Audience-generated Feedback on Conspiratorial Content on Facebook and Reddit in Serbia

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Abstract

Conspiracy theories are a ubiquitous phenomenon in the socio-political discussion. By trusting these theories, society justifies possible events like the COVID-19 pandemic. Through mixed methods research, the article seeks to provide the amount of page-generated and user-generated conspiratorial content that links chemtrails with the COVID-19 pandemic, along with audience-generated feedback on social media content. Facebook and Reddit have been chosen for this research because of their inherently contrasting approaches to content regulation. Facebook's content moderation tools lacked the impact to remove misinformation, as only 8% of content was flagged as false information. Additionally, even if researched subreddits had two times the amount of relevant content in comparison to relevant Facebook pages, most of the content had 0 upvotes, meaning that the content was either negatively received or lacked adequate support. Serbian-speaking Facebook users expressed support for conspiratorial content on this platform, while Serbian redditors used conspiratorial narratives to ridicule conspiracy theorists. Likes were the most utilized type of feedback on content of relevant Facebook pages, while comments were the most utilized type of feedback on content of relevant subreddits. The importance of this research lies in understanding what conspiratorial narratives try to imply through social media and how the audience interprets and communicates with this content.

Keywords: conspiracy theories, social media, chemtrails, pandemic, COVID-19

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Introduction

It is not uncommon for conspiracy theories to emerge during widespread illness outbreaks, as was seen during the Spanish flu pandemic during World War I. During this time, certain individuals crafted a conspiratorial story around the pharmaceutical drug aspirin, which was produced by the German company Bayer

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(Stange, 2003). While immunization has long been considered the most effective method of safeguarding against disease during pandemics, some conspiracy theorists hold alternative beliefs. For instance, some have linked chemtrails with the West Nile virus, alleging that chemtrails are being used to coerce widespread immunization (Stange, 2003).

The Internet is frequently utilized by conspiracy theorists to disseminate their ideas across a range of platforms with a plethora of different content, such as posts, images, videos, and similar content. Ignoring the power of viral content on the web would be imprudent, as it can manipulate people's beliefs and actions for ulterior motives. These beliefs are not restricted to obscure websites, social media, or YouTube videos, but can also be found through traditional (Uscinski et al., 2018) contemporary media outlets. Conspiracy theories can be connected to certain dangers and/or events, whether they are related to the past or future (Leone et al., 2020), and can be socially constructed to instigate intolerance toward certain social groups (Bojanović, 1998). The fact that cultural context can be distorted in such a way as to fit a conspiratorial narrative is dangerous. When a person in power, US senator Tom Cotton, claims that COVID-19 originated from a Chinese biological laboratory without solid evidence (Budryk, 2020), the ever-present Sinophobia increases, which affects and can continually affect this ethnic group in the future. The ever-growing xenophobia can lead to negative feelings toward them, as was the case with Chinese and Italian people, who are now often associated with the first wave of the pandemic (Šrol et al., 2022) and can be later targeted and intimidated because of these relations.

Multiple factors can contribute to the human reasoning for accepting and interacting with conspiratorial beliefs, and Bojanović (1998) cites psychological factors such as *aggression*, *fear*, *cognitive motives,* and to *reduce frustration*. Because of aggression and fear of the unknown, Facebook and Instagram users claimed that SARS-CoV-2 does not exist and that mass vaccination aims to connect people to the 5G network (Reuters Fact Check, 2021). Cognitive motives are a construct in which conspiracy theorists justify their beliefs by claiming to know the truth as a way to reduce frustration and dissatisfaction (Lewandowsky & Cook, 2020). Conspiracy theorists always view the conspirators' motives as malignant and harmful (Wood & Douglas, 2015) while perceiving themselves as *persecuted victims* of organized conspiratorial actions and as *heroes* who are desperately trying to sabotage conspirators (Lewandowsky & Cook, 2020).

Contrails, short for *condensation trails*, are a common sight in the skies, especially in areas with high air traffic. These trails are formed when hot exhaust fumes from aircraft engines mix with cold air, causing water vapor to condense and freeze (US Air Force, 2005). The resulting white streaks can persist in the atmosphere for minutes or even hours, prompting skepticism from various individuals and groups. While some people view contrails as harmless byproducts of modern air travel, others have raised concerns about their potential impact on human health and the environment (Shearer et al., 2016). In particular, a subset of conspiracy theorists has promoted the idea that certain contrails, known as *chemtrails*, are deliberately

sprayed by governments or other entities to achieve various sinister goals. The origins of the chemtrail theory can be traced back to the 1990s when the US Air Force conducted research on weather modification and cloud seeding (Smith, 2017), provoking a negative reaction from the public (Simons, 2013). Some individuals began to speculate that the military was secretly using particular aircraft to disperse chemicals or biological agents for purposes such as spreading flu-like epidemics and nuclear radiation (James, 2003), or to control the population and the minds of individuals (Bell, 2018). These claims have been widely debunked by scientists and experts in atmospheric studies, who point out that the persistence of contrails can be explained by a range of factors, including the type of aircraft, the altitude and speed of flight, and the atmospheric conditions, such as wind shear and advection (Shearer et al., 2016). Despite these explanations, the chemtrail theory continues to enjoy a following among certain fringe groups and has even spread to other parts of the world such as Europe and Australia (James, 2003).

The definition of chemtrails has changed over the years, but for the supporters of this conspiracy theory today, a new threat has appeared – the COVID-19 pandemic. In an attempt to justify their beliefs, chemtrails are defined as a tool to spread the aforementioned virus. On social media, Serbian conspiracy theorists made several accusations concerning chemtrails and COVID-19. Influential figures like Nikola Sandulović (2020), the president of Serbia's Republican Party, posted images taken out of context and claimed that people were being poisoned as part of a plot orchestrated by German chancellor Angela Merkel and Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić (Tančić, 2020). Certain Serbian medical doctors have created fertile ground for a plethora of conspiracy theories about COVID-19, including chemtrails, through various social media and media outlets, spawning like-minded support and numerous fan pages. These pseudoscientific claims included *COVID-19 denial* (Dedeić, 2020; Dautry & AFP Beograd, 2021); *anti-vax narratives* (Šljukić Bandović, 2021; Marković, 2021); that *sarin/ricin was masked as COVID-19* (Slavija info TV, 2020; FBU1,[2] 2020); and *COVID-19 was a biological weapon* (Balkan INFO, n.d.; FBU2, 2020).

In today's digital age, misinformation and conspiracy theories abound online. Even though conspiratorial beliefs are easily found through Internet search engines (James, 2003), social media sites are often cited as platforms where this misinformation finds new light and circulates through personal profiles, pages, groups, or chats. Studies have also shown that relying on social media as a legitimate source of information is linked to believing in conspiracy theories (Allington et al., 2021). In May 2020, over 53 different conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 pandemic were available on Facebook, with many of them directly or indirectly providing skepticism toward recommendations of public health administrations (Innes & Innes, 2021). Most of the narratives came from English-speaking pages,

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[2] Facebook users serving as references will be codified in the text as FBU1, FBU2, etc. as a way to prevent possible misuse of their data. However, to maintain the credibility of the presented information, links to all of their posts will be made available in the reference section.

while a third of the content came from other non-English pages (Innes & Innes, 2021). However, even if conspiracy theories are available through social media, some researchers argue that the web does not play an extensive role in crafting these conspiracy theories (Uscinski et al., 2021), while others cite word-of-mouth as a better tool because initial theories are available outside the Internet (Astapova, 2020). However, we cannot ignore the fact that social media sites seem to have a significant influence on Serbian adults, as 53.4% of them use social media as the leading informational source, according to research by the Center for Policy and Strategy Creation (2021).

Social media cannot be solely held responsible for its users' freedom of expression. Nevertheless, social media platforms must prioritize the safety of their users from harmful content. To combat the spread of misinformation concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, each social media site had implemented its own set of regulation guidelines that range from permissive to restricted. Although Twitter and YouTube have been linked to the indirect spread of conspiracy theories (Enders et al., 2021), the contrasting approaches to content moderation which can be seen on Facebook and Reddit make them more favorable and interesting for this research. For example, Facebook employs human moderators and automated regulation tools; while Reddit employs administrators to regulate content as a whole and moderators for each subreddit (Singh, 2019). Facebook's regulators follow the Social Standards policy, which is either enforced manually or through image recognition tools, NLP, and other content detection tools (Singh, 2019). These automated tools have proven to be most successful for images, as opposed to text, given that text can be more easily manipulated to avoid detection and removal. Reddit's regulators follow the platform's content policy, but moderators can employ their own set of rules (per the initial policy) on the subreddits they regulate (Singh, 2019). Unlike Facebook, which had initially updated its policy for misinformation and the COVID-19 pandemic (Facebook Help Center, n.d.), Reddit had no restrictions on coronavirus-related information or misinformation in general (Reddit Inc., n.d.).

According to the 2020 Social Serbia survey, 88% of respondents had a Facebook account, whereas only 4% had a Reddit account (Pioneers, 2020). Unlike Facebook, where individual users and/or organizations can establish several pages for a single topic, Reddit normally has one or two active subreddits for a single topic. In the context of this research, there have been subreddits that exclusively featured content about conspiracy theories, the COVID-19 pandemic, and chemtrails, but this will be addressed further in the article. There are language-specific subreddits, such as Serbia's main subreddit *r/serbia* (n.d.), which has over 144.000 members; its theme is not centralized to the three aforementioned ideals, but may potentially contain a small but significant amount of user-generated content containing conspiracist beliefs.

This research aims to highlight the fact that conspiratorial narratives available through social media pages and user-generated content lead the target audience and/or users to share their opinions on said content using different types of feedback, such as likes, comments, shares, or other types of feedback. Depending on the audience

and social media platform, certain types of feedback can be primarily utilized to show support or dissatisfaction, while other types of feedback can be underutilized. Also, it is important to analyze how two contrasting platforms, such as Facebook and Reddit, regulate their content, if users respect their content guidelines, and if their content regulation tools are adequately implemented.

Methods

This paper analyzes audience-generated feedback regarding conspiratorial content that links chemtrails with the COVID-19 pandemic, whose proliferation is largely facilitated by social media platforms such as Facebook and Reddit. The qualitative analysis will first focus on content generated by relevant Facebook pages and user-generated content (UGC) on relevant Reddit subreddits, after which specific audience-generated feedback on said content will be introduced to show its relevance, by applying mixed methods research, consisting of quantitative and qualitative analysis. The research period covers only content that was available through social media platforms from February 2020 to May 2022, while the data itself was collected in July 2022. The research aims to answer the question of ***what the audience-generated feedback is on relevant conspiratorial content spread by social media conspiracy theorists***.

Firstly, we must define what the criterion for the ***relevant conspiratorial content*** is. **In the case of Facebook**, the platform's advanced search was utilized by inputting specific keywords related to chemtrails and/or COVID-19. To find relevant pages that discuss this specific conspiratorial content, the keyword *chemtrails* was used, while employing Serbian Latin (*kemtrejls*) and Cyrillic (*кемтрејлс*) variations of the keyword as well. Applying the keyword *chemtrails* to Facebook's advanced search yielded 97 results, 10 of which were irrelevant due to being musician pages (7), chemtrail debunk pages (1), and chemtrails meme pages (2). Out of 87 relevant results, 69.8% were categorized as a *community*. Applying the keywords *kemtrejls* and *кемтрејлс* did not yield any results. However, four pages participating in chemtrails theories were found in the Balkans: Serbian pages *Chemtrails report Serbia* (n.d.), *Hemijski tragovi iznad srbije / Chemtrails Serbia* (n.d.), *Hemijski tragovi na nebu Balkana - Balkan chemtrails* (n.d.); and a Croatian page, *Chemtrails – Kemijski tragovi* (n.d.). However, most of these pages either had less than 200 followers/likes and/or were inactive for several years. Out of 87 relevant Facebook pages, the research is mainly focused on researching the Serbian-speaking page *Chemtrails report Serbia* (n.d.) with over 5.800 likes and over 6.000 followers (as of July 2022), while adding two English-speaking pages *Global March Against Geoengineering* (n.d.) with over 33.000 likes and 32.000 followers (as of July 2022); and *CA Chemtrails* (n.d.) with over 24.000 likes and 25.000 followers (as of July 2022) as they might provide relevant data to compare how these conspiracist narratives are shared in Serbia and outside its borders. The content of the pages was then researched through different keywords. For English-speaking pages, researched content had to contain two or

more keywords from the keyword pool: *covid*, *corona*, *spraying*, and *poison*. For the Serbian-speaking pages, the exact keywords were used but translated into Serbian and divided into two scripts: Serbian Latin (*covid*, *kovid*, *korona*, *zaprašivanje*, and *otrov*) and Serbian Cyrillic (*ковид*, *корона*, *запрашивање*, and *отров*). To measure the activity of the researched Facebook pages, the content was divided into three periods or years: 2020 (from February to December), 2021, and 2022 (from January to May).

In the case of Reddit, the platform's advanced search was utilized on each researched subreddit by inputting specific keywords related to chemtrails and/or COVID-19. In order to be considered for the research, subreddits had to fall into one of the following three categories: the subreddit had to be related to conspiracy theories; the subreddit's main focus was chemtrails as a conspiracy; and the subreddit had to contain any discussion regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. Subreddit *r/serbia* (n.d.) was an exception, as it had the most significant number of Serbian members, with the possibility of containing conspiratorial content. The chosen subreddits were then researched with a two-keyword system. For English-speaking subreddits, the first keyword was always *chemtrails*, while the second keyword could be one of the following: *covid*, *corona*, and *coronavirus*. For the Serbian-speaking subreddits, Serbian Latin (*kemtrejls* with *kovid*, *korona*, *koronavirus*) and Serbian Cyrillic (*кемтрејлс* with *ковид*, *корона*, *коронавирус*) variations were employed along with English keywords, as they had a chance to be more prominent on this subreddit than the latter. This research focused on four subreddits, three of which meet the aforementioned criteria: *r/conspiracy* (n.d.), with 1.8 million members; *r/coronavirus* (n.d.), with 2.3 million members; *r/chemtrails* (n.d.), comprising 2.700 members, with the added exception of subreddit *r/serbia* (n.d.), consisting of 144.000 members. Unlike Facebook, the content could not be divided into three periods, because the content on Reddit is focused on user-generated content of individual users and not on subreddits as a whole.

Secondly, we must first define what ***audience-generated feedback*** is for this research. **In the case of Facebook**, we refer to *likes on relevant content*, *comments on relevant content,* and whether or not the *content was shared* only on personal profiles or other parts of the website. For posts, the number of likes was analyzed through a scale of: *0 likes*, *1-10 likes*, *11-50 likes*, *51-100 likes*, *101-500 likes*, and *501-1000 likes*. The number of comments on relevant posts was analyzed through a shortened scale: *0 comments*, *1-10 comments*, *11-50 comments*, *51-100 comments*, and *101-500 comments*. For the shares, we used the same scale as the latter: *0 shares*, *1-10 shares*, *11-50 shares*, *51-100 shares*, and *101-500 shares*. The sum and averages of all audience-generated feedback types available across all relevant Facebook pages will be provided through positive integers in the Discussion section of the article. **In the case of Reddit**, we refer to the number of *upvotes on relevant* content and *comments on relevant content*. Two types of feedback could not be utilized in the research – *downvotes* and *shares* – because the number of upvotes and downvotes are a sum shown through a positive integer and they are never provided separately;

another reason is that the number of shares is never provided on the posts, unlike the number of likes and comments. For posts, the number of upvotes was analyzed through a scale: *0 upvotes*, *1-10 upvotes*, *11-50 upvotes*, *51-100 upvotes*, *101-500 upvotes*, and *501-1000 upvotes*. The number of comments on relevant posts was analyzed through a shortened scale: *0 comments*, *1-10 comments*, *11-50 comments*, *51-100 comments*, and *101-500 comments*. The sum and averages of all audience-generated feedback types available across all relevant subreddits will be available in the Discussion section of the article. Because the number of upvotes already represents a sum of positive and negative feedback on a single post, the research will employ the aforementioned scaling system when discussing Reddit upvotes on average, while the number of comments will be analyzed through positive integers for the sum and averages.

Results: Facebook

The research of relevant Facebook pages yielded a total of 51 results, 82% of which were published on *Chemtrails report Serbia* (n.d.), even though the initial page had four- or five-times fewer followers and page likes. All comments on researched relevant content were supportive and contained no skepticism regarding shared information on this page. Some comments have even criticized the restrictive nature of Facebook's content moderation, even if the platform's flagging system was not exceedingly active on the researched pages. Only three posts (11%) available on *Chemtrails report Serbia* (n.d.) were flagged as false information, while most of the content on this page and other researched pages remained unflagged.

Chemtrails report Serbia (n.d.) was, by far, the most significant chemtrails-related Facebook page in Serbia. Categorized as a *non-profit organization*, it had a dedicated Blogger (Blogspot) site and Twitter account, however, unlike the Facebook page, they were last active on these platforms in 2021. Using the Serbian Latin and Cyrillic keywords, a total of 42 results were found on this page, where 79% of the content (33 results) was posted in 2020. The year 2021 had eight results, while 2022 had only one result in March. The total amount of likes achieved across all relevant posts was 720 likes, with an average of 17 likes per post. More than half (55%) of content had between 1-10 likes, while only 5% of content had more than 100 likes. Regarding comments, a total of 116 comments were present on all researched content, with an average of 3 comments per post. The most comments on a single post amounted to 44 comments, while more than half (55%) of the content had no comments at all. Finally, regarding shares, all researched content was shared a total of 615 times, while the average number of shares amounted to 14 shares per post. Over 80% of content had been shared on other parts of the Facebook platform, while only one post had over 100 shares. Most of the page's posts (55%) contained original content, while the other 45% was other user-generated content that the page found interesting enough to reshare. Certain posts on this page referenced conspiracy theorist Alek Racić's claim that COVID-19 was sarin gas, while other content shared had mentioned Slađana Velkov, a medical doctor and well-known anti-

vaccine advocate. Additionally, certain content about the original chemtrails theory was updated with the COVID-19 conspiratorial narrative to include 5G networks, another popular conspiracy theory during the pandemic. If we compare the audience-generated feedback and the size of the audience, it can be concluded that 12% of the total audience used likes, 2% of the total audience used comments and 11% of the total audience used the share option to express their feedback on relevant content during the research period.

Global March Against Geoengineering (n.d.) was the biggest English-speaking and overall chemtrails-related Facebook page (as of July 2022). The page provided two external links to their official site (which were inaccessible in July 2022) and a Twitter profile (last active in May 2019). The page's latest post was from May 2020, after which it was considered inactive. As a result, research was conducted over one period alone, from February 2020 to December 2020. Using the English keywords, only three posts related to chemtrails and COVID-19 were found. All three posts were in the 11-50 likes and 11-50 comments thresholds, while only one post had more than 10 shares. The first post (2020, April 7) claimed the existence of an "Agenda 21" or "Agenda 2030", while also using conspiratorial platitudes, such as "*open your eyes*", and "*connect the dots*", and numerous hashtags, such as *#Covid19*, *#Chemtrails* and *#Geoengineering*, to make their content more visible. User-generated comments were unequivocally positive, supporting the information while also citing famous conspiracy theorist, David Icke. Their final post (2020, May 2) noted similarities between COVID-19 and high-altitude pulmonary edema (HAPE), which is a severe lung condition. This post contained 13 different links leading to other Facebook posts. However, most of the external links were inaccessible, while the post was flagged as false information by a Facebook fact-checking site Health Feedback. They noted no correlation between 5G and COVID-19, suggesting that the external links might have contained other conspiracy theories about the pandemic. However, user-generated comments were, as expected, very supportive, acknowledging the bravery of sharing the "truth", while mocking Facebook's fact-checking partner.

The second largest English-speaking and chemtrails-related Facebook page (as of July 2022) is *CA Chemtrails* (n.d.). A total of six results were found on this page, out of which five (83.3%) were published in the year 2020 (most active in December). In 2021 we had only one result, published in February, while 2022 (from January to May) yielded no results. Three posts, or 50% of the content had 11-50 likes, while only one post (17%) had over 100 likes. In the case of comments and shares, 66% of content had 1-10 comments and 11-50 shares. Facebook's content flagging system was inactive on this page since no relevant post was flagged as false information. Five posts were statuses, one of which contained an image (in May 2020), one had an external link outside of Facebook, and there were no relevant videos or livestreams.

Results: Reddit

Using the combination of given words from the keyword pool on the subreddit *r/conspiracy* (n.d.) yielded a total of 96 results, with 4 pieces of content being repeated across all variations (counted only once). During the research period, 28% of content

had 0 upvotes, while most of the posts (36%) had 11-50 upvotes. Only one post (2%) had over 500 upvotes, specifically 951 upvotes. All relevant user-generated content had at least one comment and generated a sum of 2276 comments, with an average of 23 comments per post. The aforementioned post (bumbacorn, 2020) had the highest number of comments (394) as well as the highest number of upvotes (951) and was not only focused on chemtrails but on many other conspiracy theories discussed on the subreddit. Other posts conveyed false information through text, images, or videos, and either independent theories about chemtrails and COVID-19 or images of contrails claiming to be chemtrails. One user (hands_can, 2022) linked a post from Twitter that claimed COVID-19 was not a virus, but fungi in the air produced by chemtrails. The original Twitter post could not be reached since it was removed, and other information regarding this theory was unavailable through Reddit, Twitter, or Google. However, some posts (beerathegreat, 2020) were critical of conspiracy theories, serving as an open letter to like-minded theorists to stop ruining themselves, their own families, society, and the environment with their conspiratorial beliefs by suggesting ways to overcome their fear-induced skepticism, garnering 383 upvotes and 96 comments.

Unfortunately, using the combination of given words from the keyword pool on the subreddit *r/coronavirus* (n.d.) yielded no results. This was, however, expected, because of the following reason: the fifth rule of the subreddit's personal content policy stated not to share conspiracies or speculation about the coronavirus but to reserve those discussions for other online places. This shows that the subreddit is very strict in enforcing its personal policy, which has granted no conspiratorial content a way to be shared through this community.

Using the combination of given words from the keyword pool on the subreddit *r/chemtrails* (n.d.) yielded a total of 7 results, while the combination of *chemtrails* and *coronavirus* yielded no results. The average number of upvotes belonged to the 1-10 upvotes threshold, with a sum of 30 comments and an average of 4 comments per post. Although this virtual community consisted of 2.700 members, not enough audience-generated feedback was provided (upvotes and comments) to support the claim that the subreddit strongly influenced the distribution of conspiratorial beliefs that had a significant impact on the audience.

The final subreddit explored in this research was *r/serbia* (n.d.). Using the combination of given words from the English keyword pool yielded no results. Surprisingly, applying the same two-keyword approach with Serbian Latin and Cyrillic variations yielded no results as well. Thus, we can confirm that this subreddit does not propagate or justify conspiratorial beliefs that link chemtrails with the COVID-19 pandemic. However, employing Reddit's advanced search on comments alone for the entire subreddit (with Serbian keywords *kemtrejls* and *кемтрејлс*) did yield some results, but comments from certain users implemented chemtrails narrative as a way to ridicule said conspiracy theorists.

If all user-generated content and comments published during the research period across all four relevant subreddits are taken into consideration, the average number of upvotes and comments on posts was 11-50 upvotes and 1-10 comments.

Discussion and Conclusion

Before the results are further discussed, it is crucial to point out certain limitations of this research. Firstly, the relevant content was compiled manually by the researcher, leaving a possibility for incomplete data. Secondly, although the research period lasted from February 2020 to May 2022, data collection started in July 2022. Links containing unavailable content during the research period were only utilized in the data collection period if certain "snapshots" of the links were available through tools like Wayback Machine, Archive.today, or Perma.cc, which was not always the case. Furthermore, content was prone to removal by the platform's moderators or content creators themselves, preventing the researcher from finding said content. Thirdly, the numbers and sums of audience-generated feedback from these two platforms are representative of the data collection period in July 2022. Certain audience-generated feedback can have changes in numerical ratios, meaning that these changes in data will not be addressed, as these changes have happened after the data collection period, or after July 31st, 2022. Finally, the fourth limitation lies in how the advanced search functions on Facebook and Reddit. Even if keywords narrowed down the amount of content, certain content was codified in such a way that it could not be detected by Facebook's search system or their regulation tools. One instance was noted on the page Global March Against Geoengineering (2020, May 2), where the word corona was written as *C0R0N4*, which was found because the post had other relevant keywords defined by the research.

Regarding content regulation, Facebook's regulatory framework has proven to be successful for images (Singh, 2019). As mentioned in the Introduction, it requires an overhaul to be more effective and accurately target misinformation which includes other types of content such as textual posts. Even if the forthcoming data precedes the initial research question and defined boundaries, it must be noted that over 60% (31) of researched content were images that contained conspiratorial narratives, but only three of them (6%) were flagged as false information. Additionally, out of 51 Facebook posts, only four pieces of content (8%) were ever flagged as false information. Conversely, Reddit, due to its liberal regulatory system, had double the amount of conspiratorial content but proved that the individual rules implemented by these subreddits are enforced with utmost precision. On the restrictive subreddits, like *r/coronavirus* there was no content discussing conspiracy theories, while *r/conspiracy* and *r/chemtrails*, users had complete freedom to express their critique or support of conspiracist narratives.

Based on the gathered data, the **main research question** regarding the type of audience-generated feedback used on relevant conspiratorial content mainly involved the use of likes on Facebook and the use of comments on Reddit as a means to express their reactions or to support said content. On Facebook, all relevant posts across all three Facebook pages had at least one like and generated a sum of 1073 likes, averaging 21 likes per post. Regarding other feedback utilized on Facebook, the share option was the second most utilized (784), with an average of 15 shares

per post, while comments were underutilized (245), with an average of 4 comments per post. However, posts with more comments had immense support from the target audience, expressing their dissatisfaction with Facebook's content regulation, sharing contrail images, and supporting the pages and their alleged "fights for the truth". Conversely, when it comes to Reddit, all relevant user-generated content across all four subreddits had at least one comment and generated a sum of 2306 comments, averaging 22 comments per post. As for upvotes, the average was between 10-50 upvotes, while 31% of content had 0 upvotes, demonstrating that a third of content was either negatively received by the audience or was unsupported by not providing feedback at all. Unlike Facebook's commenters, the audience on relevant subreddits expressed a wide range of reactions, from support and amusement to skepticism and mockery. Redditors were not biased toward the content shared by other users but would elaborate their own theories and arguments on why they support or do not support the claims. Relevant user-generated content would sometimes clash with other user's posts, where one user in February 2022 would claim that chemtrails have become prevalent since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, while another user in April would claim that chemtrails cases have lowered since the pandemic.

Finally, audience-generated feedback can be crucial in providing us with information if certain content has achieved relevance or has been left to an echo chamber that shares similar views. The impact of conspiratorial content is noticeable when interaction, support, and (re)distribution are placed in context. Furthermore, conspiracy theories tend to be shown through their original narrative on social media or they tend to be socially adapted through other languages, as was the case with the Serbian language. Along with the conspiratorial narratives shared through media outlets, other narratives have included other Serbian conspiracy theorists (Slavija info TV, 2020; FBU1, 2020) and medical practitioners (Marković, 2021). Some audience-generated feedback included disdain toward the West and NATO, further bolstered through narratives provided by certain media outlets (Voice of the People, 2020) and influential political figures (Nikola Sandulović, 2020; Tančić, 2020, M.Z.B., 2020), which feed on the traumas that Serbian people acquired during the Yugoslav Wars. Even if Serbian users took the lead on consuming misinformation on Facebook, Reddit's Serbian-speaking users have expressed their dislike for conspiratorial content, by ridiculing these narratives through the comment section of posts that were not initially related to conspiracy theories. This research tends to imply that audience-generated feedback is crucial to understanding how certain narratives are accepted and denied by users who interact with conspiratorial content, whether they are page-specific followers on Facebook, or come from specific virtual communities with their own set of rules similar to Reddit. Users reserve the right to express their skepticism, but only if their doubts are based on cognitive reflection and scientific discourse, not quack or other pseudoscientific narratives, which have not been sufficiently, or at all, verified.

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Povratna informacija publike o konspirativnom sadržaju na Fejsbuku i Reditu u Srbiji

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Apstrakt

Teorije zavere su sveprisutan fenomen u društveno-političkoj raspravi. Verujući ovim teorijama, društvo opravdava moguće događaje poput pandemije bolesti COVID-19. Kroz istraživanje mešovitih metoda, članak nastoji da obezbedi količinu konspirativnog sadržaja generisanog na stranicama i pomoću individualnih korisnika, kojim se kemtrejlsi povezuju sa pandemijom bolesti COVID-19, kao i da obezbedi povratne informacije članova publike o datom sadržaju na društvenim mrežama. Fejsbuk i Redit su izabrani za ovo istraživanje zbog svojih inherentno suprotnih pristupa regulaciji sadržaja. Fejsbukovi alati za regulaciju sadržaja nisu bili uspešni da adekvatno uklone dezinformacije, pritom što je samo 8% sadržaja označeno kao lažna informacija. Pored toga, čak i ako su istraženi sabrediti, odnosno, podforumi imali dva puta više relevantnog sadržaja u poređenju sa relevantnim Facebook stranicama, većina sadržaja je imala 0 glasova, što znači da je sadržaj bio ili negativno prihvaćen ili mu je nedostajala adekvatna podrška. Korisnici koji govore srpski jezik na Fejsbuku su izrazili podršku zavereničkim sadržajima, dok su srpski korisnici Redita, koristili konspirativne narative da ismevaju teoretičare zavere. Sviđanja su bili najkorišćeniji tip povratnih informacija o sadržaju relevantnih Facebook stranica, dok su komentari bili najkorišćeniji tip povratnih informacija o sadržaju relevantnih podforuma. Važnost ovog istraživanja leži u razumevanju šta konspirativni narativi pokušavaju da impliciraju putem društvenih medija i kako publika tumači i komunicira sa ovim sadržajem.

Ključne reči: teorije zavere, društvene mreže, kemtrejls, pandemija, COVID-19