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Canon and Countercast in Romania's 2018 Family Referendum

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Abstract: The 2018 Romanian referendum on the constitutional definition of marriage crystallized a struggle over normativity that was simultaneously legal, moral, and media-performative. This article reinterprets the campaign as a competition between distinct performative regimes staged across two intersecting axes: secular–religious and television–digital. Drawing on cultural pragmatics, performance theory, mediatization scholarship, and framing analysis, the article contrasts the conservative camp's vertical referendum campaign—organized through the Coalition for the Family, Trinitas TV, Prodocens Media, and aligned evangelical broadcasters—with the progressive camp's horizontal and affective counter-performance articulated through digital activism and civic campaigns. Special attention is given to the contrast between the Orthodox "great stage" of televised authority and the fragmented "small stages" of evangelical and digital media. The article argues that the referendum's invalidation cannot be reduced to political apathy, but reflects an asymmetrical clash between ritualized authority and distributed authenticity, between canon formation and digital countercasting, within a post-secular media ecology increasingly shaped by platform culture and affective publics.

Keywords: cultural performance; mediatization; referendum; religious media; digital activism; performativity; framing; Romania.

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The Romanian referendum held on 6–7 October 2018 sought to modify Article 48(1) of the Constitution by replacing the gender-neutral term "spouses" with the formula "a man and a woman." Officially presented as a constitutional clarification, the referendum rapidly evolved into a condensed symbolic conflict concerning family, nation, morality, and democratic legitimacy. More than a juridical consultation, it became a struggle over the authority to define social reality itself. This article approaches the referendum as a cultural and media performance rather than merely a political event. Public actors did not simply exchange arguments; they staged competing moral worlds through distinct media forms, visual grammars, and affective strategies. Religious broadcasters, civic organizations, digital activists, and institutional actors each attempted to produce credible performances of authenticity, legitimacy, and collective belonging. The campaign therefore functioned simultaneously as a legal process and as a theatrical struggle over symbolic authority.[2]

Two major tensions organized the referendum's media ecology. The first was the secular–religious axis, where theological norms were translated into civic language through concepts such as democracy, children's rights, freedom, and national continuity. The second was the television–digital axis, which opposed centralized broadcast authority to networked and affective digital publics. Television privileged ritual continuity, solemnity, and hierarchical communication, while digital platforms favored intimacy, fragmentation, emotional immediacy, and self-representation. A third tension emerged around the paradoxical performance of majority and minority identities. Conservative actors frequently presented themselves as culturally threatened despite institutional dominance, while LGBT organizations and civic activists performed vulnerability and precariousness as conditions of everyday life. The referendum thus became a confrontation between competing performances of legitimacy, suffering, and moral authenticity. The article argues that the referendum can be understood as a conflict between canon and countercast: between attempts to stabilize a normative social order through institutional religious media and attempts to destabilize that order through digital counter-framing, testimonial intimacy, satire, and civic refusal.

[2] Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 527–531.

From Ritual Authority to Media Performance

Jeffrey C. Alexander conceptualizes public life as cultural performance, composed of actors, scripts, symbolic backgrounds, staging devices, audiences, and means of symbolic distribution. Successful performances produce "fusion," convincing audiences that the performance is sincere and morally legitimate, while failed performances generate suspicion or interpretive fragmentation. The Romanian referendum campaign reveals precisely such a struggle over fusion and de-fusion. Conservative actors attempted to align religious morality, democratic legitimacy, and national identity into a coherent symbolic narrative, while progressive actors attempted to interrupt that fusion by reframing the referendum as exclusionary, manipulative, or politically illegitimate.[3]

Goffman's dramaturgical sociology is equally relevant because the campaign depended heavily on impression management and control over public framing. Television formats, studio arrangements, host authority, camera proximity, testimonial aesthetics, and emotional tone became part of broader struggles over credibility and moral plausibility. The campaign must also be situated within processes of mediatization. Religion no longer operates solely through ecclesiastical structures but increasingly through media logics shaped by broadcasting conventions and platform circulation. Religious authority today depends not only on doctrine but also on audiovisual adaptability, affective resonance, and digital visibility. Framing scholarship further clarifies how both camps attempted to define the stakes of the referendum. Conservative discourse frequently mobilized moral panic narratives concerning children, civilization, demographic collapse, and ideological colonization, while progressive discourse counter-framed the referendum as authoritarian, exclusionary, or incompatible with democratic pluralism. The conflict was therefore not simply over family definitions, but over interpretive ownership of democracy itself.[4]

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[3] Alexander, *Social Performance*, 536–542.

[4] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), 17–76.

Method and Corpus

This article employs interpretive audiovisual analysis focused on recurring staging conventions, affective registers, and framing strategies across the referendum's media ecology.

Rather than cataloguing every broadcast or video item, the analysis concentrates on stable performative structures and symbolic repertoires. The corpus consists of publicly available audiovisual materials distributed between 2016 and 2018 through the official YouTube and Facebook channels of Trinitas TV, Prodocens Media, Alfa Omega TV, Credo TV, Speranța TV, the Coalition for the Family, and progressive civic organizations such as MozaiQ, ACCEPT, and Declic. The analysis includes talk shows, campaign videos, livestream recordings, testimonial clips, conference recordings, promotional spots, and digital microcampaigns selected according to their visibility, circulation, thematic relevance, and recurrence within the referendum media ecology. Rather than providing exhaustive quantitative coverage, the study adopts an interpretive audiovisual approach focused on recurring staging conventions, affective registers, framing strategies, and symbolic performances. The analysis focuses particularly on the relationship between audiovisual form and symbolic authority: how different media environments staged legitimacy, intimacy, expertise, authenticity, or moral urgency.[5]

Coalition for the Family and the Pre-Campaign Momentum

Before the referendum itself, the Coalition for the Family constructed a highly effective pre-campaign repertoire centered around the collection of three million signatures supporting constitutional change. This phase relied heavily on dense provincial evangelical and neo-Protestant infrastructures capable of sustaining volunteer mobilization, local coordination, and congregational circulation of campaign materials. The signature handover to Parliament in May 2016 became one of the campaign's foundational performances. Boxes

[5] Nick Couldry, *Media, Society, World: Social Theory and Digital Media Practice* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 1–20.

marked by counties and physically transported into institutional space transformed quantity into visible legitimacy. The visual grammar of the event converted signatures into a symbolic map of the nation itself, while Parliament functioned as a monumental background against which "the people" could appear materially present.

This pre-campaign phase was characterized by plurality and distributed energy. Numerous local actors, churches, and activists contributed to a broad mobilization ecology. Yet as the campaign moved closer to the referendum, the stage became increasingly centralized and symbolically narrowed. The Marches for Life amplified this momentum through a hybrid moral repertoire that fused pro-life activism, family discourse, public prayer, patriotic symbolism, and civic ritual. Neo-Protestant communities proved especially effective in sustaining local intensity and volunteer mobilization. A significant asymmetry emerged here: evangelical and neo-Protestant actors often supplied the organizational energy and grassroots logistics of the movement, while Orthodoxy increasingly supplied its dominant symbolic image and canonical legitimacy.[6]

Trinitas TV and the Great Stage of Canonical Authority

Trinitas TV functioned as the referendum's principal canonical stage. As the official broadcaster of the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate, it transformed the referendum into a solemn moral event integrated into broader narratives of national continuity, religious identity, and social order. The dramaturgy of Trinitas was structurally vertical. Programs relied on stable hosts, long monologic segments, controlled pacing, and limited confrontation. Guests frequently appeared less as debate participants than as authoritative interpreters of moral truth. The visual grammar reproduced the logic of ecclesiastical hierarchy transferred into media space. The "televised altar" did not simply communicate doctrine; it staged institutional continuity itself through ceremonial form, measured speech, frontal framing, symbolic decorum, and audiovisual solemnity.

[6] Stig Hjarvard, "The Mediatization of Religion," *Culture and Religion* 12, no. 2 (2011): 119–135.

One of the most significant differences between the conservative and progressive media ecologies concerned the scale and structure of staging itself. Trinitas TV functioned as a "great stage" of canonical authority: centralized, ceremonious, vertically organized, and symbolically close to liturgical performance. Its visual grammar frequently reproduced the logic of the congregational scene transferred into broadcast space through controlled speech rhythms, limited interruption, frontal authority, and a stable hierarchy between speaker and audience. As the campaign advanced, the range of lead actors visible on the national stage narrowed considerably. Mihai Gheorghiu, president of the Coalition for the Family, and Vasile Bănescu, spokesperson of the Romanian Orthodox Church, became recurrent protagonists across multiple talk formats. Message discipline increased, but so did predictability. Repetition strengthened internal cohesion while risking interpretive fatigue among broader publics.[7]

The authority performed by Trinitas TV depended not only on institutional legitimacy, but also on a carefully regulated audiovisual temporality. Long speaking sequences, restrained editing, solemn musical transitions, and ceremonious pacing contributed to a media environment structurally close to ritual communication. In this configuration, viewers were positioned less as interactive users than as a congregational audience invited to contemplate rather than intervene. The symbolic force of the "great stage" therefore emerged through continuity, repetition, and stability of form. Religious authority was not simply stated discursively; it was embodied audiovisually through controlled rhythms of visibility and speech that transferred elements of liturgical hierarchy into broadcast space. This ritualized televisual logic strengthened symbolic coherence while simultaneously limiting communicative flexibility within rapidly shifting digital environments.

One of the campaign's defining asymmetries concerned the relationship between Orthodoxy and evangelical infrastructures. Evangelical communities often supplied organizational density, grassroots circulation, and high participation intensity, while Orthodoxy supplied symbolic centrality and

[7] Zizi Papacharissi, *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1–35.

canonical legitimacy. Backstage mobilization remained plural, but frontstage representation became increasingly Orthodox. This asymmetry partly explains the campaign's later difficulties. The monumental authority of the Orthodox "great stage" proved less adaptable within fragmented digital publics where legitimacy increasingly depended on intimacy, flexibility, and conversational accessibility.

Prodocens Media and the Hybrid Translation Layer

If Trinitas functioned as the canonical altar, Prodocens Media operated as a hybrid translation layer between institutional conservatism and digital activism. Its communicative style was more dynamic, diversified, and platform-compatible than the solemnity characteristic of Trinitas. Prodocens circulated long-form interviews, conference recordings, expert panels, and quasi-debate formats involving conservative intellectuals, legal actors, and religious representatives. The platform attempted to translate theological morality into cultural, legal, and philosophical language capable of resonating beyond strictly religious audiences.[8]

The Coalition for the Family and allied actors also developed an extensive repertoire of digital microcampaigns adapted to platform circulation. Series such as *Adevărul despre Referendum (The Truth about the Referendum)* introduced a repetitive pedagogical structure functioning as a mechanism of counter-framing and inoculation. Other microcampaigns, such as *Referendum pentru România (Referendum for Romania)*, shifted discourse into a procedural-democratic register centered on sovereignty and popular legitimacy through references to "three million signatures," while mobilization spots such as *Tu vei decide (You Will Decide)* or *Vino la Referendum (Come to the Referendum)* reduced political complexity to immediate action imperatives. In parallel, the series *X susține Coaliția pentru Familie (X Supports the Coalition for the Family)* introduced a logic of legitimation through authority and exemplarity by mobilizing the symbolic capital of public personalities. These formats reflected

[8] David A. Snow and Robert D. Benford, "Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilization," *International Social Movement Research* 1 (1988): 197–217.

an adaptation of religious discourse to media logic through the appropriation of secular credibility codes such as expertise, fact-checking aesthetics, procedural rationality, and personal storytelling.

As the campaign advanced, however, the conservative camp became increasingly defensive and indignant, especially in confrontational appearances within mainstream television debates. Unlike the controlled symbolic environment of Trinitas or Prodocens, mainstream media formats exposed conservative representatives to interruption, adversarial questioning, irony, and competing moral vocabularies. Their authority was no longer automatically recognized or ceremonially stabilized. As a result, debates on generalist television channels often intensified polarization rather than persuasion, reinforcing mutual delegitimation between the camps.[9]

Fragmented Conservative Media and the Logic of Small Stages

Religious broadcasting during the referendum was far from monolithic. Beyond Trinitas and Prodocens, evangelical broadcasters developed differentiated conservative performances shaped by distinct audiovisual cultures. Alfa Omega TV largely amplified and stabilized conservative narratives already circulating within evangelical environments. Credo TV adopted a more dialogical and conversational register through moderated discussions and rights-based language, while Speranta TV remained comparatively restrained, often limiting itself to procedural updates and low-intensity informational coverage.

By contrast with Trinitas's monumental authority, evangelical and neo-Protestant media often operated through what might be called "small stages": lower-budget but more flexible communicative environments built around podcasts, conversational interviews, testimonies, conference recordings, and hybrid discussion formats. These stages lacked the monumental symbolic capital of Orthodoxy, yet they possessed greater adaptability to digital circulation and platform culture. Their *mise-en-scène* privileged proximity

[9] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 1–34.

over ceremony, modularity over ritual continuity, and emotionally accessible speech over transcendence. Such formats traveled more easily across Facebook, YouTube, and messaging applications precisely because they were already structurally compatible with networked circulation. The conservative media field was therefore internally asymmetrical: Orthodoxy supplied the canonical image of the campaign and its symbolic permanence, while evangelical infrastructures supplied mobility, circulation, and grassroots intensity.[10]

These communicative environments operated through a markedly different logic of authority than the Orthodox broadcast model. Podcasts, livestream discussions, informal interviews, and conference recordings cultivated a sense of conversational accessibility rather than ceremonial distance. Lower production intensity frequently functioned as a marker of authenticity, allowing speakers to appear spontaneous, emotionally responsive, and socially approachable. In many cases, authority emerged less from institutional grandeur than from perceived sincerity and relational proximity. Such formats were also structurally modular: clips could be fragmented, reposted, commented upon, and circulated independently across platforms. This portability made evangelical "small stages" particularly compatible with the participatory dynamics of social media ecosystems, where visibility depends increasingly on circulation and audience interaction rather than centralized institutional control.

The Progressive Countercast

The referendum's invalidation cannot be understood without examining the progressive counter-performance that emerged across digital platforms and civic networks. Progressive actors did not attempt to compete with the Orthodox Church on the terrain of institutional broadcasting. Instead, they shifted the scene from altar to screen and from moral obligation to individual autonomy. Campaigns such as *Iubirea nu se votează (Love Cannot Be Voted On)* developed a narrative matrix centered on autonomy, affect, and personal

[10] Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, rev. and expanded ed. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 22–38.

experience. Messages such as "I am not going to the referendum" or "love cannot be voted on" reframed electoral participation as an individual moral choice and transformed absence into civic action.

Audiovisually, these campaigns proposed distinct constructions of authenticity and audience relationship. In *Iubirea nu se votează*, recognizable public figures, artists, activists, and influencers addressed the camera directly through frontal and egalitarian staging. The effect was one of proximity and personal interpellation. By contrast, *#stauacasă în familie (#IStayHomeWithFamily)* relied on pluralization and decentralization of representation. Instead of a dominant voice, the campaign accumulated diverse domestic scenes involving single mothers, parents of children with disabilities, and non-normative family configurations. Through this accumulation of lived realities, family was reconstructed as plural, personal, and relational rather than institutionally fixed.[11]

Both campaigns challenged the dominant normative framework through different performative mechanisms: one through public voice and frontal interpellation, the other through the multiplication of visible difference inside ordinary domesticity. These campaigns can be understood through Papacharissi's concept of affective publics and through the logic of vernacular video, where authenticity derives from reduced professionalization and intimate immediacy. A comparable logic of "small-stage performativity" characterized much of the progressive counter-campaign. Individuals addressed the camera directly from domestic interiors, neutral urban spaces, or intimate everyday settings. The persuasive force of these clips emerged not from spectacle or transcendence, but from recognizability and vulnerability. The boycott therefore transformed absence into performative presence. Rather than occupying the referendum's official stage, progressive actors destabilized its legitimacy through withdrawal while simultaneously saturating digital space with testimonial intimacy, counter-performances, and alternative definitions of kinship and democratic belonging.[12]

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[11] Robert M. Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (1993): 51–58.

[12] Papacharissi, *Affective Publics*, 78–96.

In this sense, abstention itself became a visible communicative act rather than a withdrawal from public participation. Digital campaigns transformed non-participation into a form of symbolic presence capable of circulating through hashtags, testimonial videos, profile images, and networked declarations of refusal. The persuasive force of these interventions depended less on institutional authority than on emotional recognizability and peer circulation. Civic legitimacy was increasingly constructed through intimacy, vulnerability, and experiential testimony rather than through formal representation. This redistribution of symbolic credibility proved particularly effective within platform environments organized around affective engagement, rapid circulation, and personalized visibility. The boycott campaign therefore functioned not as political silence, but as a performative reframing of democratic participation itself.

A crucial inflection point emerged with Papaya Advertising's video *Copiii Referendumului (The Children of the Referendum)*, inspired by The *Handmaid's Tale*. Unlike the empathetic aesthetics of other progressive campaigns, this clip deployed dystopian imagery projecting an authoritarian future shaped by church-state moral control. Conservative framings centered on "protecting children" were radically inverted: the danger became not gender ideology, but religious authoritarianism itself. This strategy functioned as a form of counter-panic, reproducing the emotional intensity characteristic of moral panic campaigns while redirecting fear toward conservative actors.[13]

Conclusion

The invalidation of the referendum reflects not only political failure but also the limits of canonical religious media within increasingly fragmented and networked publics. The authority effects of the televised altar proved comparatively weaker in digital environments where legitimacy is continuously renegotiated through circulation, remix, emotional proximity, and peer visibility. The conservative camp possessed greater institutional infrastructure, symbolic continuity, and territorial reach. Yet its central performance increasingly

[13] Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1972), 9–18.

narrowed into a vertical and repetitive script concentrated around a limited number of canonical voices. The "great stage" of televised authority struggled to travel effectively across decentralized digital publics, especially once the campaign entered the confrontational arena of mainstream media debates, where conservative representatives no longer benefited from ritual authority or controlled framing. In these spaces, the tone of the conservative camp became increasingly defensive and indignant, while polarization intensified through reciprocal delegitimation rather than persuasion.

By contrast, progressive actors developed a distributed countercast based on testimonial intimacy, emotional accessibility, civic refusal, and flexible digital circulation. Their performances often appeared less monumental but more compatible with the affective expectations of platform culture. The boycott campaign was particularly effective because it transformed non-participation into visible civic agency and shifted the symbolic terrain away from institutional authority toward personal autonomy and lived legitimacy. Small-stage performativity—direct camera address, domestic settings, conversational speech, modular storytelling—allowed progressive actors to compensate for their weaker institutional resources through forms of authenticity more adaptable to networked circulation.[14]

A final irony concerns the movement's strongest moment of mobilization. The campaign's greatest momentum emerged during the decentralized pre-campaign phase carried largely through provincial evangelical and neo-Protestant infrastructures. Once the national stage became centralized and increasingly identified with canonical Orthodox authority, communicative flexibility diminished. The referendum therefore illuminates a broader transformation affecting both politics and religion: symbolic authority is no longer secured exclusively through institutional legitimacy or canonical permanence, but increasingly through the capacity to stage emotionally credible worlds across unstable and hybrid media environments.

This transformation also signals a deeper mutation in the relationship between religion and media. In broadcast culture, authority depended largely on

[14] José van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 11–29.

hierarchy, continuity, and controlled visibility. The institutional center organized the scene, regulated access to speech, and stabilized meaning through repetition and ceremonial form. Platform culture operates differently. Visibility becomes decentralized, attention fragmented, and legitimacy increasingly tied to affective immediacy, relatability, and circulation potential. Under these conditions, religious authority can no longer rely exclusively on transcendence and institutional distance; it must also negotiate the vernacular aesthetics of digital culture.[15]

The referendum revealed precisely this tension between canonical permanence and platform adaptability. The Orthodox "great stage" maintained symbolic prestige, but often appeared too rigid for the communicative expectations of digital publics shaped by interaction, commentary, personalization, and rapid circulation. By contrast, evangelical "small stages" and progressive digital campaigns already resembled the architecture of platform communication: modular, intimate, reproducible, and emotionally accessible. In this sense, the conflict was not only ideological but medial. Competing camps inhabited different temporalities and different regimes of visibility.

At the same time, the referendum and the pandemic years that followed revealed an important adaptive process within conservative media culture itself. Increasingly, conservative actors have recognized the strategic value of podcasts, livestreams, influencer-like communication, short-form videos, and conversational formats that imitate horizontality while still preserving ideological cohesion. Institutional authority has not disappeared; rather, it has begun to reorganize itself through the aesthetics of accessibility. Priests, religious influencers, and conservative commentators increasingly perform proximity, spontaneity, and emotional authenticity without fully abandoning hierarchical legitimacy. The result is a hybrid media form in which the "great stage" attempts to fragment itself into multiple portable "small stages" capable of circulating within platform culture.[16]

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[15] Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 469–500.

[16] Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 2–29.

This transformation also suggests that contemporary referendum politics increasingly operates within what Debord described as the "society of the spectacle," where visibility itself becomes a mechanism of symbolic power. Competing actors no longer struggle only over doctrine, legality, or political legitimacy, but over the capacity to organize attention, circulate emotionally resonant images, and impose recognizable public realities through media performance. In this context, both conservative and progressive actors attempted to construct persuasive spectacles of authenticity, vulnerability, and collective identity adapted to the fragmented conditions of platform visibility.[17]

Platform culture further intensifies this transformation because visibility is no longer stabilized primarily through institutional continuity, but through algorithmic circulation and emotional acceleration. Religious and political actors increasingly compete within media systems that reward immediacy, engagement, repetition, and affective intensity. Under these conditions, authority must be continuously reperformed through formats adapted to fragmented attention economies: short-form videos, livestream interactions, podcasts, reaction clips, and influencer-like communication styles. The symbolic center itself becomes less stable and more distributive. Institutional actors continue to preserve hierarchical legitimacy, yet they increasingly adopt vernacular aesthetics associated with digital creators and participatory media cultures. Contemporary religious communication therefore operates within hybrid ecologies where canonical authority and platform visibility become progressively intertwined rather than opposed.

The future conflict between canon and countercast may therefore no longer oppose television and digital media so clearly. Instead, it may increasingly unfold through hybrid media ecologies in which institutional authority itself learns to perform intimacy, informality, and platform fluency while continuing to pursue symbolic stabilization and moral authority.

[17] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 12–24.

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