

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

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

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

### Preamble

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Theoretical framework**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### *The people of Reddit*

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

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

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

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

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

### *The content of Reddit*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

### **Research design**

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Methodology**

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

### Data collection

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Analysis

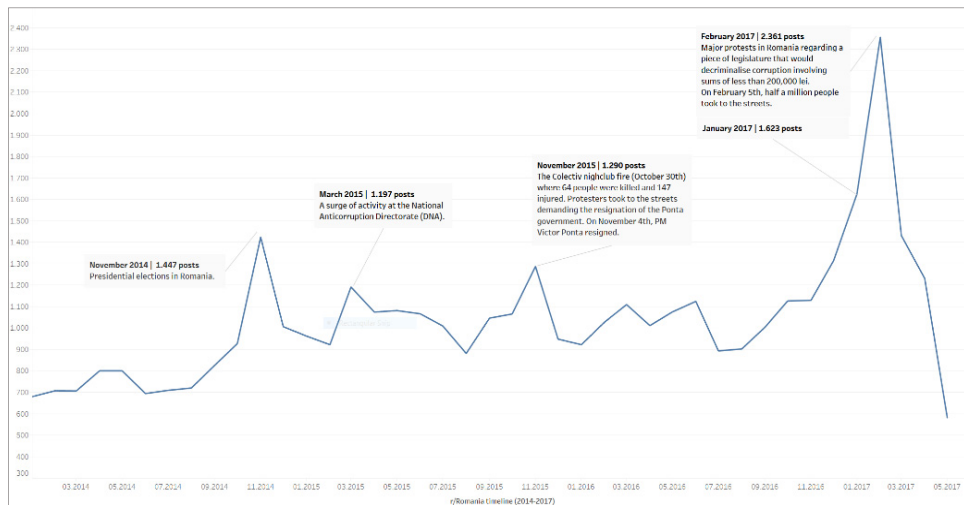
### *Roddit over time*

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

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

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

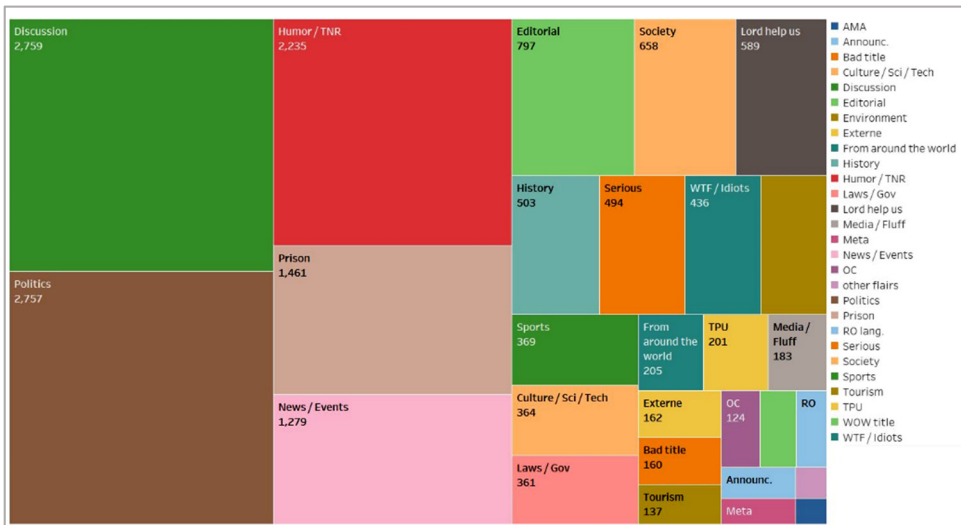
Between 2011 and 2014, the number of posts roughly doubled from one year to the other, plateauing in 2015-2016. This growth rate can be explained by an increase in interest of Internet users in current affairs. Figure 1 showcases the escalation of activity on r/Romania in periods of political and social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



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

### *Types of content and sources*

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

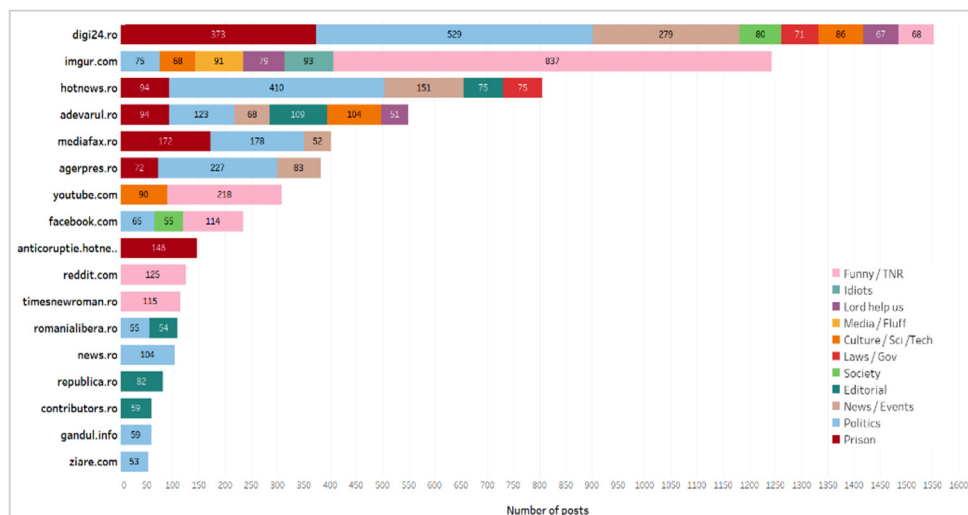


**Figure 2.** Post flares (grouped) and number of posts for each flair group [DS1, excludes posts with no flair, N=17.074]

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

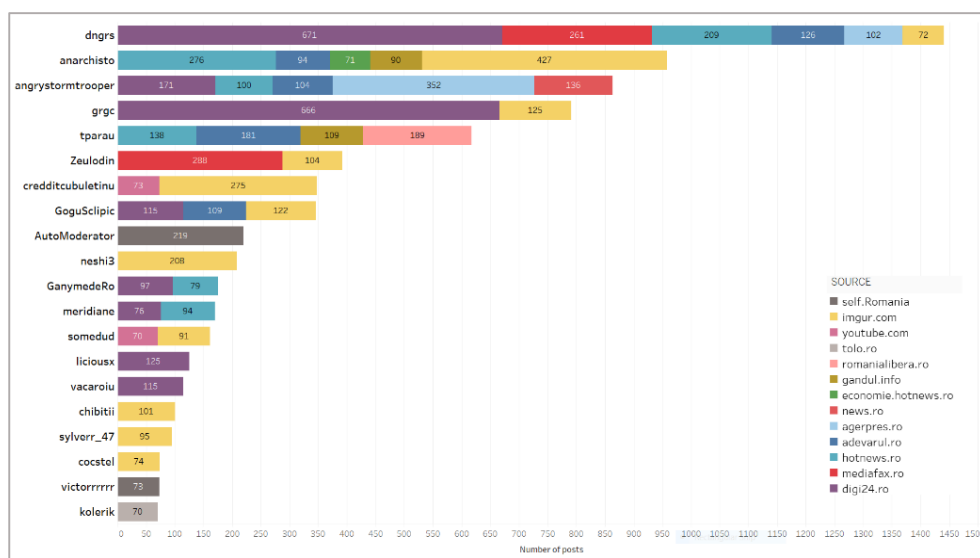


Figure 4. Top 20 users by number of submissions made and the sources [DS1, includes self.Romania posts]

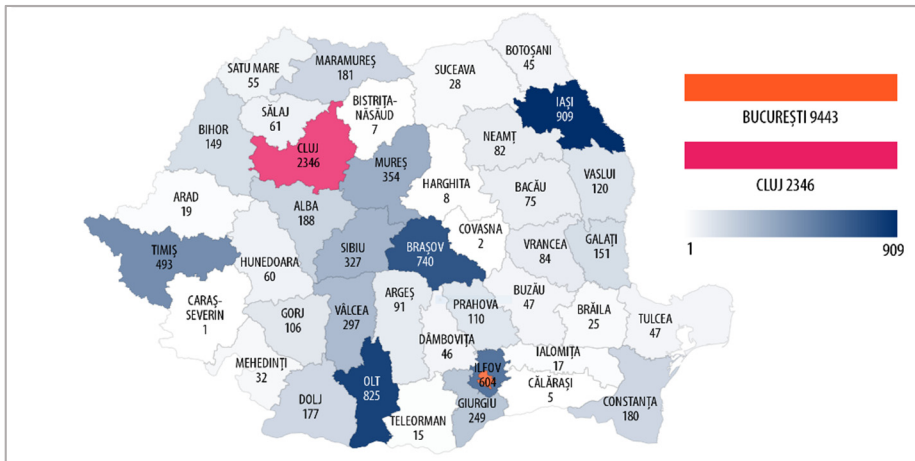
### Who is Roddit?

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

**Table 2.** Types of author flair

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

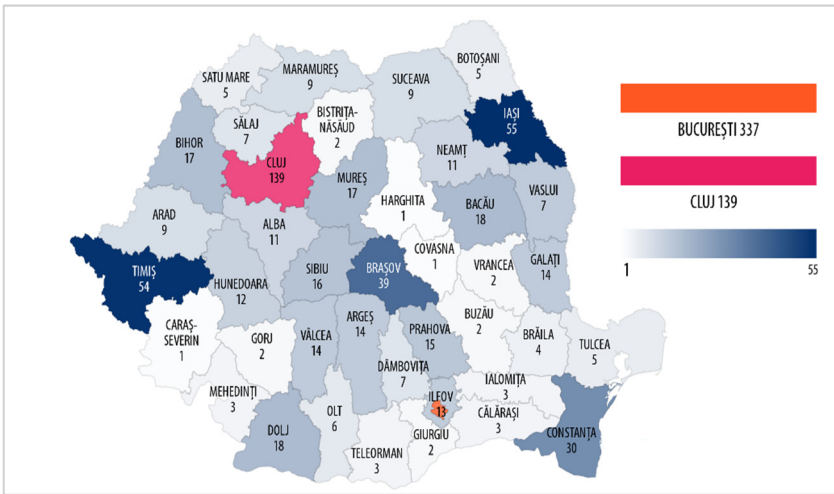
Figure 5a displays the geographical spread of posts from Roddit. Bucharest and Cluj have distinctive colors due to the large number of posts (a proportionate scale with Bucharest at 100% would have rendered the map unreadable for the other counties).



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

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

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



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

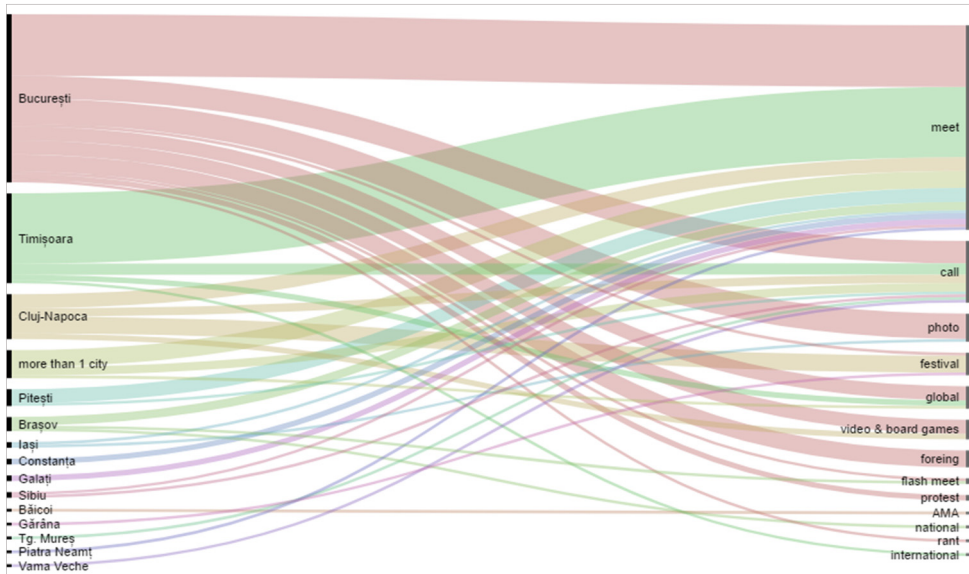
### *Roddit online and offline*

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

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

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





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

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

### *Roddit as a social knowledge repository*

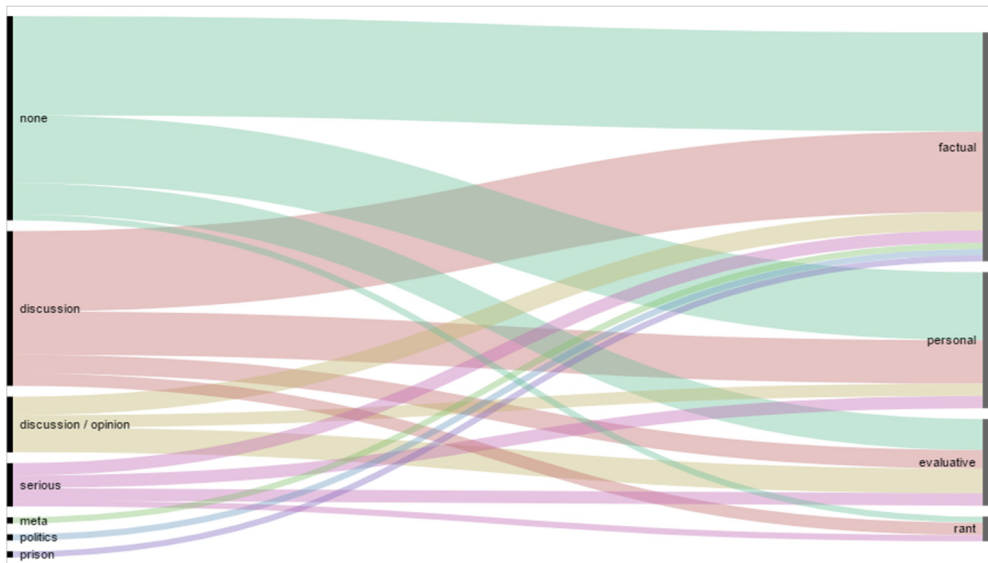
It is a common Reddit practice to address questions directly to the subreddit. In order to isolate this type of posts we filtered the dataset using the keyword 'roddit' and identified the self-referential ones, resulting in a total number of 259 questions (the annex provides a sample, with the top 10%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

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

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

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

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



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

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

### *The Roddit debate*

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

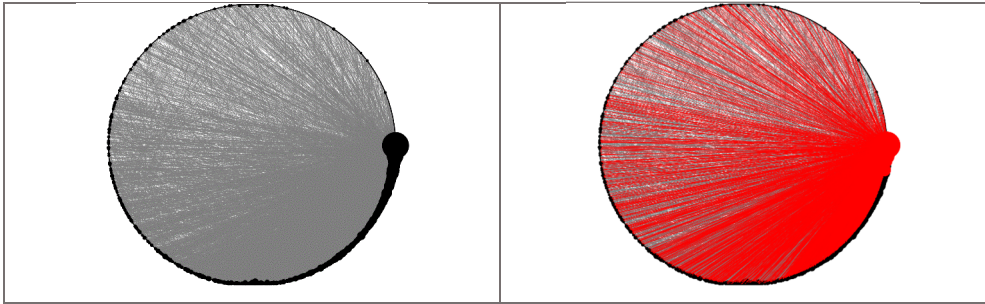
**Table 3.** DS2 numbers (January 1<sup>st</sup> – June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2017)

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

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

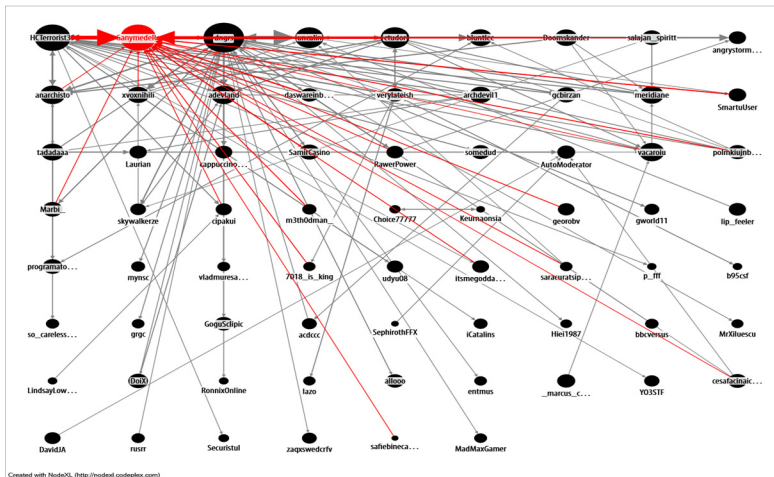
Figure 8a and 8b are created using the MS Excel template NodeXL for graph visualization. The nodes (or vertices) are users that commented, the size of the nodes is given by the total commenting activity, while the edges are the directed connections between the commenter and the person receiving the reply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

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



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

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



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

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

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

## **Findings**

### *Agenda setting and gatekeeping angle*

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

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

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

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

### *Is Roddit a community?*

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

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

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

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

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

## Conclusions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## Annex

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

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

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