

## THE DIGITAL DISCOURSE OF ROMANIAN SOCIAL MEDIA PROSUMERS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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**ABSTRACT.** *The Digital Discourse of Romanian Social Media Prosumers during the COVID-19 Pandemic.* Social media platforms provide the digital playground for users to manifest a strong form of clicktivism and, at the same time, a deep sense of belonging. In this digital space, users produce discourses with in-built ideologies which have a strong impact on society. Through digitized practices (following, sharing, commenting, posting), users become social actors who design and redesign their behaviour and life choices in relation to the individuals and groups which they follow online on a regular basis. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, through the use of social media, various users have become movers and shakers in Romania. This study aims to analyse the new media discourse showing the Romanian people's attitude towards the Covid-19 pandemic in the time span of September-October 2021. As such, the linguistic manifestation of users (including micro-celebrities and public figures) was reflected in the polarization of Romanian society, resulting in people mistrusting authorities, and medical experts and giving voice to users who would not normally have a voice in the matter of a global pandemic.

**Keywords:** *clicktivism, digital discourse, digitized practices, prosumers, debunking*

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**REZUMAT.** *Discursul digital al prosumatorilor români de rețele de socializare în timpul pandemiei COVID-19.* Platformele de socializare oferă utilizatorilor terenul de joacă digital pentru a manifesta o formă puternică de clicktivism și, în același timp, un sentiment profund de apartenență. În acest spațiu digital, utilizatorii produc discursuri cu ideologii încorporate care au un impact puternic asupra societății. Prin intermediul practicilor digitalizate (urmărire, partajare, comentarii, postări), utilizatorii devin actanți sociali care își proiectează și își reproiectează comportamentul și opțiunile de viață în raport cu persoanele și grupurile pe care le urmăresc online în mod regulat. În contextul pandemiei Covid-19, prin utilizarea rețelelor sociale, diverși utilizatori au devenit promotori și actanți în România. Acest studiu își propune să analizeze discursul noilor media care arată atitudinea românilor față de pandemia Covid-19 în intervalul de timp septembrie-octombrie 2021. Ca atare, manifestarea lingvistică a utilizatorilor (incluzând micro-celebritățile și figurile publice) s-a reflectat în polarizarea societății românești, ceea ce a dus la neîncrederea oamenilor în autorități, precum și în experții medicali și a dat glas unor utilizatori care, în mod normal, nu ar fi avut o voce în contextul unei pandemii globale.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *clicktivism, discurs multimodal, practici digitale, prosumator, demascare*

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic in Romania reached its fourth wave in September-October 2021 and was marked by the first reopening of schools, local elections, a surge of cases, and a low vaccination rate. In this context, Romanian Facebook users, in their quality of prosumers (producers and consumers of social media) were very active online as news about the pandemic was regularly posted and discussed. There was also an abundance of misinformation posted and circulated in the filter bubbles created by Facebook algorithms. This gave way to the phenomenon of polarization within Romanian society, both online and offline: people who were pro-vaccine and people who were anti-vaccine. Thus, an 'us' versus 'them' tendency became prevalent on Facebook as well, simultaneously showing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral polarization regarding medical and scientific subject matters (see Bârgăoanu 2021)<sup>3</sup>. As a consequence, there were users who tried debunking the misinformation using various strategies (sarcasm, humour, irony, etc.).

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<sup>3</sup> For further information on the matter see the article *Tendința anului 2021: „NOI” împotriva „LOR” – indiferent care ar fi subiectele aflate în discuție* (<https://www.qmagazine.ro/tendinta-anului-2021-noi-impotriva-lor-indiferent-care-ar-fi-subiectele-aflate-in-discutie/?fbclid=IwAR3shtXeBhB1nXbgID8NuKM0wzvktPjwZSizQHwAi5-nllkYrY22fscOJPI>)

The digital discourse produced during the specified time period reflects the local manifestation of the pandemic and the complexity of the situation by documenting how authorities and ordinary citizens dealt with the sanitary crisis. There were discourses of panic and fear with a strong echo at the societal level; however, there were also discourses that balanced the first category by promoting science over pseudo-science, and rationality over emotional havoc. All these discourses were constructed in a snowball-like fashion, growing rapidly, but then dissipating like a soap bubble.

This paper explores aspects pertaining to the digital discourse of the COVID-19 pandemic produced by Romanian Facebook users in the time span of September-October 2021. To this, we add a post from December 2020 and a post from January 2021 with the purpose of highlighting the online productions by which some Facebook users showed anticipation of a situation that would eventually escalate.

This study begins by providing a context for the analysis of the analytical material selected. We present relevant theoretical concepts; we engage in qualitative analysis and discuss a few selected examples. The examples are in Romanian, and, for authenticity reasons, we provide screenshots from Facebook, accompanying the screenshots with the translation of keywords or relevant excerpts. In the Annex, we provide the translation for the text that appears in the screenshots, but which is not translated in the body of the article.

### **Digital Discourse and Prosumers in the Post-factual Era**

Social media platforms enable a profound sense of belonging and they play “a crucial role in spreading information and mobilising society for common action” (Sutkutė 2016, 427). Users generate discourses that are embedded in ideologies (beliefs, points of view and ideas that they share within particular groups) and become social actors who sometimes design and redesign their behaviour and life decisions in relation to the individuals and groups they interact with online. Moreover, as we live in a post-factual era “marked by fake news and uncritical consumption of the media” (Lacković, 2020, 442) and in which there is an “increasing influence of public figures with a flexible code of ethics” (Modreanu 2017, 8), users appeal to their emotions and convictions rather than to facts when assimilating and accepting arguments. Users are also prone to embrace the values of diversity and democracy, make decisions, and express themselves through a vast array of distinct forms and digitised practices – *like button, follow, share, comment, and post* (see Jenkins 2016).

In order to be informed and keep up to date with the latest memes and trends, fast-breaking news, entertainment options, and various events, users crowdsource “their friends’ sharable databases” (see Alvermann 2017, 335).

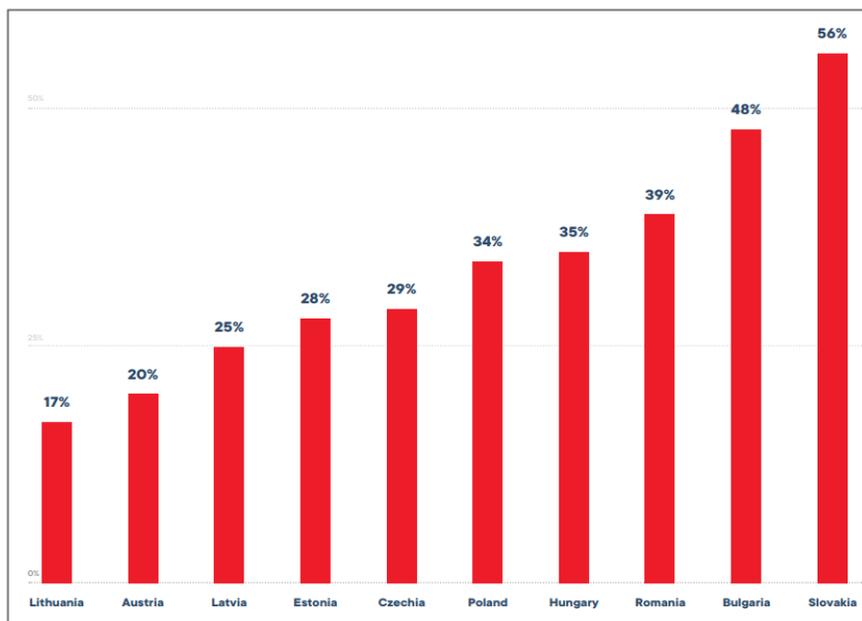
They also interact with the content, gaining the quality of prosumer, a term introduced by Alvin Toffler (1980) and first used in the field of economics and marketing to denote the proactive consumer and describe the fact that “people consumed what they themselves produced. They were neither producers nor consumers in the usual sense. They were instead what might be called ‘prosumers’” (283). In the new reality of social media, the user represents the social consumer, embodying the prosumer<sup>4</sup> and using “social networking sites as vital information resources for the sharing and consumption of product and brand information” (Silver 2009, apud. Buzzetto 2013, 68).

Prosumers are engaged in the digital discourses (see Thurlow and Mroczek 2011) of social media platforms whose power resides in the use of images and text. These images and texts keep the prosumers in the same discourse space and shape their understanding of the world, having a snowball effect as posts trigger reactions and counter-reactions. Especially in times of crisis or crucial events like the pandemic, oftentimes, the prosumers’ engagement with these discourses manifests in the form of clicktivism, understood as “‘liking’, upvoting, or ‘following’ an activist social media post or blog. Clicktivism signals endorsement of an existing post” (George et al. 2019, 10) and creates communities of like-minded users, where they support and validate each other in their ideologies and beliefs. This explains Makoš’ five types of cognitive distortions mentioned by Kvetanová et al. (2020, 6) and which we also identified on social media platforms: 1) anchoring: the recipient, in our case the user, considers the first information he sees to be the relevant one, even though it may be false; 2) peak-end bias: the perception of the veracity of past events depends on the most recent or most significant positive or negative experience; 3) survivorship bias: individuals’ tendency to trust the version of successful, well-known people; 4) confirmation bias: recipients subconsciously seek confirmation of their opinions (often false); 5) contrast bias: people often compare and use contrast in perceiving and evaluating events, seeking reassurance for their opinion.

Users’ continuous engagement with social media platforms is framed by the post-factual era in which we live. The ceaseless prosumption and clicktivism enhance the tendency of individuals to believe false information, this tendency being “also related to the historical and political significance of a country” (Kvetanová et al. 2020, 7). Regarding the degree of belief in disinformation and conspiracy theories in a survey conducted by GLOBSEC, Romania ranked among the top three EU countries who believe published lies, occupying the third position with a percentage of 39% (see Figure 1 below).

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<sup>4</sup> For further insight on the concept of prosumer in time of crisis, see Lang et al. 2020.



**Figure 1.** Degree of belief in conspiracy theories and misinformation narratives  
(Source at the end of the article)

In the digital space, the increased degree of belief in conspiracy theories and misinformation narratives is fuelled by rhetorical strategies and, even more so, by a multimodal discourse in which the image and text are intertwined, with the image having a high impact, functioning like a trigger to one's attention and having "emotional consequences" (Powell, Boomgarden, De Swert, De Vreese 2015, 997). The online images authenticate the reality users wish to portray in an immediate and fast-changing manner, being better at accessing *a reality* than words. Users anchor themselves into the reality created by the content creators, who reenact Roland Barthes' belief that photography "does not invent; it is authentication itself; the (rare) artifices it permits are not probative; they are, on the contrary, trick pictures: the photograph is laborious only when it fakes" (1981, 87). This is valid for the digital discourse as most of the time users play with reality, embellishing it and altering it in order to convey the intended message. Hence, "photography never lies: or rather, it can lie as to the meaning of the thing, being by nature tendentious, never as to its existence. Impotent with regard to general ideas (to fiction), its force is nonetheless superior to everything the human mind can or can have conceived to assure us of reality - but also this reality is never anything but a contingency ("so much, no more"). Every photograph is a certificate of presence" (ibidem).

## Facebook as a Site of Engagement

We collected several examples of Facebook discourses in the time span of September-October 2021. We chose Facebook and not other social media platforms due to its popularity in Romanian society and its affordances which distinguish it from other platforms, Facebook having “the largest array of functions, including text-based posts, photo sharing, and sophisticated privacy settings” (Shane-Simpson, Manago, Gaggi, and Gillespie-Lynch 2018, 277). Thus, according to a study performed by the Romanian National Press Agency<sup>5</sup>, Facebook is the most popular social media platform because it is used by all age groups. Especially in the pandemic, compared to the previous years, Romanians have used platforms to a greater extent. Among the online activities performed, the authors of the above-mentioned study state that users prefer Facebook as a platform for leisure activity and as a source of information. To this, we add that almost everyone in Romania has a Facebook account (see Marica 2021), adults aged over 30 have a Facebook account and check it several times a day, while younger users prefer Instagram or TikTok.

When comparing Facebook affordances with the affordances of other platforms, there are significant differences that determined us to analyze profiles on this platform and not on others. Hence, we consider that the Facebook affordances make this platform more appealing to adults rather than to the younger generation as it blends a classical source of information (e.g. magazine, newspaper, TV) with the user-generated/created content. Whereas Instagram and TikTok “emphasize visual image sharing” and videos (Shane-Simpson, Manago, Gaggi, and Gillespie-Lynch 2018, 277), which offer fluid and rapid stories and representations, Facebook focuses on multimodal content, offering more space for text. On Facebook, users are encouraged to use their real names, and interact with people by sharing their opinions, which creates a higher impression of familiarity among users, engagement and “higher levels of bonding social capital” (ibidem). On Instagram and TikTok, more users have nicknames and their online activity is focused more on self-promoting images with narcissistic overtones (ibidem).

For our study, we select posts and comments produced by Romanian users on Facebook, providing an overview of the digital pandemic discourse. We focus on the discourses produced by a variety of users in terms of age, education, and approach to the pandemic, offering a vast amount of content. We analyze a selection of the most representative examples of this content, performing qualitative analysis.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.agerpres.ro/economic-intern/2021/10/19/platforma-de-socializare-facebook-ramane-in-preferintele-utilizatorilor-romani-de-internet-televiziunea-principala-sursa-de-informare-studiu--799136>

There are three aspects that we take into consideration and that we consider particularly relevant in our analysis of Facebook discourse: 1. the combination of images, videos, and text (the digital discourse); 2. the polarization (US versus THEM) and 3. the snowball effect (a post and a reaction that triggered counter-reactions).

### **Online Pro-vaccine Discourses versus Anti-vaccine Discourses**

The beginning of the vaccination campaign triggered polarization, making evident the existence of two groups of users: a group of users who were against COVID-19 vaccination and a group of users who encouraged vaccination. This polarization was amplified by fake news and misinformation.

Starting from the basic idea that in the post-factual society emotions and beliefs undermine credible facts, it is our view that in Romania the emphasis falls on content that relies on imaginable situations and experiences. Moreover, as “technology has enabled every person to craft their own narrative, while seeking and engaging with personalized and relevant information”, this content is delivered in a digital loop created by the algorithms “or ‘filter bubbles’ where users are not exposed to opposing viewpoints” (Altieri 2021, viii). Hence, prosumers find themselves in this loop of content that is being delivered to them, with which they interact, and which sometimes encompasses “fake news”, “hoaxes and conspiracy theories, hyper-partisan content, and state-sponsored disinformation, all of which are circulated or amplified by networked individuals that may be spreading false information both intentionally and unintentionally” (Caplan et al. 2018, 9). This would explain the success of fake news in Romanian society: it belongs to the field of contexts and experiences that the human mind can comprize and envisage. In this respect, the Facebook corpus in this paper is divided into two sections: the anti-vaccination discourse and the discourse of pro-vaccination. We made a selection of representative figures for each type of discourse.

The anti-vaccination discourse was represented by the right-wing political party, specialists against the vaccine and the anti-vaccine group identities, while the discourse pro-vaccination was produced by public figures from various fields.

### **The Anti-vaccine Discourse**

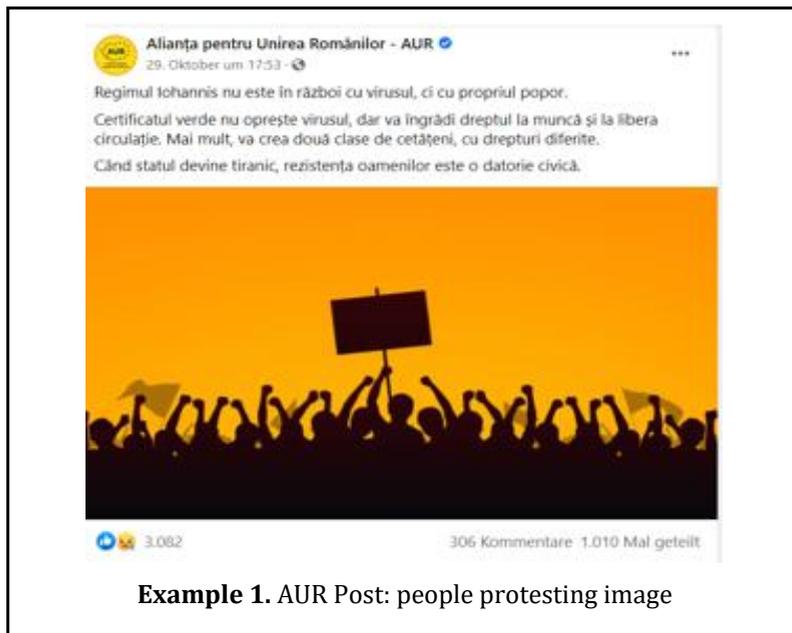
The Romanian right-wing political party (AUR - Alliance for the Union of Romanians) is the first representative figure for our study. Their posts generally illustrate panic, fear, and critical situations, and instigate hatred. They claim that the president is at war with the Romanians and that the green certificate restricts the citizens’ freedom and rights. They also urge the citizens to fight a tyrannical state. We can often see examples of keywords like *medical*

*dictatorship, conspiracy, government psychopaths, and war.* Images very often complement the text. For example, figure 2 below contains a sample of posts produced by AUR. Example 1 shows people protesting and the text: [The Iohannis regime is not at war with the virus, but with its own people. The green certificate does not stop the virus, but it will limit the right to work and to move freely. Moreover, it will create two classes of citizens, with different rights. When the state becomes tyrannical, the resistance of the people is a civic duty.]

Example 2 is an image depicting the Romanian president holding the citizens captive. The image is also accompanied by the text: [The medical dictatorship is no longer just a conspiracy. The interim minister of labor, Raluca Turcan, wants the green certificate to be a passport to work in public institutions. We have to stop them!].

We also noticed high-impact messages written in a very simple and clear language: [The Government psychopaths want only vaccinated people to be granted access to shops. [we demand] Early elections!] (see Example 3).

There were also posts with text [Who are the extremists? We, who support civil rights and freedom, or they, who have started a war against their own people?] and high-impact messages written in special fonts and colours in order to draw users' attention: *Stop extremism* (see Example 4 below).



**Example 1.** AUR Post: people protesting image



Example 2. AUR post: president holding citizens captive image



Example 3. AUR post: Government psychopaths



**Figure 2.** AUR Posts - Samples 1  
(Source at the end of the article)

Other AUR posts contain images and texts that encourage citizens to act and refuse the vaccine (see Figure 3 below). The texts accompanying the images are very relevant and we provide the translation: Example 5 [Romania needs trust and hope, not the terror promoted by the current regime. Cițu and Johannis must go]; Example 6 [Now, in Victoriei square]; Example 7 [We will not allow them to turn us into obedient citizens! We will not allow them to shut down our schools, to force us to get the vaccine, to infringe our rights and our freedom guaranteed by the constitution! On Saturday we will go out on the streets to stop the dictatorship!]; Example 8 [Outrageous! Vaccination with the third dose of covid vaccine begins in Romania today, regardless of the fact that the European Medicines Agency (EMA) has not issued a positive assessment. This fact is unprecedented and implicitly of great magnitude. We know that the government wants to get rid as soon as possible of the tens of millions of vaccines it bought with the Romanians' money, but we are people, not laboratory mice!].

Overall, their discourse is paradoxical: they encourage citizens not to panic, but their discourse contains exactly the words and the images that are connected to crisis and critical situations. This blend of simple images and words with which Romanians instantly resonate (for e.g. the Romanian flag, people on the street, syringes, the Romanian president) constitutes their most

used rhetorical strategy to appeal to users' feelings and beliefs. These keywords and images refer to the Romanians' negative experience with the communist era and dictatorship and they activate one of Makoš's five types of cognitive distortions: the peak-end bias which could trigger past traumas in the Romanian collective imaginary.



**Example 5.** Romania needs trust and hope



**Example 6.** Now, in Victoriei square



**Example 7.** We will not allow them to turn us into obedient citizens!



**Example 8.** Outrageous!

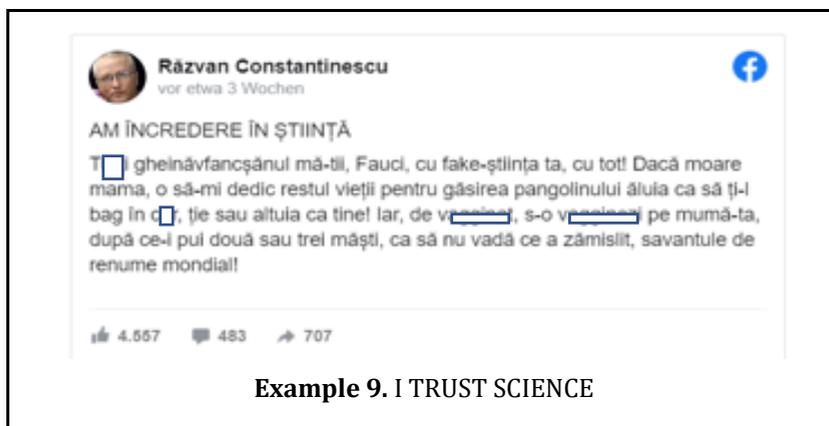
**Figure 3.** AUR Posts - Samples 2  
(Source at the end of the article)

Some doctors who are not virologists outspoke a highly vocal critic against the vaccine on TV and insistently express their reluctance regarding the vaccine. These doctors posted a lot of content on their FB profiles in order to gain more popularity and reach a larger and more diverse audience. Doctor Răzvan Constantinescu, whose posts consist of self-contradictory and injudicious statements, provides a good example. We observe that his discourse might be perceived as persuasive by some users, but the paradox is that most of his posts are full of trivial and vulgar words. Wanting to gain popularity, he is condescending and sarcastic, without bringing any scientific arguments, as can be seen in the two posts below.

In example 9 “I TRUST SCIENCE”, even though the title he gives to his own post announces a relevant, scientific topic, he uses offensive language, insulting, and mocking American immunologist Anthony Fauci, who serves as director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. In the post, Constantinescu accuses Fauci of promoting fake science.

In example 10 “THIS GUY MUST BE HOSPITALISED”, he tags and directly addresses Raed Arafat, one of the doctors who played a key role during the Pandemics. He uses labels such as *dropout*, *power-sick psychopath*, and *demented man* to describe Arafat. (see Figure 4 and see ANNEX for a full translation of these posts).

His posts are then shared by other users in the Facebook community as they take them for granted and they consider the first information they see to be the relevant one, showing an uncritical consumption of the media and constituting a clear case of anchoring.



**Example 9. I TRUST SCIENCE**



**Example 10.** THIS GUY MUST BE HOSPITALISED

**Figure 4.** Specialists' posts against the Vaccine  
(Source at the end of the article)

These stances above produced by this doctor are illustrative for other anti-vaccine stances of specialists who are not virologists, their anti-vaccine discourse predominantly appealing to emotion, using simple and sometimes aggressive language. These stances shown by specialists fuelled strong positionings towards vaccine rejection. Hence, the *us versus them* dynamics enabled pro-vaccine groups (labelled by the people in derogative terms like *laboratory mice* or *government slaves*) and anti-vaccine group identities (labelled by the people as *anti-vaxxers*).

Regular users against the vaccine often promoted and shared the posts of the doctors like the one mentioned above, acting as prosumers, endorsing these posts, and creating communities of like-minded users, thus performing clear cases of clicktivism and deepening the anchoring cognitive distortion, but at the same time subconsciously seeking confirmation of their opinions, thus manifesting the confirmation bias. Their discourse contains the same keywords: *dictatorship*, *communism*, *freedom of choice*, and *rights gained with the price of our blood*.

Most of these types of posts have sarcastic, belittling, and attacking overtones: *the flu of the hysterical stupid; imbeciles wearing their underpants on their noses; the stupidity of the world we live in do not understand anything and they follow the herd, that's why it is easy to manipulate them; "i-phone" generation; how naive should you be to believe that someone wants to do you good by forcing you, for your own sake taking away your air, freedom of movement, your job and the right to buy food.* (See Figure 5, Example 11 "The flu").

Oftentimes, these posts are accompanied by quotations from Romanian classical authors in order to make their discourse more credible. For example, one of the posts below contains the quote "Man has only one duty: not to be

stupid”, which belongs to an iconic figure of the Romanian literature and journalism of the late XIXth century and beginning of the XXth century. This quote reveals an attempt to legitimize their discourse, by enforcing the message they want to convey and appealing to an authoritative figure. However, including it in the discourse of the pandemic leads to the juxtaposition of two different narratives. It presents readers with a collage of unrelated, incoherent, and incohesive information as these quotes are not taken from the specialised literature and they do not present case studies about the topic under focus (see Figure 5, Example 12 “Quoting the classics”).

26. Oktober um 15:20



Medicul Răzvan Constantinescu, de la Spitalul „Sfântul Spiridon” din Iași, șef de lucrări la Universitatea de Medicină și Farmacie „Grigore T. Popa”

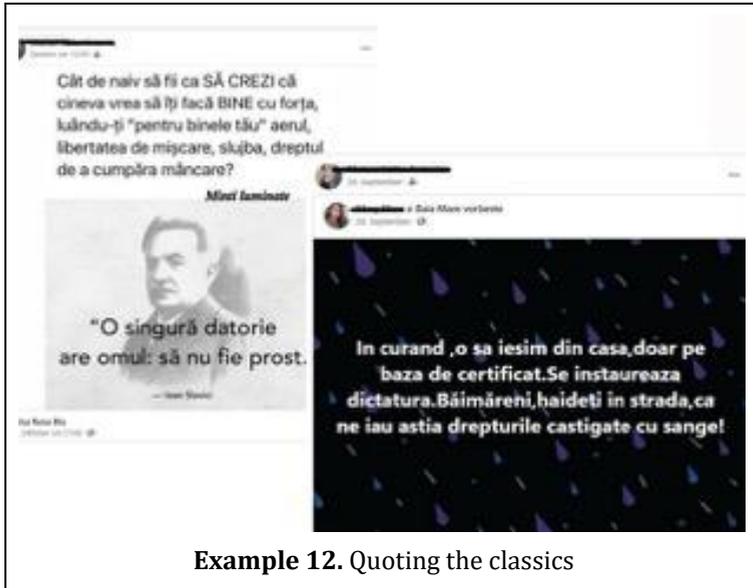
**GRIPA PENTRU PROȘTII ISTERIZAȚI**

Ca să-i lămuresc pe imbecilii care umblă cu chiloteii pe nas prin aeroporturi, mă ofer voluntar să mă infectez cu virusul vieții. Să vadă și ei un medic nevaccinat “antigripal” (o tâmpenie, având în vedere polimorfismul virusurilor gripale) care nu moare, frate, deși “a susținut ciurma roșie” (!)

Prostovănia lumii în care trăim nu pricepe nimic, se comportă ca o turmă, de aceea este ușor de manipulat. Ea nu poate înțelege că astfel de virusuri nu prezintă pericol vital decât pentru categoriile cu risc maxim: cirotici, neoplazici, vârste extreme, pacienți cu insuficiență cardiacă severă, BPOC, imunodeprimați (aș adăuga eu, și cei care s-au vaccinat aiurea pentru orice prostie). Generația “i-phone” poartă barbă și glezne goale, mască de pânză pe fațes, urlă că vrea nu știu ce țară ca afară, iese la proteste în mod ovin, se vaccinează în draci ca să-și facă rost de vreo leucemie și apoi se plânge că statul nu face nimic pentru ei, nu îi pune biberonul.

Mortalitatea gripei “Covid-19” este de 2,4%, comparativ cu 2,1% cât a fost cea a epidemiei de gripă din 2018. Și atunci de ce vă isterizați, glezno-barbișoanelor?

**Example 11. The flu**



**Figure 5.** The Anti-Vaccine discourse  
(Source at the end of the article)

### The Pro-vaccine Discourse

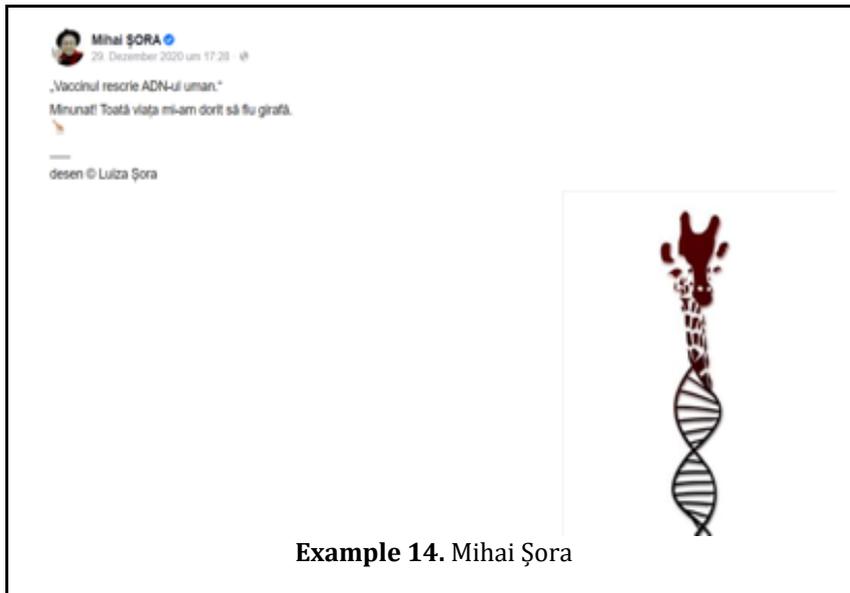
Many opinion-makers, micro-celebrities, and celebrities from various fields (the medical field, academic communities, literature, etc.) posted examples of good practice and shared a lot of content on their Facebook pages in order to raise awareness and convince people to get vaccinated and accept the rules (lockdowns, wearing masks, etc.) implemented by the government and the World Health Organization. As such, social media platforms provided the digital playground on which regular users, in their capacity of prosumers, had access to the voice of public figures.

One of the rhetorical strategies in the discourse of opinion-makers, micro-celebrities, and celebrities reflects the so-called phenomenon of debunking, "the intention of which is to clarify the primarily false information presented and thus force the recipient to think more deeply about the published facts" (Kvetanová 2020, 2). For instance, Romanian writer Mircea Cărtărescu (novelist, poet, short-story writer, literary critic, and essayist) wrote a post after getting vaccinated, simply stating what he did and motivating his choice: *I got vaccinated against Covid and I advise everyone to do so. It is a great chance to be among the first ones in the world who get vaccines from the most trustworthy companies and*

*for free. It seems absurd to me to refuse, while in peril at sea, this lifebuoy.* The post also contains a picture of Mircea Cărtărescu wearing a mask and holding the COVID-19 vaccination certificate (see Example 13 “Mircea Cărtărescu”, Figure 6 below). In a related move, the Romanian philosopher and writer Mihai Şora speaks back to and thus challenges the anti-vaxer discourse by drawing on it and reframing it. Thus, he posts on his Facebook wall the following text: “The vaccine rewrites human DNA. Wonderful! I have wanted to be a giraffe all my life”. To this, he adds the picture of DNA sequencing that transforms into a giraffe (see Example 14 “Mihai Şora”, Figure 6 below). It is important to note that Mihai Şora uses the giraffe as a symbol of strength; in one of his previous posts, he explains that giraffes are the only terrestrial mammals that do not yawn and stay awake and lucid almost the entire time (they never sleep more than 2 hours out of 24).



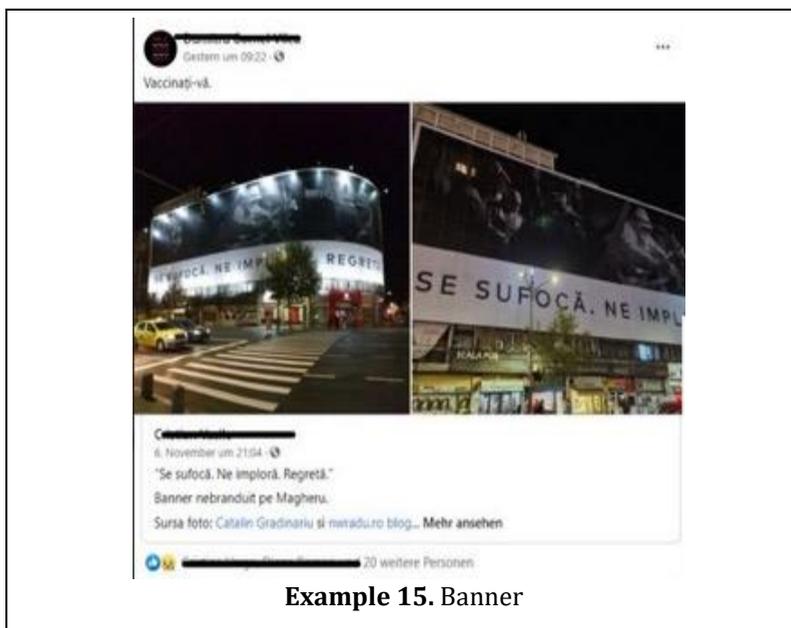
**Example 13.** Mircea Cărtărescu



Example 14. Mihai Șora

Figure 6. Contemporary Romanian Writers  
(Source at the end of the article)

In some cases, users, including micro-celebrities and public figures, chose to express their opinions in a solemn and grave manner. In example 15 “Banner”, in figure 7 below, the user writes a post in which he urges the Romanian people to get vaccinated (*Get the vaccine*) and shares a picture of a banner on the streets of Bucharest in which the dire consequences of not getting vaccinated are depicted: *“They suffocate. They beg us. They regret it.” - Banner on Magheru street.* In example 16 “Death certificate”, Figure 7, the user highlights the role played by the political parties in deciding people’s faith. When the political parties had to give their votes pro or against the Green Certificate, two of the Romanian parties (AUR and PSD) voted against it. The user expresses irony and despondency, implying that voting against the Green Certificate will cause the death of the Romanians: *AUR and PSD have voted yesterday for replacing the Green Certificate with the Death Certificate.*



**Example 15. Banner**



**Example 16. Death Certificate**

**Figure 7. Posts expressing discouragement**  
(Source at the end of the article)

Other users manifest irony or sarcasm towards the national situation, but also try to deconstruct and debunk certain anti-vaccine beliefs. We selected Romanian users who produced public posts (jokes, profile pictures with the vaccine logo, etc.) and who had more visibility, a high degree of engagement with other discourses, and frequent interaction with other users.

One user makes fun of the lack of reasonable thinking in the messages shown on the banners of people protesting against the vaccine in Bucharest. As such, the user writes the Latin acronym *qed* and reposts the banner's content, specifying: *It is worse than during the communist regime. It is true, the grocery shops were empty, but you were allowed to enter them. - person protesting - Universităţii Square* (see Example 17 "Banner text", Figure 8). Another user announces in a post a record of vaccination, expressing his bewilderment towards the fact that Romanians can take action as well. He then uses a litotes in order to highlight the gravity of the situation: *There was a record of vaccinations today. Well, blow me down, man! It only had to happen: hundreds of deaths on a daily basis, people had to wait one year and a half, the government had to fall and there was a need for a state of general chaos during which no one understood anything. Get it? General...Mkey* (see Example 18 "Litotes", Figure 8).



**Figure 8.** Posts expressing sarcasm  
(Source at the end of the article)

Other users reacted against the Church and its teachings, as evidenced by their posts: [What The Romanian Orthodox Church is doing is to make as many bodies as possible available for chapels] - in this post, the user hints at the fact that the church earns a lot of money from burial ceremonies (see Figure 9, Example 19 “Money for the chapels”); [Churches are exempted from any restrictions, my body is a temple] (see Figure 9, Example 20 “My body is a temple”).



**Example 19.** Money for the chapels



**Example 20.** My body is a temple

**Figure 9.** Reactions to the Orthodox Church  
(Source at the end of the article)

When the fourth largest wave of the pandemic occurred in Romania, and at the same time the Church organised a massive pilgrimage to the tomb of the saint Paraschieva, this ceremony constituted the source of the greatest controversy because thousands of Romanians were present at the event and kissed the saint's coffin. This exception to pandemic rules was perceived by some as a dismissive and even contemptuous gesture on the part of the Church that allowed and encouraged this behaviour. Therefore, users who promoted the use of vaccines and following protocols posted numerous jokes on the matter: [The coffin is disinfected every 10 minutes, but it is in vain, the woman is still dead] (see Figure 10, Example 21 "The coffin"). Another user calls the saint *Super Spreaderscheva* (see Figure 10, Example 22 "*St. Spreaderscheva: The relics of Saint Super Spreaderscheva*"), making a mockery of the circumstance through this play of words.

<p><b>Racla Sfintei Parascheva e dezinfectată la fiecare 10 minute. Dar degeaba, că femeia tot moartă e.</b></p> <p><b>Example 21.</b> The coffin</p>	<p><i>Moaştele Sfintei Super Spreaderscheva</i></p> <p><b>Example 22.</b> St. Spreaderscheva</p>
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**Figure 10.** St. Paraschieva  
(Source at the end of the article)

When it comes to the voice of public figures, micro-celebrities, opinion-makers, we consider that prosumers tend to trust the version of successful, well-known people and people that they admire. In the multimodal discourse of these prosumers, we were able to identify the survivorship bias. Moreover, the form of clicktivism manifested in this case is represented by the further distribution of content which consolidates communities of users who support and validate each other in their ideologies and beliefs.

## Conclusions

During the Covid-19 pandemic there was content such as videos, spots, posts, comments, images, pictures, text, and memes that circulated on social network sites like Facebook, reaching large audiences. In this climate, pro-vaccine groups and anti-vaccine groups attempted to convince the population to adopt their particular ideology (pro-vaccine or against vaccine). In Romania, the ever-increasing polarisation of the population was a main effect of these

arguments. New media allowed for an unprecedented reach as users were quickly updated about the particular stance of the people they admire, including relatives, professors, scientists, etc. The popular new technologies facilitated a faster sharing and distribution of content, engaging users in continuous interaction, triggering the creation of discussion groups and instigating users to action, organizing people in the digital space and outside the digital space as well in a quick and efficient manner. Through social media platforms, users discovered each other's opinions, clusters of ideas were created, and consequently, people joined one side or the other.

Without the new technologies, it would have been more difficult to comprehend the reality and complexity of the crisis. At the same time, the new technologies revealed a tendency to trust the version of successful, well-known people, leading to the cognitive distortion of *survivorship bias* mentioned by Makoš' (2019). In this scenario, clicktivism seems to have gained an unprecedented effect and a completely new trajectory in Romanian society, bringing in more prosumers and employing new rhetorical strategies.

The COVID-19 pandemic made visible the social impact of the online multimodal discourse and the power of images and texts created and distributed online. There were drawbacks for all the actants involved in this sanitary crisis, regardless of their position and attitude towards the vaccination campaign: scientists and medical experts have been discredited; people, especially those living in small towns and villages, decided to act on their own when in dire need of medical assistance (they did not accept treatment, vaccines or going to hospital); conflicts arose, which led to personal relationships being broken; and the dynamics of some relations have changed as well.

The trend seems to be that new forms of clicktivism, rhetorical strategies, and online patterns of behaviour will influence society in various and complex ways. In this respect, digital activism could constitute a further research path to explore social impact and the manner in which desired outcomes are obtained. Furthermore, it would be relevant to analyze the segment of the population more prone to be influenced by online discourses and thus more susceptible to succumb to the power of image and text. Such potential findings would foster understanding of digital discourse and the idea that critical thinking should be employed when consuming new media content.

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### Figure 2. AUR Posts - Samples 1

**Example 1.** AUR Post: people protesting image, at [https://web.facebook.com/partidulAUR/posts/pfbid0MySbGxXS3rYasxdZwpc8ePDmsg3HNocTB1zmmRzuXfavQDq5PzBqLoQXLUHNP27I?\\_rdc=1&\\_rdr](https://web.facebook.com/partidulAUR/posts/pfbid0MySbGxXS3rYasxdZwpc8ePDmsg3HNocTB1zmmRzuXfavQDq5PzBqLoQXLUHNP27I?_rdc=1&_rdr)  
Published: October 29, 2021  
Comments: 248; Shares: 967

**Example 2.** AUR post: president holding citizens captive image, at [https://web.facebook.com/partidulAUR/posts/pfbid0J8KrCubsPYMpdWEtE5LzNibZTqbk2tUzwKt5fyQHxBiE2unNZgMUkgGKCumB1rI?\\_rdc=1&\\_rdr](https://web.facebook.com/partidulAUR/posts/pfbid0J8KrCubsPYMpdWEtE5LzNibZTqbk2tUzwKt5fyQHxBiE2unNZgMUkgGKCumB1rI?_rdc=1&_rdr)  
Published: October 20, 2021  
Comments: 163; Shares: 309

**Example 3.** AUR post: Government psychopaths, at [https://web.facebook.com/partidulAUR/posts/pfbid0gDaXGc9o2KoCBD2iXdr1avEbHec5tXi4ZEjBbmT7ZtbLkuG7zbKjEVdF5CdrwcnBI?\\_rdc=1&\\_rdr](https://web.facebook.com/partidulAUR/posts/pfbid0gDaXGc9o2KoCBD2iXdr1avEbHec5tXi4ZEjBbmT7ZtbLkuG7zbKjEVdF5CdrwcnBI?_rdc=1&_rdr)  
Published: October 14, 2021  
Comments: 380; Shares: 265

**Example 4.** AUR post: stop extremism, at [https://web.facebook.com/partidulAUR/posts/pfbid02BrSHEPvedRcn2ippy2FsM9X8zS4JZ7HdQukCkL8wkiQef5NYEzSoHw6BXeZkfuNHI?\\_rdc=1&\\_rdr](https://web.facebook.com/partidulAUR/posts/pfbid02BrSHEPvedRcn2ippy2FsM9X8zS4JZ7HdQukCkL8wkiQef5NYEzSoHw6BXeZkfuNHI?_rdc=1&_rdr)  
Published: October 27, 2021  
Comments: 132; Shares: 313

### Figure 3. AUR Posts - Samples 2

**Example 5.** Romania needs trust and hope, at [https://web.facebook.com/partidulAUR/posts/pfbid032KBEUTYE5XJFaXZWbwsy6wCv72Vy3ZLYtk4iqmPepFkE12qtSZjRvbv5QKEvDejl?\\_rdc=1&\\_rdr](https://web.facebook.com/partidulAUR/posts/pfbid032KBEUTYE5XJFaXZWbwsy6wCv72Vy3ZLYtk4iqmPepFkE12qtSZjRvbv5QKEvDejl?_rdc=1&_rdr)  
Published: October 4, 2021  
Comments: 105; Shares: 202

**Example 6.** Now, in Victoriei square, at

[https://web.facebook.com/partidulAUR/posts/pfbid0YfeSDufYG8SmysNb5LxpKmJc23JjCdrFtYGx9W4t9jH5qYbXRUFsZignBuUjwyhTl?\\_rdc=1&\\_rdr](https://web.facebook.com/partidulAUR/posts/pfbid0YfeSDufYG8SmysNb5LxpKmJc23JjCdrFtYGx9W4t9jH5qYbXRUFsZignBuUjwyhTl?_rdc=1&_rdr)

Published: September 18, 2021

Comments: 69; Shares: 192

**Example 7.** We will not allow them to turn us into obedient citizens!, at

<https://web.facebook.com/watch/?v=388089719452967>

Published: September 29, 2021

Comments: 410; Views: 60

**Example 8.** Outrageous!, at

<https://web.facebook.com/partidulAUR/posts/pfbid0hKMgpxvBC1UQvDccCcgDjZP8H7TQYLRkewgTby3tYVGx5eFiNNZwnxw2ueMiL3Mxl>

Published: September 28, 2021

Comments: 79; Shares: 100

**Figure 4.** Specialists' posts against the Vaccine

**Example 9.** I TRUST SCIENCE, at

[https://web.facebook.com/razvan.constantinescu1/posts/pfbid0C6XUWzpqfRF6fjGv1zd6gSWneh2FqwXtkTG43bV8KMZXWUBzzY1XFfj2U7D9nYsYI?\\_rdc=1&\\_rdr](https://web.facebook.com/razvan.constantinescu1/posts/pfbid0C6XUWzpqfRF6fjGv1zd6gSWneh2FqwXtkTG43bV8KMZXWUBzzY1XFfj2U7D9nYsYI?_rdc=1&_rdr)

Published: October 15, 2021

Comments: 552; Shares: 656

**Example 10** THIS GUY MUST BE HOSPITALISED, at

[https://web.facebook.com/razvan.constantinescu1/posts/pfbid0neXmYia9QJxeZ1RT8r59BkXSskXNvjMhRUhjHpoWhHDMVTf6ddhumMGhSBbvsK6l?\\_rdc=1&\\_rdr](https://web.facebook.com/razvan.constantinescu1/posts/pfbid0neXmYia9QJxeZ1RT8r59BkXSskXNvjMhRUhjHpoWhHDMVTf6ddhumMGhSBbvsK6l?_rdc=1&_rdr)

Published: October 27, 2021

Comments: 726; Shares: 4.2K

**Figure 5.** The Anti-Vaccine discourse

**Example 11.** The flu, at

[https://web.facebook.com/dana.raescu/posts/pfbid0Qbu7ft8p3yBjbB9AX77rB6tE5rMeR7rKtsMYfw6PdwCkaR1zVXam4h4D5osCipdMI?\\_rdc=1&\\_rdr](https://web.facebook.com/dana.raescu/posts/pfbid0Qbu7ft8p3yBjbB9AX77rB6tE5rMeR7rKtsMYfw6PdwCkaR1zVXam4h4D5osCipdMI?_rdc=1&_rdr)

Published: October 26, 2021

Embedded as Facebook PrintScreen

**Example 12.** Quoting the classics, at

[https://mobile.facebook.com/citate.shop.ro/photos/a.110248290873237/260639575834107/?type=3&source=54&\\_rdc=1&\\_rdr](https://mobile.facebook.com/citate.shop.ro/photos/a.110248290873237/260639575834107/?type=3&source=54&_rdc=1&_rdr)

Published: October 25, 2021

Embedded as Facebook PrintScreen

**Figure 6.** Contemporary Romanian Writers

**Example 13.** Mircea Cărtărescu, at

[https://web.facebook.com/cartaescu.mircea/posts/pfbid0cyjir21SDyQQzSRWb7P5WjBxnNYGvgaJAbCZVDSTz7sMAoko3npKvyyyqHu1Y8Q3il?\\_rdc=1&\\_rdr](https://web.facebook.com/cartaescu.mircea/posts/pfbid0cyjir21SDyQQzSRWb7P5WjBxnNYGvgaJAbCZVDSTz7sMAoko3npKvyyyqHu1Y8Q3il?_rdc=1&_rdr)

Published: January 20, 2021

Comments: 235; Shares: 687

**Example 14.** Mihai Şora, at

[https://web.facebook.com/mihaisora/posts/3639320039457319/?paipv=0&eav=AfZSaKS0qr175aX6U9DQs75jMx5Y3\\_ZF185kcu44jlc\\_Fa4nbJLs-xnj-i0EbHG33qU](https://web.facebook.com/mihaisora/posts/3639320039457319/?paipv=0&eav=AfZSaKS0qr175aX6U9DQs75jMx5Y3_ZF185kcu44jlc_Fa4nbJLs-xnj-i0EbHG33qU)

Published: December 29, 2020

Comments: 173; Shares: 959

**Figure 7.** Posts expressing discouragement

**Example 15.** Banner, at

<https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/se-sufoca-ne-implora-regreta-cine-este-in-spatele-bannerului-urias-cu-un-mesaj-pro-vaccinare-de-pe-fatada-blocului-scala-3823481>

Published: October 25, 2021

Embedded as Facebook PrintScreen

**Example 16.** Death Certificate,

[https://web.facebook.com/dumitrucornel.vilcu/posts/pfbid0y4gWf7QUz1gwBZjF7cCKDjwF6unTgGiv7bUESeXNcnAsPanXMX27K9C2wRFviboTl?\\_rdc=1&\\_rdr](https://web.facebook.com/dumitrucornel.vilcu/posts/pfbid0y4gWf7QUz1gwBZjF7cCKDjwF6unTgGiv7bUESeXNcnAsPanXMX27K9C2wRFviboTl?_rdc=1&_rdr)

Published: October 28, 2021

Comments: 0; Shares 0

**Figure 8.** Posts expressing sarcasm

**Example 17.** Banner Text, at

[https://web.facebook.com/ana.glavce/posts/pfbid02VAjTW8U7vD8XX9wiiFtoBi1X2RDQyBiwtfDEc8ZFAAvV2G2ZRVZNGiEyk4LTRTTI?\\_rdc=1&\\_rdr](https://web.facebook.com/ana.glavce/posts/pfbid02VAjTW8U7vD8XX9wiiFtoBi1X2RDQyBiwtfDEc8ZFAAvV2G2ZRVZNGiEyk4LTRTTI?_rdc=1&_rdr)

Published: October 30, 2021

Comments: 28; Shares: 9

**Example 18.** Litotes, at

[https://web.facebook.com/tiberiucodorean/posts/pfbid02Yr8TW9Djx8hPi4hWvijAW3VEA2AXmJ3oEAjkYe9NPy65tGXxdQcgAP36jkc6kCyzl?\\_rdc=1&\\_rdr](https://web.facebook.com/tiberiucodorean/posts/pfbid02Yr8TW9Djx8hPi4hWvijAW3VEA2AXmJ3oEAjkYe9NPy65tGXxdQcgAP36jkc6kCyzl?_rdc=1&_rdr)

Published: October 22, 2021

Comments: 31; Shares: 17

**Figure 9.** Reactions to the Orthodox Church

**Example 19.** Money for the chapels, at

[https://web.facebook.com/cornel.ionescu.182/posts/pfbid0JGjagWiWsdX6DeNSExpqxk6AQp95BdX8Q9jhTyuNRZGWOcykpmE5pvNBbayozg1UI?\\_rdc=1&\\_rdr](https://web.facebook.com/cornel.ionescu.182/posts/pfbid0JGjagWiWsdX6DeNSExpqxk6AQp95BdX8Q9jhTyuNRZGWOcykpmE5pvNBbayozg1UI?_rdc=1&_rdr)

Published: October 24, 2021

Comments: 8; Shares: 10

**Example 20.** My Body is a Temple, at

<https://web.facebook.com/tiberiucodorean/posts/pfbid02HoDLBTGFLDfRD SGGaQsaLgDxsSsH4Vn8QbqDbK8iaVDvN5ZtugkoXkApUgz3Mii6l>

Published: October 22, 2021

Comments: 21; Shares: 19

**Figure 10.** St. Paraschieva

**Example 21.** The coffin, at

<https://web.facebook.com/tiberiucodorean/posts/pfbid0255iYfbu6DLMS6ZvKfPyzefVitbQATiRZz4m9D2Ljr9z33TNHgFgSTCK7UMnyBRGUl>

Published: October 9, 2021

Comments: 21; Shares: 46

## ANNEX

### Example 9 I TRUST SCIENCE

#### AM ÎNCREDERE ÎN ȘTIINȚĂ

T\*\*\*i gheinăvfancșănul mă-tii, Fauci, cu fake-știința ta, cu tot! Dacă moare mama, o să-mi dedic restul vieții pentru găsirea pangolinului ăluia ca să și-l bag în c\*r, ție sau altuia ca tine! Iar, de v\*\*\*\*\*t, s-o v\*\*\*\*\*i pe mumă-ta, după ce-i pui două sau trei măști, ca să nu vadă ce a zămislit, savantule de renume mondial !

[I TRUST SCIENCE.

F\*\*k you, s\*\*\*\*\*g Fauci, with your fake-science and everything! If my mother dies, I'm going to dedicate the rest of my life to finding that pangolin to put it up your a\*s, yours, or someone else's like you! And you should f\*\*k your mother after putting two or three masks on her, so that she does not see the world-renowned scientist she has conceived!]

### Example 10 THIS GUY MUST BE HOSPITALISED

#### ĂSTA TREBUIE INTERNAT DE URGENȚĂ

Dar cine restricția mă-tii de crezi tu, Raed Arafat, să mă ameninți și să propui să fiu aspru sancționat? Un repetent susținut de servicii și ajuns un psihopat bolnav de putere? Să povestesc cum mi te smiorcăiai la telefon, prin 2010, că vor Movilă și Tabără să-ți privatizeze SMURD-ul și apoi îmi mulțumeai fierbinte pentru ajutor, după care mi-ai blocat adresa de e-mail și toate contactele? Dementule!]

[THIS GUY MUST BE HOSPITALISED

But who do you think you are to restrict me, Raed Arafat, to threaten me and propose that I be severely punished? A [secret] service-supported dropout turned power-sick psychopath? Let me tell you how, in 2010, you were whining to me on on the phone that Movilă and Tabără wanted to privatize your SMURD [emergency rescue service based in Romania], and then you thanked me for my help, after which you blocked my email address and all contacts? Lunatic!]

### Example 11 The flu

Ca să-I lămuresc pe imbecilii care umblă cu chiloțeeii pe nas prin aeroporturi, mă ofer voluntary să mă infectez cu virusul vieții. Să vadă și ei un medic nevaccinat "antigripal" (o tâmpenie, având în vedere polimorfismul virusurilor gripale) care nu moare, frate, deși "a susținut ciuma roșie" (!) Prostovănimea lumii în care trăim nu pricepe nimic, se comportă ca o turmă, de aceea este ușor de manipulat. Ea nu poate înțelege că astfel de virusuri nu prezintă pericol vital decât pentru categoriile de risc maxim: cirofici, neoplazici, vârste extreme, pacienți cu insuficiență cardiacă severă, BPOC. Imunodeprimați (aș adăuga eu, și cei care v-ați vaccinat aiurea pentru orice prostie). Generația "i-phone" poartă

barbă și glezne goale, mască de pânză pe fațes, urlă că vrea nu știu ce țară ca afară, iese la proteste în mod ovin, se vaccinează în draci ca să-și facă rost de vreo leucemie și apoi se plânge că statul nu face nimic pentru ei, nu îi pune biberonul. Mortalitatea gripei "Covid-19" este de 2.4%, comparative cu 2.1% cât a fost cea a epidemei de gripă din 2018. Și atunci de ce vă isterizați, glezno-barbișoanelor?

[To enlighten the imbeciles who walk around airports with their panties on their noses, I volunteer to infect myself with the damn virus. Let them see an unvaccinated doctor (a stupidity, given the polymorphism of flu viruses) who doesn't die, bro, even though he "supported the red plague" (!) The stupid people of the world we live in don't get it, they behave like a herd, that's why they are easy to manipulate. They cannot understand that such viruses are only life-threatening for the highest risk categories: cirrhotics, neoplastics, extreme elderly, severe heart failure patients, COPD. Immunodepressed people (I might add, and those of you who've vaccinated yourselves for whatever nonsense). The "i-phone" generation, having beards and bare ankles, cloth masks on their faces, screams that they want a civilized country like the one you can find in Western society. They participate in protests, vaccinate the hell out of themselves to get leukemia, and then complain that the State does nothing for them, doesn't give them their baby bottles. The "Covid-19" flu mortality is 2.4%, compared to 2.1% as high as the flu outbreak in 2018 was. So why are you hysterical, you 'bare-ankled' bearded people?]

#### **Example 12** Quoting the classics

- Cât de naiv să fii ca să crezi că cineva vrea să îți facă BINE cu forța, luându-ți "pentru binele tău" aerul, libertatea de mișcare, slujba, dreptul de a cumpăra mâncare?
- "O singură datorie are omul, să nu fie prost"
- În curând o să ieșim din casă doar pe bază de certificat, se instaurează dictatura. Băimăreni, haideți în stradă, că ne iauăștia drepturile câștigate cu sânge.
- [How naive could you be to believe that someone wants to do you GOOD by force, taking away "for your own good" your air, your freedom of movement, your job, your right to buy food?
- "Man has only one duty, not to be stupid"
- Soon we will be allowed to go only if we have a certificate, dictatorship is being established. Come on, people, let's take to the streets, they're taking away our rights gained with the price of our blood!]

#### **Example 13** Mircea Cărtărescu

M-am vaccinat anti-Covid și sfătuiesc pe toată lumea s-o facă. E o mare șansă să fim printre primii în lume, vaccinul să fie de la cele mai credibile firme și gratuit. Să refuzi, căzut în mare, acest colac de salvare mi se pare absurd.

[I have the vaccine against Covid and I advise everyone to do so. To be among the first to get the vaccine is a great opportunity. Not to mention that the vaccine was produced by the most reputable companies and it's free. To refuse this lifeline seems absurd to me.]

**Example 14** Mihai Şora

„Vaccinul re-scrie ADN-ul uman.” Minunat! Toată viața mi-am dorit să fiu girafă

[“The vaccine re-writes the human DNA.” Great! I wanted to be a giraffe all of my life]

**Example 19** Money for the chapels

- Eu, prieteni, interpretez invers știrea: Ceea ce a făcut (și mai face) BOR, în pandemie, e să pună la dispoziție morți pentru capele.

Morgile spitalor din București sunt pline. Arhiepiscopia Bucureștilor vine în ajutor și pune la dispoziție capelele de exterior din cadrul spitalelor, capelele mortuare de la parohiile din imediata apropiere și capelele cimitirelor parohiale din imediata proximitate. Tot este ceva, nu?

- Prin urmare, o afacere BOR

[I, my friends, interpret the news backwards: what the Romanian Orthodox Church did (and still does), in the pandemic, is to provide dead people for the chapels.

The hospital morgues in Bucharest are full. The Archdiocese of Bucharest comes to the rescue and makes available the outdoor chapels of hospitals, the mortuary chapels of nearby parishes and the chapels of nearby parish cemeteries. It's still something, isn't it?

Therefore, a profitable deal]