



# ENGAGING WITH THE 'OTHER'

REPORT ON A COLLABORATION  
BETWEEN JOURNALISTS  
AND RESEARCHERS

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*How and why the parties came to work together, the parties' interests and goals and how the collaboration was developed*

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# INTRODUCTION

This report tells the story of why the Less Hate, More Speech moderation component exists and why we believe it is a special endeavour<sup>1</sup>. We try to explain concisely why the moderation part of the project came about, how and why all parties involved – political science and communication researchers, media people and journalists – joined forces to develop the project and what the goals and expectations were on all sides.

We start with a brief presentation of the websites involved in the project, proceed to show the motivation and goals of each party and briefly reflect upon how the work took place.

The last section locates our venture within the Romanian context and explores the specific challenges it poses due to Romania's media and societal characteristics rather than simply presenting it as an idiosyncratic 'exotic' case. We conclude with further insight into the choices and challenges faced by the partners in the project and by those who consider similar endeavours.

Several of these aspects are or will be further developed in separate reports and working papers, including a report on how we developed the moderation ([Managing the comment section: terms, conditions and procedures. Romania in comparative perspective](#)) and one on the appearance of the comments section over time, as well as a [timeline of the moderation process](#) and a more detailed analysis of the journalists' perceptions and perspectives regarding comments and digital engagement. Further analyses on the contextual circumstances both in terms of media and public opinion can be found in research notes<sup>2</sup>, papers and presentations.

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1 Surely, the whole project would not have existed without the collaboration with our [Norwegian research partner](#), without the [funding](#), without the very positive reviews of three international reviewers who gave us just short of the maximum [100 points \(98\)](#).

2 Chilin, T., Popescu, M., & Toma, R. From Social to Political Intolerance. An Examination of Exclusionary Attitudes toward Different Out-Groups in Romania. MRC Working Paper.

# WEBSITES' PROFILES

The moderation of online comments is probably the most unique and innovative component of the Less Hate, More Speech research project, as it was developed in the context of a real newsroom and through working with journalists over an extended period of time. The moderation process lasted for 15 months (April 6, 2015 – 30 June, 2016) and was deployed on 4 websites in Romania: GSP.ro, Tolo.ro (the core sites), Paginademedia.ro, Blogspot.ro. It continues unsupervised on the core sites (see the [timeline of the moderation process](#)).

The project teamed up with GSP.ro and Tolo.ro in order to see how one can strive for better conversation in online comments and how the introduction of systematic moderation can be used as a test of how institutionalized rule can raise civility and help find the 'better angels' in people (here meaning the commenters), an aim at the heart of the entire project.

The close collaboration with the core online media partners agreed before the start of the project is in respect of the joint implementation of a highly standardized moderation procedure. The moderation technology was made freely available to the participating media websites. The scientific and collaborative/participatory development of the moderation procedure as well as the outcomes derived from its implementation process are also applicable to other (Romanian or foreign) online media. The project's first set of findings and recommendations regarding moderation are summarized in the [Trends in comment moderation and a set of rules for any online community](#)' blog post.

The moderation started on GSP.ro first on April 6, 2015, then on Tolo.ro on September 28, 2015. It began on Paginademedia.ro and Blogspot.ro on February 5, 2016

## WHO ARE THE MEDIA PARTNERS?

[GSP.ro](#) is one of the biggest news websites in Romania, with over 3 million unique users each month<sup>3</sup>. It is the website of the only daily sports newspaper in the country, Gazeta Sporturilor.

The website is also known for encouraging interactions with its public

- The site has developed 'wiki' articles: a journalist sets the theme for an online article and writes the beginning; website users then continue the story by writing subsequent paragraphs in the comments section, from which the journalist selects some to continue the article he or she began. This method earned the website a positive mention in The Economist (9th of March, 2011, both print & online editions)<sup>4</sup>.
- A new interactive project called 'Jurnalisport' aims to expand the newsroom virtually by offering the readers the possibility to write some items of sports news themselves and have them published on GSP.ro. This prototype project won a Google Digital News Initiative grant in 2016.
- My Sport community: a project that was designed to be an online community for people interested in sport who were invited to express their opinions by writing their own posts on sporting events and where they could interact with other users. The best articles were promoted to the main page of the GSP.ro website alongside pieces written by the newsroom. This online community also served as a method of recruiting, training and sometimes hiring young journalists.

3 According to SATI: Studiul de Audienta si Trafic Internet (The Audience and Internet Traffic Study) - calculated mean number for the first 12 months of the moderation.

4 <http://www.economist.com/node/18389155>

Gazeta's website is popular with men (89% of its users are men) between the ages of 25-44 (the 25-34 bracket predominates), who are interested mainly in sports and particularly soccer news. Its reach is mainly in Romania (76% of its traffic comes from here), with the bulk of other users in the UK and Germany.

[Tolo.ro](#) is the multiple-award winning blog of one of the most highly reputed journalists in Romania, Cătălin Tolontan, editor-in-chief of Gazeta Sporturilor. Tolontan and his team are well known for their far-reaching, thorough journalistic investigations, which have had an impact on public debates and led to resignations and prosecutions. He was named 'journalist of the year' 9 times in the last 13 years. His blog attracts 290,000 unique users per month<sup>5</sup>. 81% of the blog's readers are men with ages between 25-44 (the 35-44 bracket predominates), mainly interested in sports, soccer, movies & TV, and politics. It attracts 82% of its traffic from Romania.

[Paginademedia.ro](#) is a niche website, dedicated to the media and advertising market in Romania, run by journalist Petrisor Obae. It is a widely-read site in the business, with over 250,000 unique visitors per month and 827,356 views<sup>6</sup>.

[Blogsport.ro](#) is a platform dedicated to opinion pieces from some of the most respected voices in sports in Romania. It has monthly traffic of around 100,000 unique users<sup>7</sup>. 91% of its readers are men, interested in sports, soccer and news, with its core target being 25-44 years old (the 35-44 bracket predominates).

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5 According to SATI: Studiul de Audienta si Trafic Internet (The Audience and Internet Traffic Study) - calculated mean number for the first 12 months of the moderation.

6 According to SATI: Studiul de Audienta si Trafic Internet (The Audience and Internet Traffic Study, November 2015).

7 According to SATI: Studiul de Audienta si Trafic Internet (The Audience and Internet Traffic Study, November 2015).

# WHY THE PARTIES CAME TO COLLABORATE

Collaboration with the media companies in this project came about almost naturally. The research team at the Median Research Centre (MRC) was already in talks with executives at Gazeta Sporturilor to develop projects together based on our shared values and interests, and the issue of online commenting came up several times during conversations.

The media partners opted to collaborate with the project because their senior executives felt that there was both an ethical and a practical need for moderation.

While they are interested in readers' reactions, there was a genuine anxiety on the part of media partners about online comments' overly violent and intolerant nature, which is seen as a potential danger to journalists' capacity to do their job and to act in accordance with professional journalistic norms because comments cause journalists to fear angry and immediate public reaction. The chief editor expressed concern about potential repercussions 'nasty' comments had on the perceptions and behaviour of readers, authors and subjects of the published articles.

First, there was the danger of self-censorship within the newsroom and an excessive alignment with audience expectations and reactions when journalists were supposed to express their own opinions or make professional choices. This concern has also been noted elsewhere (Kovats and Rosenstiel 2007) and it reflects more than a simple interest in maintaining gatekeeping power.

Second, the journalists perceived that the people interviewed or described in the articles they wrote were less forthcoming and very careful about what they said because they feared an online backlash once the stories were published online. This aspect raises similar concerns around professional integrity and journalistic capacity.

Third, journalists also believed that online comments might influence readers' perceptions of the articles, possibly generating confusion and diminished trust in the publication. Worldwide, journalists and publishers worry that the brand image or their personal reputation will be influenced by the quality and tone of the comments (Singer and Ashman 2009, Hermida and Thurman 2008). When Popular Science decided to shut down its comments section, Suzanne LaBarre, their online content director, explained that comments were 'bad for science' and brought forward arguments derived from a study, "The 'Nasty Effect': Online Incivility and Risk Perceptions of Emerging Technologies" to support the notion that 'uncivil comments not only polarized readers, but they often changed a participant's interpretation of the news story itself.' Indeed, studies show that people who read 'uncivil' comments tend to evaluate the article itself as less valuable, regardless of its content (Anderson et al 2013).

The media partners were also curious as to whether 'proper' moderation was workable and whether it could have any effect beyond simply mechanically deleting some comments and thereby alienating some commenters – for example, whether moderation might spark an increase in user engagement. For instance, if people are indeed put off by nasty comments, a key question is whether a clear sign that such comments are not tolerated together with the creation of a more civil environment may encourage new people to start commenting, and whether any such positive effects could be sustainable or even cumulative over the long term.

Thus, for the purposes of the media partners, the project provided a learning process on an editorial issue that had long troubled them; it assisted the start-up of systematic comment moderation through the provision of custom-made software, human moderators, and training. [As the chief editor noted](#), it was an opportunity to open up the newsroom to new ideas at no financial cost, while, on the contrary, the media partners could gain much-needed resources, especially in terms of knowledge and training.

For the academic research project, this exercise served almost as a field experiment, examining the impact of a stronger institutionalisation of civility and anti-prejudice norms in public speech in an entirely natural setting.

The researchers were interested in working with news websites with active comments sections and large and diverse audiences, preferably not self-selected on political grounds, something rather difficult to find in Romania. Moreover, in Romania, like elsewhere, entertainment, sport and non-political content reaches wider sections of the population than hard news. They do convey values and cover issues with socio-political relevance; thus politically relevant information is not restricted to public affairs and news programming (Williams and Delli Carpini 2011), which is why a sports site of a popular print newspaper and the general interest and public affairs blog of its editor in chief are appropriate options. This choice of core outlets is also justified given the structure of the media system in Romania: politically polarized and fragmented on partisan lines, low newspaper consumption, [absence of a high-performing public service broadcaster in general and also in terms of a significant online presence](#) (such as the BBC in the UK).

This is not just a choice of convenience, given our opportunity for collaboration. However, this opportunity is in itself significant given the limited links between researchers and media organizations in general and particularly in Romania, where there is the additional negative contribution of very low inter-personal trust, which makes collaborations still more difficult, as we will further explain in the last section of this report.

The interest in comments and the decision of the newsroom to keep a comments section open also stemmed from the chief editor's belief, shared by the MRC researchers, in the importance of spaces of interaction that bridge/go across political, social and age divides, even if these spaces are not – and probably cannot be – fully deliberative spaces. The need is particularly acute in Romania today, where there is an increased partisan fragmentation and polarisation of the public sphere, similar to, and possibly even more extreme than, the phenomena discussed in Western Europe and comparable with the USA. Sports represent a unifier but also a very intense environment of passions and strong views. Similarly, public affairs, and especially the investigations on Tolo.ro, attract a lot of emotions, including anger, and similarly strong views. The value of these spaces is likely to be increased if more people comment and if there is an explicit possibility for all views, including minority ones, to be expressed in a respectful interaction.

Thus, the parties agreed on the necessity of comment moderation as a means to create a (more) civil and respectful space for dialogue, a position widely recognised and explicitly defined as such by the editors of renowned European publications, like [The Guardian](#) or [Le Figaro](#). Studies also show that moderation is essential and may have positive effects on the quality of debate without reducing the number of commenters. For instance, Nonnecke & Preece (2001) studied the motivations of 'lurkers' (people who read comments but do not post) and found that a safer space, moderated and less troubled by insults, may encourage them to express themselves. Moreover, we aimed to build on existing evidence that the range and quality of online discussions is higher when journalists take part and engage more frequently and substantially with their readers and commenters (Stroud et al 2014).

In a nutshell, the journalists were interested in seeing how to achieve better engagement with their readers and commenters while striving for a decrease in aggressiveness and incivility, but while still maintaining the passion in debates; the researchers wanted to see under which circumstances and to what extent it was possible to reach these goals of respect and civility and turn them into accepted norms.



# RESEARCHERS AND JOURNALISTS WORKING TOGETHER

For this project, researchers, journalists and media people cooperated, each bring their own perspectives. Journalists' opinions on the relationship between online comments and professional journalism, as well as the meaning of this interaction for a democratic public sphere, coupled with our awareness of the relevant literature(s), allowed us to design [a moderation procedure fit for purpose as well as based on a set of fundamental principles](#).

The collaboration had a significant pre-set timeline of activities and goals and its main steps were followed (see [timeline](#)). However, we were prepared to adapt to the realities of the newsroom and of the comments section, including a series of technical limitations encountered. We found this continuous adaptation absolutely essential for the success of the moderation process. This meant primarily the ability to devise rules and procedures that were systematic and clear, in tune with our project goals and values and at the same time applicable and acceptable in the given online context and society more generally.

One crucial change and a significant addition to the project was the decision to develop the moderation procedures over a longer period of time. The initial plan was to have a few weeks of discussions, write up the rules, update the automatic dictionary, then just institute comments moderation and let the moderators get on with it. The researchers were meant to observe how and how well the moderators apply the rules and then focus on measuring effects.

Participatory observation meant a presence in the newsroom and the collection of observations (field notes) by the journalists/moderators. By allocating more time, the entire approach changed in line with newsroom needs. It became an iterative process over a year, which included discussions in weekly meetings, through written memos and hand-outs, and [a continuous re-evaluation of practice against principles](#). These exchanges, as well as the field notes and the transcripts of the meetings, represent a rich source of information about the setting up of the moderation procedure and also about journalists' reactions and engagement with a different type of learning and knowledge, with the need to reflect upon their own stereotypes and prejudiced views, often in line with those widespread in Romanian society, and upon their difficult mission as both gatekeepers of their journalistic organization's content/home and hosts/communicators/community enablers on its behalf.

Thus, apart from flexibility, in order to be able to find a balance between the principles, goals and methods of research and the goals, rules and needs of the newsroom, it was fundamental to have a mixed GSP-MRC team with diverse backgrounds and sets of expertise and to base our intervention on the newsroom's perceptions of their needs, rather than just on the stock of scholarly knowledge. We aimed to maintain a continuous, open and equal interaction, a two-way flow of information and learning that could make use of a systematic understanding of the newsroom and communication practices from both lived and learnt expertise.

- **Mixed team MRC-GSP** - to ensure that there is a continuous interaction of people from the two organizations empowered to make decisions in an informal and participatory environment.
  - The work package (WP) on implementing the moderation system was led by a person with a joint work experience at MRC (as a media researcher) and at Gazeta (as a marketing and digital communication expert);
  - The leader of the moderators' team, like the moderators - who can also be considered to have acted as participatory researchers - came from Gazeta; the leader of the moderation team has decision-making power within the newsroom, being also the digital manager of GSP.ro;
  - The person in charge of the meetings with the moderators was of similar age, though with a very different educational background; they established a relationship of equality and mutual respect (both for the other's views and knowledge/expertise) that led to interactions and discussions far beyond the call of duty.

- **Diverse team in terms of professional experience, age and gender** (by design) and in terms of socio-political predispositions (partially by chance) – to ensure a diversity of views and perspectives, possibly even different sensitivities regarding the nastiness in comments.
  - 5 women, 4 men, female WP leader, male head of the moderation team;
  - Age range 26-40 with an average of 31 years old;
  - Out of the 9 people in the team, 6 were journalists or trained in journalism, 3 were political scientists or had similar social science academic backgrounds, there was 1 marketing and communication practitioner; all MRC members had obtained at least their highest degree at a university abroad (Belgium, UK, USA);
  - The groups turned out to be more diverse in terms of social and political attitudes than their socio-economic background would suggest: for instance, among the moderators some were strong believers and practising Orthodox Christians; some had sensitivities to women's body issues and objectification; one had a very high sensitivity to issues of class and poverty; and one to issues related to communism-anticommunism and the symbolic uses of history.
  
- **A central feature of the collaborative work** was to understand and use the views of the newsroom. Apart from in-depth conversations and consultations with the Editor-in-chief and the digital editor, we also used standardized questionnaires for a more systematic approach to the opinions of GSP journalists and moderators.
  - The first survey was deployed in December 2014, before the moderation started, in order to understand opinions on the relationship between online comments and professional journalism as well as the meaning of this interaction for a democratic public sphere. The second survey was done in May-June 2015, shortly after the moderation procedure began on GSP.ro<sup>8</sup>.
  - The moderators were surveyed once at the beginning of the supervised moderation period (May 2016) and then at the end of the moderation period (July 2016).
  - Furthermore, 26 meetings were held with moderators and 32 subsequent field reports were developed.

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8 In agreement with the chief editor and the digital editor, the first questionnaire was sent by email to the 37 GSP journalists whose articles may receive online comments. The survey software Qualtrics was employed, which allowed for automated reminders (two were sent). The response rate of 100% was ensured through the full collaboration of the newsroom, whilst we guaranteed that journalists were confident that the responses remain anonymous to the rest of the newsroom and anyone associated with it. The second survey had a response rate of 72%; 36 journalists received the survey and 26 responded.

In designing the moderation system on the four websites in Romania the research team factored in the input drawn from the two surveys of journalists deployed before and shortly after the beginning of moderation. These surveys, together with the questionnaires completed by the moderators also give an insight into how the views and intuition of the chief editor were matched by those of the journalists in the newsroom that motivated the moderation project.

Data from the first survey showed **the predominant perception of a need to have moderated comments sections.**

The majority of journalists believed that comments should be allowed but moderated (72%), while only 21% believed they should be allowed with no restrictions and users should not be anonymous. Moreover, journalists believed in the potential of moderation to increase the number of readers and commenters (67%), congruent with the project partners' intuition and motivation.

However, they were relatively sceptical about the possibility of devising a moderation procedure capable of separating hate speech and prejudice from other aggressive comments, even if cost were not an obstacle (54%). What we have found out so far, related to this belief, is that it is in fact possible, and the moderators could acquire the skills/knowledge to do it effectively. This goes beyond their self-perception and is something that can be inferred both from our checks over time and our quantitative analysis of the moderation trends; further, despite differences between moderators in terms of stereotypes and sensitivities, there were no strong systematic moderator effects (differences in what and how moderators moderate the comments).

Another predominant perception (84%) was that the comments section was predominantly vile. This perception matched that of the chief editor, who also had a feeling that uncivil, more precisely aggressive and hateful comments are overwhelming and thus distressing for the journalists and their subjects/interviewees. We found this perception so far to be exaggerated since only 21% of comments needed moderation on GSP.ro (14% on Tolo.ro) and 55% of articles on GSP.ro have either only one or no comments in requiring moderation at all (16.4% for Tolo.ro)<sup>9</sup>. They had an accurate perception of the dominant categories of nastiness to be found in comments: violent/brutal and intolerant language, racist and intolerant towards persons with illnesses or disabilities. These were also the most encountered categories in our analysis of comments during the implementation of the moderation system. Even in the second survey, when asked what bothers them most in the comments section, the violent/brutal and intolerant language topped journalists' answers.

The journalists also agreed that **comments are useful in some ways.**

The majority of journalists surveyed in the first round were interested in reading the comments, especially on their own articles (45%), but less so on other articles on GSP.ro or on other mass media outlets. They also found that comments on articles provided ideas for future articles (63%) and a significant 70% found them important in order to get useful and interesting information from readers.

Among GSP journalists, 64% reported that they had discovered new perspectives on a subject that they hadn't thought about before from online comments; 67% reported they gained a new idea for an article from the online comments and 78% of journalists said they got some new information from the comments that they could use in an article. Journalists also seem to be rather in agreement that online comments are important for hearing people's opinions (73%), although they were divided about whether the comments represent public opinion.

The GSP journalists believe in **interaction with their readers.**

82% of journalists in the first survey believed that engaging with readers should be just important as writing articles and 63% thought that in the newsroom, interaction with readers is just as important as other journalistic activities. Furthermore, we also found that most (57%) believed that the intervention of the author in the comments section would make comments more civil.

<sup>9</sup> There is a difference in both consumption and speed of publishing between these two websites. During the supervised moderation period on GSP.ro (May 5, 2015 - May 4, 2016) and on Tolo.ro (September 28, 2015 - June 30, 2016), the first website had a total of 18,940 articles published with at least one comment and a comment was published on average every 71 seconds, while the latter had 219 articles with at least one comment and a comment was published every 27 minutes, on average.

Organizational differences and distinct project responsibilities meant that the development of the moderation represented a learning process on multiple levels: not everything had been anticipated. Over time we tried to find a mutually acceptable balance between the research plans and the capacity of the newsroom and digital management to incorporate them. The team maintained open channels of communication and made decisions that newsroom leadership and the moderators were comfortable with, whilst being in line with scholarly definitions and democratic principles. It was necessary to have a knowledge of sports as well as awareness of the meaning of expressions and inside jokes of sports fans, as well as navigating complications related to conflicts between personal views and the learning material, between accepted norms in Romania and basic standards of non-discriminatory/non-prejudiced talk. We were careful to set realistic goals and rules in terms of what can be achieved regarding the content of comments and the quality of the interactions as well as the enforcement capacity of the moderators and the newsroom beyond the period of the project.

In brief, the following three core principles were aimed at:

- Continuous interaction between researchers and moderators – to ensure that the goals of the project are followed and implemented and that any issues are resolved quickly;
- Two-way flow of information between researchers and moderators – to enable the two distinct types of expertise and approaches to be continuously brought into the process;
- Balance between research and newsroom needs and work style, between research plans and newsroom capacity.

Our report on the [development of the moderation](#) rules presents the main steps and reflects upon the central considerations in the design of the moderation procedure. The interaction between the researchers and the moderators during the moderation development process will be explained further in future in-depth qualitative analyses of the moderation process using the materials mentioned earlier in this report.

# THE CHALLENGES POSED BY THE ROMANIAN CONTEXT

The task of setting up a moderation process is quite challenging for any media outlet<sup>10</sup>. We mentioned the difficulties of meeting the needs of a newsroom and of a research project/team at the same time. But doing all this in Romania poses some further specific challenges, not simply because of the idiosyncrasies of an 'exotic' context, but rather due to characteristics of the media system, public discourse and societal norms, which increase the inherent difficulties of coordination in such a project<sup>11</sup>. We briefly review them below.

The Romanian media system is characterised by strong [political parallelism and polarisation, low information quality \(including in terms of accuracy\), high levels of partisanship](#), low institutionalization of professional norms – no binding or enforceable (self-regulatory) [codes of conduct in the private media](#).

## Therefore

- It is difficult for researchers to find suitable media outlets to work with, which do not represent political self-selected bubbles and where independent journalism would be the norm rather than the exception.
- Working with two outlets on opposite sides or in competing media conglomerates is not possible given issues of not just competition, but distrust. Researchers would not be trusted to follow confidentiality rules, not least because of the lack of understanding or experience of strong scholarly professional norms<sup>12</sup>.

The media system also lacks a sustainable business model, more so than almost anywhere in Europe (Bodea 2014). This is due to a sharp decrease in advertising money across the whole media sector (down by 50% in 2012 since its height in 2008), which is still more marked in the newspaper sector, which was hit even more with a decrease in advertising revenues of 82% between 2008 and 2014<sup>13</sup>.

## Therefore

- It is even more difficult for media outlets to carve out resources for user engagement – including comments moderation – and to prioritize its maintenance
- There are shortcomings in terms of the technical capacity of understaffed and underfunded media organizations, which further limit the possibilities of technical improvements, innovation and experiments even if the researchers' proposals were acceptable to the newsroom.

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<sup>10</sup> The multiple considerations and challenges faced by newsrooms in their engagement with their audience specifically in the comments sections have been reviewed most recently in The 2016 Global Report on Online Commenting of the World Association of Newspapers (WAN 2016) and in a American Press Institute report (Guzman 2016). We also reflect upon the substantive choices to be made and the way they can be implemented, communicated to the users and enforced systematically in our reports Managing the comment section: terms, conditions and procedures Romania in comparative perspective (Toma, Popescu and Bodea 2016) and Comment moderation in the "Less hate, more speech" project: how it works (Toma and Popescu 2016).

<sup>11</sup> The project also provides further empirical evidence about these characteristics of the media system and political elite attitudes and discourse through the macro WP4 and WP6. Together with the public opinion data, we are able to more solidly ground our initial expectations of Romania and Norway as good choices in a most dissimilar case design regarding societal prejudice norms.

<sup>12</sup> Apart from the limited interactions between scholars and journalists, Romanian academia is also marred with scandals of plagiarism and clientelism rather than a beacon of professionalism.

<sup>13</sup> Both percentages were calculated using data from ZenithOptimedia 2013 and WAN World Press Trends 2014

The Romanian political context also has the following challenging characteristics

- High political polarization based on symbolic rather than programmatic/ ideological divides, strong negative partisanship, ethnic rather than civic national identity (Chiru, Popescu, Toma 2015, Chiru 2015);
- Low institutional efficiency, low bureaucratic capacity and infrequent effective impartial institutions (Rothstein and Teorell 2008, Rothstein 2011);
- Socially and politically intolerant antidemocratic public discourse from mainstream political actors<sup>14</sup>. Romanian politicians, including high-level figures in government or mainstream parties of both left and right, have occasionally exhibited an intolerant discourse that would, in other contexts, have been expected to prove career-ending (Toma et al 2016)<sup>15</sup>.
- High social intolerance toward a wide range of groups even in 2015 (Chilin 2016, Popescu et al 2016) in spite of [a slow trend towards tolerance over time](#)<sup>16</sup>.
- Political intolerance is highly connected with social intolerance and is also high, which suggests that there is a limited awareness that these are rights guaranteed in the constitution and that denying these rights based on ethnicity would constitute discrimination<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Social and political intolerance refers to «the unwillingness to put up with disagreeable ideas and groups» (Gibson 2009) and thus threaten democracy and its desirable output of good governance through the denial of equal rights by claiming that some people/groups that share certain characteristics should not be treated equally. Good governance is exactly the provision of common goods for all, and requires impartial institutions, i.e. institutions that are expected to treat in the same manner everybody, which do «not take into consideration anything about the citizen/case that is not beforehand stipulated in the policy or the law». (Rothstein, Teorell 2008) In turn, impartial institutions are unlikely to emerge if the principle of equality is denied, and instead it is widely accepted that some people are less deserving and different opinions are illegitimate.

<sup>15</sup> The Roma have most frequently served as targets of scorn, although supporters of competing political parties also increasingly serve as subjects of uncivil discourse. In 2007, former President Traian Băsescu, for instance, famously used the phrase «stinking gypsy» to insult a reporter, while the liberal Minister of Foreign Affairs Adrian Cioroianu proposed that the Roma be deported to Egypt. Băsescu also promoted stereotypes that Roma women produce «five-six» children and that the Roma «traditionally live out of what they steal.» Former social democratic Prime Minister Victor Ponta sought to distinguish what he called «regular Romanians,» who engage in «normal emigration within the EU,» from those going abroad to profit from the welfare system of wealthier countries, explaining that «benefits tourism» is a situation «specific to the Roma community,» without substantiating the allegations. The former Liberal Party Vice-President Ludovic Orban said that only «alcoholics, gypsies and probably prostitutes» voted for Traian Băsescu or the denial of the Holocaust by Social Democratic Party deputy Dan Șova.

<sup>16</sup> While a general tendency towards tolerance can be observed in the data, this trend does not appear to follow a linear pattern. In 1999, 52% of respondents declared they would not want a Roma neighbor. By 2012 the percentage had dropped to 37%, but data collected in 2014 show that 46% of people who answered the question said they would not like to have a Roma person as their neighbor. 1999 - data from EVS, 2012 - data from RES, 2014 - data from Immigrants' Integration Barometer.

<sup>17</sup> In the 2015 Less Hate More Speech survey, we found that among those who were asked the question 46.4% would be against Roma people having the right to organize protests, 32.1% against Roma people having the right to hold public office, 22.1% against Roma people and 42.2% against LGBTI people having the right to teach in public schools.

## Therefore

- It is difficult to find common ground among people and establish rules that at the same time (a) can be accepted as fair and impartial by highly polarized groups (with essentialist identities); (b) are believed to be applied fairly and impartially (when individuals' past experiences suggest it is scarcely possible); and (c) do not look too harsh in comparison with the usual public discourse or ideas of acceptability (as defined by elite discourse and perceived social norms).

Levels of interpersonal trust in Romania are abysmally low and trust is usually reserved for close family members<sup>18</sup>. This societal feature

- Feeds into various manifestations of intolerance towards the 'other' as well as in terms of everyday interpersonal relations;
- Makes the development and implementation of any rules and institutions less likely or more difficult (Hardin 2006).

The latter is due to the attitudes of both those who have to cooperate to develop these rules and of those for whom they are developed and who are likely not to believe that the people who developed them could be trusted to have done so in good faith for a common good, rather than in their own self-interest. Moreover, given the limited experience of impersonal institutions working based on professional norms, irrespective of the individuals involved, combined with the already mentioned lack of awareness of research expertise, interpersonal trust is a much higher hurdle in the relationship between people with different professions and from distinct institutions.

Although, as mentioned, these sites were appropriate partners because they had a politically diverse audience (or at least not an audience selected on grounds of political partisanship), an independent and professional editorial team, it remains the case that neither the outlets nor the moderators are from Mars – they remain part of the Romanian context. Thus, these macro features influence the (perceived) needs of the newsrooms (given the financial situation and the general difficulties of professional journalism), the attitudes of the journalists engaged in moderation, as well as the patterns of social interaction and social acceptability norms that we see in the comments. It was thus necessary to take this into account and to find a balance between enforcing basic democratic principles on the one hand and not causing a boomerang effect due to the rejection of such values of imposed rules as alien to existing social norms on the other hand.

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<sup>18</sup> In our 2015 survey on a scale from 0 to 10 the mean is 2.43, where 0 means low trust (better be careful when dealing with people) and 10 high trust (one can trust most people) scale (Median Research Centre 2015), which means that 58% of respondents tend to believe that it is better to be careful in dealing with people, and only 10% think one can trust most people.

# CONCLUDING REMARKS.

## A COLLABORATIVE PROCESS BASED ON TRUST AND EXPERTISE

The entire project, from the application to the implementation of the moderation system, was a collaborative process in which the parties acted towards shared goals and put their complementary skills and styles to best use. It relied on trust but mostly on continuous communication based upon respect.

During the course of the project, the parties worked closely together, exchanged opinions and experiences both informally and through a structured interaction including Q&A meetings, field reports and surveys. The researchers were fully aware of the unique opportunity provided by the opportunity (as well as risks and responsibility) to develop and contribute to the implementation of moderation outside of the lab, for a real media outlet and over an extended period of time. This is even more the case, given the privileged position of GSP.ro and Tolo.ro in the Romanian media environment – namely their wide, non-political/partisan reach and their professional, independent newsrooms, which were essential pre-requisites of any collaboration. Similarly, Cătălin Tolontan, Editor-in-chief of Gazeta Sporturilor, saw a valuable opportunity in bringing into the newsroom resources that allowed for proper moderation; he dared to work with people from a very different walk of life because he and his colleagues perceived a need not to withdraw from necessary and natural interaction with their readers.

The project was also very fortunate that the moderators had an above average desire to control prejudice, despite having a range of negative stereotypes about the target groups that were in line with Romanian public opinion. Their anti-prejudice predisposition is internal as it exists in the absence of a social norm within their immediate social environment. Interestingly, the moderators seemed to be aware of the situation, since they are not interested in avoiding being perceived by other people as prejudiced; rather, they don't like to think of themselves as prejudiced and believe that it is not a good thing to be prejudiced. It appears that the internal motivation is much stronger than the external conditioning.

Financial resources for user engagement are an issue worldwide (Guzman 2016, WAN 2014, WAN 2016) and so are the many dilemmas online media face in terms of user engagement and collaborations that are happening elsewhere. This kind of collaboration is important in developing effective moderation / user engagement practices, as the researchers involved in such work noted (Scheufele 2013b). It is however infrequent in a context like Romania, where journalists are less aware of the value of scientific research, especially in the social sciences, and contemporary social research, which is typically done in faraway more developed countries, does not seem immediately relevant for local needs. The project shows that bridging the gap is possible and that this may represent the building blocks for a cross-pollination of resources, with both research and practical relevance. Any further collaboration between researchers and journalists on issues of content moderation / user engagement would be another sign of success.