalist elites.

This sentiment is most of the time expressed in some sort of frustration. Many research participants feel frustrated because they cannot do much to change the world, because they are constantly challenged and sometimes ridiculed by the loved ones and by the mainstream media, and because they often feel marginal and disenfranchised. I suggest the negative

discourse among my research participants is a direct manifestation of such frustrations. As we have seen, public figures can seize this kind of frustration and channel it to achieve different political or economic goals.

To conclude, trust is an essential part of the social fabric that most of the times cannot simply be attributed to an external source, be that a technology or a successful tech company. For example, trust itself is not an issue if you can rely on a close-knit community as a basic repository of trust and confidence, as it is probably the case in smaller communities and in rural areas. However, in a large city like Bucharest where most people you meet and talk to on a daily basis do not share your world views, people turn to the online environment to find like-minded individuals who apparently share their views and understand them. People with limited digital skills and those who are relatively isolated or feel lonely, such as the older individuals in my study, find their own ways to connect with such communities, for instance, by consuming and sharing non-mainstream content via social media and regularly accessing alternative news outlets.

8. Freedom vs. restricting liberties

Freedom is a central aspect of my research. Most people I interviewed believed their democratic freedoms have been increasingly restricted, with the lockdown measures during the Covid-19 pandemic being the most evident example. Research participants admire public figures or members of the public who have refused to comply with rules they feel have been imposed in unjust or authoritarian ways. Cash objectifies ideas of freedom. For example, many research participants believe that the unrestricted circulation of cash is essential for individual autonomy, helping people avoid surveillance and control by banks, other financial institutions, and potential oppressive states. The 15-min urbanistic concept, the disappearance of cash, the EU minimum wage – and the UK's Universal Credit that is already in place in the UK, vaccines, lockdown, EU interventions – all are seen as possible deadly threats to freedom and should be resisted.

Eugen believes the time of censorship is closer. He talks extensively about censorship promoted by the EU. He is convinced that websites will be closed and even TV channels "if it will be the case." He cites the EU legislation to combat fake news – which resulted in the EU Digital Services Act (DSA) adopted in October 2022 – as his main argument. The

Digital Services Act provides a framework for cooperation between the Commission, EU and national authorities to ensure platforms meet their obligations. But October 2022 was the time EU adopted the DSA. Some member states then took nearly two years to implement and enforce the Act within their national legislation.

Eugen explained to me that the EU used the Digital Services Act to create the grounds for a small army of censorship workers – the Fact Checkers – who together with AI read all sites and information on the internet, tag them, and then recommend the closure of those who promote Fake News. This is how he reads this initiative.

> "We are reduced to the level of children who don't know how to judge [important matters] and [instead, they are] taught by their parents how to judge (...) We won't be able to judge with our own minds and background, but they will tell us what to think, like during communism. This worries me a lot. It will affect us all (...) It should not be called fake news, but [rather] propaganda and manipulation." (Eugen, 41 yo)

Now, we have to agree that the EU response to Fake News is slow and pretty much ineffective. From the start, the DSA has been criticized because it does not set out the ways in which digital platforms, yet alone big platforms, should handle disinformation. Disinformation tactics change rapidly, disinformation campaigns tend to be coordinated and more localised and targeted – which requires fast and flexible responses, so tackling disinformation by regulation is seen at least as inadequate. For people like Eugen, this looks highly suspicious.

Many research participants believe the fight against 'fake news' is part of a larger plan. He talks about Freemasonry who has been ruling the world for centuries. Iustin tells me a detailed history of Freemasonry and how its ideas penetrated in aspects of life that we now take for granted, including science, arts, and popular culture. For example, Iustin explains how a thread of ideas that started from biologist and anthropologist Thomas Henry Huxley[3] went through his nephew Julian Huxley, an important member of the British Eugenics Society,[4] then to people like H.G. Wells, Bertrand Russell, and Yevgeny Zamyat who inspired the *Brave New World* (2007 [1932]) written by the famous English writer Aldous Leonard Huxley[5] and a series of superheroes comic books that inspired George Lucas' Star Wars series and a good part of the contemporary entertainment industry. Such genealogy, Iustin argues, shows that much of the Western popular

culture is not casual but is imbued with key philosophical ideas abut how people should live their lives. Iustin believes that these top-down ideas are powerful and imposed through both obvious and subtle mechanisms, leaving him little room him to find and follow his own voice.

Eugen is more pragmatic. He argues that when some individuals thrive economically or intellectually, the Freemasons recruit them. He sees social welfare tools such as the Universal Income as mechanisms to make people, especially the vulnerable, dependent on their governments. The next step in this process, he argues, is to make people so used with this social welfare system and so dependent on it they would be easier to manipulate by their governments. For example, they would be happier to 'obey' the rules imposed by governments, such as, having a clear vaccination record and agreeing to have a chip implanted. Then, Eugen argues, cash will disappear, credit cards will disappear, 'it will be Game Over.'

> "There is a slow war," he tells me. "When changes happen slowly in their societies, people do not see where they lead to. But when changes are fast, more people realize where the world leaders want to bring them. The objective is to make people poorer and poorer, which is realized by decimating the middle class. The lower classes depend on the state, while the higher classes are theirs [*ai lor*]." (Eugen, 41 yo)

Eugen and several other participants in my research believe that 'they' invest a lot of money in digitalization and in the construction of an immense, trans-national, power grid to extend the control of wider populations. A few people told me that the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (part of the EU initiative of EUR 724 billion to boost economies in the wake of Coronavirus pandemic) is kept secret because most money in this plan goes to surveillance, control, and digitalization. Many research participants tell me they have lost trust in the EU because they believe it fails to address citizens' problems and instead seeks to implement a globalist agenda aimed to control and reduce welfare. Some participants believe that such attempts are possible because there is a common practice of favoritism and cronyism inside the EU. Academic research has reported such practices, including fraud, nepotism and cronyism in EU (Shore, 2005) and fraud and corruption in the UN (Beigbeder, 2021).

Now, many people I interviewed believe the restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic were designed to impose centralized control over the

world population and to assess the level of tolerability of such measures. So, they felt the need to fight back.

> "During the Covid period, when there was the protest here in University Square, I was the only one to show up among all the people I knew. All my friends said to me, 'You're crazy! What are you doing there?' (…) I prepared a note [a document required by the authorities, stating the reason for leaving home during lockdown] saying I was going to see my mother in the Militari district. Then, I stayed there [at the protest] until morning. I wanted to go home at some point, but I had to stay until morning." (Nina, 49 yo)

This is a story of Nina joining an anti-mask protest during Covid. A friend of her husband came to their house just before she was about to leave. He told them he would like to go to the meeting. Her husband told him: 'Well, take my mad wife and go!' But then, her husband decided to join them at the protest, although not because he shared her 'principles and values.' When they got to Victoria Square, were the protest started, the two men decided to stay out of the protest area. Police officers were photographing and filming everything and they preferred to stay out. They sat on a bench in front of the Natural History Museum for half an hour before heading home. Nina commented they were not brave enough to join the protest.

Nina took photos and posted them on Facebook, but they received relatively few reactions. At the protest, she only made friends with a man of her age. He was a neighbour she vaguely knew, who happened to work for the Romanian Intelligence Service. She used the word *Securitate*. He was dressed in civil clothes, probably under cover. He told her not to get out of the protest area, so she wouldn't be fined for not respecting the lockdown. He advised her to stay at the protest and he would then drive her home after 5am in the morning. Which happened. The neighbour had his car parked very close, at the back of the University of Bucharest, and no one stopped them on their way home.

Nina is a childminder. She wakes early morning during workdays and travels by tube to a central neighborhood where the family who employed her lives. She has to be there at 7:15 sharp, to prepare their two children for school and walk them to school. Nina then does some domestic chores, including washing, ironing and sometimes cooking something light. She is always free for at least a couple of hours before 1:30pm when she has

to collect the two kids from school. Nina then has lunch with the kids, supervises their homework, and cleans after them. She usually finishes work before 5pm, when one of the parents comes home. She than takes the tube back home and gets there around 6pm. Nina finds her routine rather relaxed and her work undemanding. She is free for a few hours during work, which is not enough to attend personal chores in the center of the city where there are no services or shops she would need. Therefore, she spends most of this free time browsing her smartphone. She mainly uses the news feed recommended by Google and Facebook. But them, she does her own research on the matters that intrigue her. On returning home, Nina knows so many things about what has happened during the day. But she has no one to discuss the 'true' reasons behind the news. Her husband is not interested in her claims that all point to the declining state of the world. So, she turns her TV on and watches news and live debates on several TV channels, especially non-mainstream ones. She also follows ad-hoc live streams on important topics, such as the wars in Ukraine, in Israel and Palestine, controversies around climate change, and the big hoax of electric vehicles. Again, her husband is not interested. He watches films and other commercial programmes in the other room of their flat. They do not have children, and most of her energy goes into this constant effort to dig out the truth about the world we live in.

The two stories presented in this section point to a deep sense of freedom that almost all research participants crave in different ways. It is not an absolute craving for freedom, but rather, as anthropologist Johannes Fabian (1998) describes, as 'moments of freedom' that can dialectically appear as part of more popular political praxis. Reflecting on the way people from mining towns in southeast Democratic Republic of Congo understood and engaged with 'popular culture' between the 1960s and 1980s, Fabian suggests that popular culture is more a praxis than a system (1998: 32). This praxis consists not only of a whole set of beliefs and practices but also of an assemblage of discursive strategies that sometimes conflict with each other. Popular practices and discursive strategies often oppose both elitist and hierarchical thinking and integrative models of culture (1998: 33).

Indeed, all my research participants agree in different ways that mainstream media is dominated by elite globalist groups attempting to impose their cultural and political agenda. Participants' quest for freedom should be seen as key moments to express their opposition to what they perceive as assertive attempts to impose models of culture they see unfit,

misleading, and dangerous. Some of my research informants believe the effects of the restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic were not that bad in Romania simply because Romanians are 'backwards,' 'know how to get by,' and that 'laws do not function like they do in Germany.' For example, some people view the relatively underdeveloped transport infrastructure in Romania, especially the lack of major highways, as a positive aspect. Slow and narrow roads hinder the spread of dangerous globalist ideas. The slow adoption of globalist ideas gives Romanians a certain autonomy and more time to resist, and hopefully fight back against, restrictions on personal liberties.

9. Rationality and coherence

A few months into my field research I found myself often struggling to follow the logical flow of my research participants. Almost every time they tried to explain why they believed in different non-mainstream explanations, I felt I can only follow them up to a point. Then, their explanations seemed to not make sense anymore. I was expecting some sort of logical flow, but, from a certain point onward, I could detect a break in the arguments presented. I was expecting a coherent flow of arguments. But most participants gave me a large number of arguments that seemed disjointed one from another. People would jump from one train of thought to another without any apparent relation between the two, no matter how much I tried to follow. This was a pattern that kept repeating itself in different ways.

This points to a classical debate in anthropology about alternative forms of reasoning – the expectation that people can reason in ways that our own reason finds unreasonable. In a famous essay on rationality and coherence, Peter Winch (1964) argued that we need to avoid using science and our understanding of objective reality as a benchmark to understand other beliefs and practices. His critique was actually mainly addressed to Evans-Pritchard ([1937] 1976), and to his understanding of witchcraft among the Zande in South Sudan. Evans-Pritchard understood the system of belief as a 'closed system,' meaning that believers cannot step outside this system of thought and be agnostic.

Instead, Winch argues that this kind of explanation is an epistemological matter related to very concrete forms of exercising power and authority – namely colonial power. Winch observes that since "we do not initially

have a category that looks at all like the Zande category of magic," and because it is 'we' who want to understand the Zande category, it should be us to extend our understanding to make room for the Zande category, rather than insisting to see this category "in terms of our own ready-made distinction between science and non-science" (1964: 319).

In a recent essay, Stanley J. Tambiah argues that we should look at ritual acts not in the idiom of 'Western science' and 'rationality' but in terms of convention and normative judgement, and as valid solutions to existential problems and intellectual puzzles.

Following this line of thought, I suggest that a similar clash happens within the 'West' itself, when, for example, rationality is often seen at odds with other modes of thinking and living. What is often seen as 'conspiracy' can be an accessible way to explain the inaccessible, or simply a social commentary on a central authority that is seen distant and exclusive.

In a thoughtful ethnography of alien abductions and UFO experiences, anthropologist Susan Lepselter (2016) describes how people come to believe in what most of us would dismiss as 'weird' stuff. Lepselter explores the stories and experiences of UFO believers and the associated aspects, including stories of alien abductions, military experiments, government secrets, and popular conspiracies, to account for the feeling and structure of the American uncanny. This sentiment has nationalist accents and is characterized by a permanent oscillation between two opposed feelings: freedom and captivity.

Lepselter uses the term 'resonance' to account for the way different signs and uncanny discourses overlap or seem to complete each other. Resonance is not a repetition or a confirmation, but rather "it's something that strikes a chord, that inexplicably rings true" (2016: 4). Resonance is the mechanism that reassures people that all the different pieces of information and signs compose a story that makes sense.

Non-mainstream, 'conspiratorial' explanations, I suggest, create a similar sense of familiarity with something that is far from familiar, ultimately with that version of 'truth' that is revealed only to those who make an effort to decipher it and connect with like-minded people in order to reveal and protect it. For most research participants, the feeling of being on the verge of discovering the ultimate secrets of all evils and the eagerness to share this knowledge whenever possible seem to outweigh the importance of maintaining a rational flow of thought. Feelings are deeply personal but also socially shared within safe circles. Research participants often view shared feelings as reassuring and comforting in the face of

massive disinformation and conflicting claims. In contrast, they believe that rationality can be easily deceived, misinformed, and misdirected.

A similar account can be found in the way Buryat villagers explained the devastation of the Buddhist temple by the Soviet Russia in the 1930s. Anthropologist Caroline Humphrey (2003) accounts that Buryat villagers saw the destruction of the temple and the larger campaign of terror they witnessed in sacred terms. Buryat villagers believed that Stalin was the third and the last reincarnation of the Blue Elephant, who according to the legend, had built a Buddhist pagoda in ancient times in India. In a sinful access of rage towards the high lama, the Blue Elephant vowed to destroy Buddhism three times in its future rebirths. Humphrey describes how Buryat Buddhists have always read the historical events of their lifetime through the Buddhist lens of reincarnation beliefs rather than through the Soviet and then post-Soviet values. Therefore, she suggests that Buryat found themselves caught in the "seemingly objective and transparent, yet deeply irrational, persecutions" (Humphrey 2003: 174) of the Soviet Communist Party that considered local people as primitive and imbued with superstitious beliefs. In consequence, Buryat people did not embrace the bright and modernist narrative of the Communist Party, but "[r]ather they reproblematize[d] through metaphor and allegory the issue of what it is to be an actor in history understood metahistorically" (Humphrey 2003: 174).

10. Transparency and oversaturation in a post-socialist context

Anthropologists remarked that throughout history, during periods of oversaturation in terms of diagnoses of social change, people tend to turn to conspiratorial thinking. For example, in the United States at the end of the 19th century numerous conspiracies emerged in response to assassinations, general elections, and scientific discoveries (e.g. McKenzie-McHarg 2018). In Europe, the end of 19th century saw an overabundance of descriptions, diagnoses, and analyses of social change that led to multiple possible explanations of the same events (Marcus 1999: 4). George Marcus argues that overwhelming information combined with abrupt changes can lead to moral panics and 'paranoid styles.' Such genres can range from extreme and violent responses to social change to professionalized rhetoric of 'paranoia within reason' (1999: 8). Caroline Humphrey argues that post-socialist countries experienced

an oversaturation of explanations for the abrupt social and economic decline and the emerging volatile state, contrasting with the certainties of the socialist era (2003: 183).

Another issue is accountability. In many post-totalitarian regimes, people are nostalgic about the possibility to localize blame, such as in hereditary rule or single-party systems (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003: 294). In contrast, in post-totalitarian, multi-party regimes, many people are baffled by the fact that blame is far too generalized, difficult to identify, and relatively easy to avoid. In his ethnography of the politics of memory in Germany, anthropologist Dominic Boyer argues that conspiracy theories serve as a therapeutic mode of protecting a positive sense of selfhood in the shadow of a dread historical burden (2006: 332), in a context long associated with the legacy of Nazism and the Holocaust.

Anthropologists Susan Harding and Kathleen Stewart suggest that conspiracy theories can be seen as a 'metacultural discourse' that dwells on "fundamental, abstract dilemmas of ideal and real, good and evil, creation and destruction, hope and dejection, purity and pollution, mystery and minutiae" (2003: 282) with the aim to actively interrogate the state of the world in search of its cures. Anthropologists Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff suggest that conspiracy is rooted in the problem of transparency (2003: 288). They follow Žižek's observation that Western thought has been obsessed with transparency, which has been a problem in modern times characterized by numerous technical breakthrough and social and political changes. The problem rests in the fact that with each change, the pattern of illumination changes, which casts new shadows on many aspects around us. These new shadows intrigue and require explanation. But explanation is not always easy to offer and to accept. In this context, Comaroff and Comaroff argue that we live a contradictory era of "significant historical discontinuities amid the continuities" (2003: 190), which leads to a tide of claims to recognize the true meaning of multiple occurring events. Harry West and Todd Sanders follow this line of thought, suggesting that contemporary conspiracy theories represent the ways in which ordinary people manage "the relationship of the visible and the invisible, the knowable and the unknowable" (2003: 7) while sanctioning those in power for their lack of transparency and comprehensible explanations.

We have seen that in Romania, people often feel that much of what is promoted as transparent is actually opaque and not unintelligible, sometimes due to an overload of paradoxical information. For example,

the impressive construction of the HAARP offers more shadows than explanations, despite the vast literature existing on the internet. The problem seems to be rootedin the way partial and restricted knowledge interacts with a form of social imagination fueled by a strong desire to access information that is perceived as essential yet concealed. The persistent feeling that mainstream forces continuously deny and obscure the truth often leads to frustration and overflow into ad-hoc communities and tense conversations. Individuals who suspect something is false or misleading organize themselves in online communities to work out the truth or be closer to it. Different actors then exploit this urge to question the mainstream and look for alternative answers for political, ideological, or economic gains.

11. Final remarks

This essay explores different ways in which people try to make sense of the contradictions and paradoxes in their lives. One typical approach is to seek out and engage with alternative narratives. Throughout this process, people tend to gradually lose trust in formal authority and in what they perceive as its agents, including life partners, siblings, children, neighbours, and close friends. As a result, they turn to rely on their own senses and 'think with their own minds,' as many participants described. But we have seen that this is not an individual cognitive process that is somehow socially isolated. Rather, 'this mind' is distributed throughout society and converges within various social communities that share a common sense of annoyance and disappointment with the current political economy. In this process, they view 'fake news' as meely a tool used by those in power and mainstream media use to obscure the truth. While disinformation is something they have to live with, many feel they can immunize themselves against it as long as they do not 'go with the sheep' and continue to 'think with their own minds.'

Most research participants accuse the Romanian state of being chaotic, weak, and incoherent in designing and implementing public policies and, above all, completely subordinated to Western powers, especially the 'Americans.' This narrative arises from the juxtaposition of two ideals. The first ideal is represented by Socialist Romania when the state was viewed as strong, imposing discipline, and respected internationally.

The second ideal is represented by a set of ideas abut what Romania could have become after the collapse of communism, had it not been the malevolent influence from the West – if Romania had known how 'to stand on its own feet,' as one man in his 70s noted. Most research participants have proposed solutions for escaping the current impasse, including increasing budgets for education and healthcare, restricting emigration and immigration, stopping the sale of agricultural land to foreign investors, providing state funding for Romanian industry, and declaring neutrality in the Russian-Ukrainian war.

The problem lies in the fact that people find it difficult to attain both types of ideals, and many feel too marginal and weak to even attempt to do so. This results in a clear and sometimes violent rupture with the mainstream political economy of the state and its communication. As a result, people feel entitled to withdraw from close relationships that do not share their radical views and look for alternative communities and actions.

There are a few ways in which disenfranchised people manifest their opposition to mainstream ideas, which represent the key takeaways of this study. First, people accused of upholding conspiracy theories simplify complexity and attempt to resist the dominant and celebrated liberal transparency that they perceive as overwhelming, flawed, and opaque.

Second, people attempt to piece together their own alternative puzzles using the fragments they have at hand. They rely on one or a few widely shared meta-theories, to which they attach a constant stream of smaller pieces of alternative information. In doing so, they create both online and offline communities based on a shared search for a deeper, concealed 'truth.' The shared trust in alternative theories is critical to this process.

Third, many point in different ways to the difficult transition from socialism to a free market in Romania, where they struggled to connect with the dominant discourses and lifestyles. The free market promises fulfillment but requires constant effort to align oneself with its principles. However, most of the research participants feel they have fallen through the cracks of this transition—many feel lonely, marginalized, and unheard. As a result, they create alternative hierarchies of authority and retreat from the existing social relations that challenge these hierarchies. The sense of disenfranchisement is particularly strong for those who were once at the center of public life during socialism.

Fourth, people tend to heavily blame those who have been promoting – they would say imposing – dangerous changes. They view mainstream politicians and the media as the main promoters of such changes. They

fear the worst, believing global conspiracies are just around the corner. On the other hand, new politicians who promise to free people from the burdens of constantly being misled quickly gain popularity and support.

Finally, most people believe that the current world order is about to collapse, and everyone will feel it someday, despite isolated efforts to challenge the dominant political economy. People feel angst and suspicion because powerful forces manage to keep their views on the margins of society. They avoid discussing their feelings and actions with close family and friends who do not share their views, which deepens their sense of isolation and sometimes anger. They feel marginalized and predict that we will all be marginalized soon, at which point we will understand how they feel.

Endnotes

1 At the time, the average monthly salary in Macedonia was less than USD 400.

2 Ionosphere begins at about 50 kilometers above the Earth's surface and contains atoms and molecules that are ionized by the Sun's ultraviolet light.

3 Thomas Henry Huxley (1825–1895) was a biologist and anthropologist and one of the biggest supporters of Charles Darwin's evolutionism.

4 Julian Huxley was the vice-president of the British Eugenics Society between 1937–1944 and its President between 1959–1962.

5 Aldous Leonard Huxley (1894–1963) was a famous English writer and social satirist who was nominated nine times for the Nobel prize in literature.

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