

Umi was proudly obsessed with the Slavic Skeptic's Society, but she wasn't naive to the associations that the words had outside of her target demographic.

To be safe, online, she would often use the shorthand SSS, or just refer to it as "the group", unless sure of her audience.

She felt that people simply replied better to her comments this way.

The worst of it was when "the group" was still known simply as the "Slavic Skeptics", but thankfully this didn't last long as the word "Society" was quickly added after someone pointed out the acronym's historical connection.

The term "Slavic" itself rarely had positive connotations in the media she consumed growing up; it was always someone "looking too Slavic", yet not once did she hear someone looking "too Nordic".

Umi responded to what she perceived as a subtle yet powerful campaign of degradation of her birth identity by doubling down on being Slavic; if you thought about the Slav-squat or Adidas tracksuits after hearing that, Umi would say "my point exactly".

Slavs were misunderstood and misrepresented, she often said.

A favourite talking point of hers was that the frequently touted "fact" that the word 'slave' derives from the 'Slavs' being taken as slaves during the ninth century AD is actually completely wrong.

Even the mighty British Broadcasting Corporation, the BBC, a kingpin in edutainment and often the first result when one googles "where the word slave came from" has this incorrect tidbit on their site.

Umi would proselytize to anyone willing to listen on this topic; once she had you under social obligation, she would take you from the etymological misunderstandings of the word, all the way to the relevant historical and geographic details regarding Eastern Europe, including all the relations to the Byzantine Greek empire, then go on with whatever psycho-linguistics she had time for.

If you made it through her lecture cognisant, you would come to understand the fact that she could have shared with you at the very beginning; the fact that "Slav" and "Slave" sound the same is actually pure coincidence.

Knowing these things and rarely finding a willing audience only fueled her further; she saw this not as a failure of her ability to communicate the ideas in an engaging manner, but rather, that the truth was too hard for people to hear.

Umi was well on her way to being unlikeable by the time she met Tony.

Tony wasn't Slavic, but he did hail from right across a small sea to her native Bosnia; he was Italian, and that suited her just fine.

As proud of being Slavic as Umi was, she would never date a fellow Bosnian.

Umi had always credited her abrasive attitude when it came to these topics to an overcorrection by her subconscious; she felt her youth was spent suffering at the hands of the misinformed and deluded, and she would quickly become agitated when she sensed a perceived lack of objectivity in those around her.

Being a militant atheist in a community of religious believers had her at odds with her culture and cousins on an almost-daily basis, but she never faltered, Umi would often proudly tell Tony.

She could never fathom while those around her always felt drawn to the comfort of religion, nor did she ever see that the division between adherence to belief and not within her childhood world, and within her very family, was very much correlated to the age one was born into; born late enough to never really worry about the war, she never had to.

The reality that she was *now* living in, the one where she was not only far removed from her folksy origins, but also dating a non-Bosnian non-Religious man (she could hear mother gasping at the very idea); this reality allowed her to build a new attitude that she felt was far more *organic* to her character.

Free from the restrictive associations that plagued her mind for most of her early life, Umi had built herself a safe-haven with Tony in a neighboring seaside nation and had slowly begun to unwind.

Soon enough however, her new reality made her mad that she *ever* lived under the thumb of other people's irrationality, and *determined* for others to not suffer the way she had. How could she relax when others were still stuck like she was?

Spurred on by encouraging digital communities she discovered in her late teens, full of enthusiastic free thinkers and know-it-alls, Umi always felt righteous when speaking out against what she called "The Enemy".

The Enemy was anyone perpetuating delusional thinking, misinforming others on things and just generally not being what Umi considered "objective".

This included anyone taking bribes and using nepotism to fill desperately-needed positions in her native Bosnia, as she felt that this was “taking the first marshmallow”, as per the infamous Stanford experiment.

Although never studying economics beyond a few skimmed wikipedia articles, she remained adamant that the reason Bosnia, or any similarly corrupt and nepotistic nation, would never prosper is because any non-merit based economy was inherently doomed to fail.

Umi had many strong opinions on topics with varying levels of familiarity, and her ideas often seemed to have the ring of truth about them.

But her local peers never found them as seductive and engaging as her digital “Western” ones did; Umi’s theories often had her local listener feeling as if they were the root of the problem, and as her dearest cousin once said after patiently listening to her rhetoric; she was unlikely to ever become a notable social or economic commentator in Bosnia.

According to Umi, the country was filled with zealous conservatives attempting to enforce as strict an adherence to fundamental dogma as the Western-tained zeitgeist would allow, which thankfully, was not much.

Sarajevo particularly had always had a fascinating mish-mash of believers, charlatans and the rationally-opposed.

After all, “what could one expect when you consider the history?” Umi often said.

She credited the diversity of the Bosnian community for her foundation of critical thinking, and Tony would encourage her to expand on this since he rarely heard her say good things about her birth-country.

The local populace was just as likely to be religious as they were to be superstitious in more alternative ways, like various forms of fortune-telling, and often, they were both.

There was nary a person in the country that didn’t believe certain common superstitions, such as the mildly amusing “if you walk over someone’s legs while they’re lying or sitting down, that person won’t grow anymore!” - most, however, were not this harmless.

Meeting Tony was the first time Umi almost believed in fate; they fit together like religion and prayer, each complementing the other’s abilities and affects.

Tony was agnostic and charismatic, able to take any topic Umi would throw at him and make it palatable by focusing on the semantic associations their listener might have to the rhetoric. Umi in return had a small apartment in Croatia that served as their base of operations.

Where Umi might yell at someone doing something wrong, Tony would instead first try to build rapport with a simple “I get why you’re doing that, I would too if I didn’t know what I’m about to tell you...”

When Umi said “Facts are facts, let them deal”, Tony would counter “They just won’t instead.”, and he was right.

He had seen it first hand; his own grandmother had lost 20,000 dollars to a supposed “truth-teller” that claimed to be connecting her to her dead husband.

After grandpa died, before grandma committed her life-savings to a scam artist, she was sprinkling every conversation with not-so-subtle clues about how she couldn’t handle not talking to him anymore and was considering trying. Tony assured her that all the academic literature on the matter said that the feeling would pass and that she couldn’t talk to the dead, but for some odd reason, Grandma didn’t take this matter-of-fact approach to heart.

Soon after, he would leave for a holiday in Spain, and in his own hubris, while drinking with friends, he would humble-brag how he saved his grandmother from her own superstition. His heart sank when a message came about the bank withdrawal.

It was after this that Tony vowed to never again invalidate someone’s feelings because they didn’t line up with the facts; to bring them to the light, Tony realized you have to speak *their* language and work with what is, and not with what you *want* it to be.

Umi was never able to get past the feeling of “It’s the truth! I refuse to pander!” for long enough to be able to seem relatable, and without Tony, the SSS and her might have been doomed to wither in obscurity, growing saltier evermore in her digital echo-chambers.

But they found each other, and in each other, a common purpose; Destroy Destructive Delusions.

DDD was the fundamental tenet of the SSS.

Tony had managed to convince Umi to downsize her goal of global atheist domination to a more manageable project; if the delusion is directly provable to be harmful, it goes on the list.

They hoped that by focusing on individual hucksters and exposing how their scams work through engaging videos, people would not only be safe from their manipulations but also be more critical of the ones they couldn’t get to.

“This is our religion” they would joke.

Working menial jobs during the day to fund the construction of an online empire at night was not easy, but it was easier with two dedicated individuals hyping each other up.

“Soon, SSS will start bringing in enough to pay for more than just the website.”

Things were moving along slowly but surely as they gathered a faithful following of fellow skeptics that sporadically donated to an ever growing war chest.

It didn't hurt that Tony looked good on video either, or that Umi was a surprisingly competent producer.

The Balkans were their bread and butter, but the audience was growing and they both agreed that they needed something “big” to tip the scales.

While scrolling through local Telegram groups Tony had used in the past to buy weed, he found something that he would later label as “the universe providing”, although you would never hear him admit this to Umi.

A group of Poles were boasting about having been to an exclusive, expensive new fortune-teller.

People being enthusiastically taken by their scam artist is nothing new. After all, if the scammer couldn't sell those emotions to their victim, would they be able to run the scam at all?

But this was different; the fortune-teller was advertising as always being 100% right, with a *money back guarantee*.

Fortune-tellers pretending to be right is the entire scam, but the “100%” wasn't commonly used simply for the fact that it helped the scam itself if it was presented as a difficult-to-interpret art, and not an exact, pedantic science.

Secondly, and much more oddly, they were offering money back. Tony thought “That *never* happens.”

He was intrigued; by the time he found Umi in the bathroom to tell her about the new opportunity, dramatically waving for him to get out, he was already formulating the video's clickbait title.

Soon after, Tony was on the phone, booking the cheapest tickets possible to Poland for the both of them.

Umi hated doing anything that involved her using her full name; it felt too intimate to share with strangers as her nickname was a carefully constructed alternative for her public English-speaking life.

The only time she would share it willingly was when she needed to tell a pushy salesman to back off; studies showed businesses that when you use a customer's name, they are *apparently* more likely to spend more. This research caused an influx of new sales policies, but what they didn't account for as per usual is context; rare is the salesman that can naturally pull that off.

"Most of the time, you're left with some sense of being violated because some dude thinks he's good with people after watching a few YouTube tutorials on manipulating customers, so now you're being verbally molested with your own name in order to get you to buy more." is how she put it to Tony on their first date.

Umihana would tell them her name after they asked, only for them to repeat it back and, regardless of the quality of their pronunciation, she would go on to correct them with the most put-on accent she could muster.

No salesman has ever lasted more than two back-and-forths of this before they defaulted to a more distanced "Ma'am" or "Miss", "which is what it goddamn should be" Umi thought.

After the tickets were booked, Tony and her sat down to strategize their approach to the subject.

Their usual expose involved either her or Tony going "undercover" as a desperate believer in whatever the scammer was selling, only for them to eventually reveal that they were being audio-recorded as the other person walks in with a phone-camera for the visual finale. They then spent most of the video breaking down "what happened" and what can be learned from it; it was a format many gotcha-style investigative journalists had used in the past to much dramatic success.

"Ok, so this one could be different" Tony sat on the floor and crossed his legs. "There's a lot of buzz about this teller never failing, and I tried looking into it but I can't tell whether they're just great at marketing or..."

"That wouldn't make sense though, since you said it was hard to even find them in the first place..." said Umi.

"Right, but maybe the exclusivity is part of the marketing. I just can't tell yet, so let's focus on what we know."

What they knew was how fortune-tellers, psychic readings, mentalism and clairvoyance worked, and in most cases, it wasn't hard to pick out once you knew the basics.

Cold reading was essential; most tricksters were great at reading people and their responses, and would use this to essentially shape whatever they're telling as they go.

In the internet age, the most savvy and successful scam-artists were able to utilize “warm” reading, whereby they’d use highly detailed amounts of information that people were freely sharing online to research the client.

People are very ok with handing over cash when they think you know them better than they know themselves.

To make sure there’s nothing they could miss, they would also use things like the Rainbow Ruse; by telling someone that they have a personality trait, as well as the opposite of that trait, you simply can’t miss.

Sentences like “Most of the time you are positive and cheerful, but there has been a time in the past when you were very upset... is that you?” work a lot like a horoscope; generic statements that anyone can find themselves in, dressed up to appear as information curated from the ‘other side’.

At least, that’s how Tony usually explained it to people; Umi’s take was “How can’t you see that they’re just telling you what you *want to hear* for *money*?! ”

Umi and Tony would go on late into the night, switching between trying to use their past exposes to anticipate how the scam worked and drunkenly singing about how they were going to be famous YouTubers.

They both missed work the next day.

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HOW THE SCAM WORKS

“Have you heard of binaural beats?” Mike enthusiastically asked their guest. His partner face-palmed out of view in an attempt to signal to Mike ‘dude, no, not that’.

“Like, where you play two sounds of different frequencies and your brain makes a third? Isn’t that mostly pseudosci...” asked the clearly confused guest. He turned around to meet Jan’s gaze, who quickly moved his hand off his face and gave a pursed-lip smile.

“It’s not that, I don’t think it’s that...” Jan said as he moved to join Mike in facing their guest.

Mike started saying “It might be! When we looked at...” when their formally-attired guest interrupted quizzically; “Wait a minute, you guys don’t *know*?”

He and Jan exchanged worried glances. Jan sighed as Mike took the the lead;

“Look, cards on the table, we do need your mo... mind in this, so we’ll tell you what we know. We haven’t filed yet for obvious reasons, but this is as proprietary as it gets so...” the very insinuation made their guest move his eyebrows in such a way that Mike quickly moved the point along, “but! that’s obviously not an issue with you, I was just saying, it’s...”

Jan stepped into the conversation by taking a small step to nudge Mike out of the way and continued in his place;

“Machine learning can be a bit of a black box sometimes, due to the very nature of how we get the results. I tell a computer that it needs to achieve a goal and we feed it training data, and it finds a way, the best way it can, the quickest way it can manage, and often, we have no idea what that way is; we just know the result it brings us...”

Mike nudged him back and took over again; “And we don’t *need* to! The model it uses is irrelevant, that’s the point. Sir, I can tell we’re losing you here, so I’ll get to how this can make us a *lot* of money, right now...”

Mike takes an iPad from the table and opens a slideshow.

“This what we call the web of association; each dot represents a concept or idea and the lines represent how those ideas relate to each other. In totality, it’s a semantic approximation of a human neural network. Ok? So, we started with that.”

Jan heard his cue and continued; “Ok, so that was the training data. Now, we set up an AI to vocally chat with people and map out *their* web, which simply put is the single best virtualization of a human personality or mind that currently exists, but that’s like, not even where the algo...” the pair were getting excited again.

Mike gently touched Jan’s arm out of view of their guest and cut in ; “We sat people down to chat with Selma and she would map out...”

Jan started adding “Uhh, *S.E.L.M.A.* is the name of the AI, it’s actually kinda clever, it’s short fo...”

Mike glanced at him but continued without missing a beat “their entire brain, just by talking to them and using pre-crawled data freely available on the net, and when it has *that*...”

“So what, it’s a personality quiz? Is that it?” The man in the suit was now visibly losing patience.

“No, it’s... it’s a brain-maker.” Mike said, made unsure by the momentary silence that followed whether he should have used their internal terminology at this moment.

Jan jumped in again; “It’s nothing you’ve ever seen or heard of before. Imagine if something could surf through the associations in your mind, the very things that make up your life and

decide your reactions to things and how you feel about stimulus and triggers and..." He was struggling to find the words to convey a lifetime worth of research on the matter, but this is why he had Mike.

Mike thought back to how Jan first explained it to him, all those months ago when they first started the project. He drew their attention back to the iPad and moved the slide along. "I think it's easier to understand with an example..."

"See this network right here? We had someone come in, got Selma to map them out, and then, we had them learn a new thing. Usually we picked basic concepts, historical tidbits and the like. The 'what' was irrelevant. We just needed two sets of data; a brain with the specific information, and a brain without." Mike was slowing down a little to make sure their single-member audience was still following, "Then, we told Selma to make the change between the two sets happen by talking to them, as efficiently as she could..."

Mike slowed too much and the guest assumed that the point had been made. In a supercilious tone, he said loudly "So you brought me to Poland to tell me you've made the world's best conversational teacher? Seriously, edutainment? You think that's how I made money?"

"No, sir, you misunderstand, that wasn't..." Jan started, but Mike's approach was more confident.

"No, that's one thing we *could* do, but that's not where the magic is. This is what we did." Mike gestured back at the iPad.

"We reversed it. Now that Selma knew how to *add* things to the network, we asked her to do the exact opposite."

"This is Maria's brain" Mike pointed at the screen "And this part right here? This is her relationship with dogs." he gestured to an area of the web that was highlighted in a different color, "When she was young, a feral dog bit her. It was horrible, she was terrified and it clearly..." he tapped the screen again, playing the presentation out "...echoed throughout her entire life. See all these things it affected? It made her more anxious, less likely to seek novelty and take even *good* risks, all of that... not to mention that she, of course, developed a phobia of all dogs. This is how she got involved."

Jan felt the topic was his to expand on; "Maria is my sister. She was our first customer, our very first trial and...well, to put it bluntly, our first success. A *wild* success."

"So she..." the guest raised his finger to his lips as if he was about to say something, but he let Jan continue.

“She is today, honestly, a different person. She’s happier, livelier... and, well...” Jan pulled out his own phone and flipped it around to show a picture, “she owns a dog today. She loves him so much, and I never would have believed... I mean, growing up, she was *always*...”

Mike pushed the iPad he was holding up a little higher to suggest that the presentation was continuing; “This is her brain today.” The screen showed the same web of dots slowly removing a few red points and recolouring the red lines that it previously touched. “Maria sat down with Selma and after maybe, what was it, *half* an hour? Half an hour later, she walked out *fixed*. That was day one.”

“Couldn’t you tell by what they talked about *how* it did this?” their guest’s entire demeanor changed as he began to connect the dots himself, and what those dots meant for his other dots.

“No. We tried. You can see for yourself.” Mike pressed on the pad a few times to show a transcript of Maria’s session. “As you can see, it’s actually a very banal conversation. They barely mentioned dogs. But I don’t think that’s all that was happening...”

“What do you mean?” the suited man was now fully engaged and no moment was wasted between speakers.

“I mean that Selma hums.”

The statement made their guest raise an eyebrow but remain silent.

“I mean... yeh, she hums. Or something. Sometimes, we can hear her humming when she talks to people. And she makes other noises too, sometimes noises we can’t even hear until we check the recording. See, that’s why I thought it might be like binaural beats where...”

“It’s not binaural-fucking-beats Mike, let it go.” Jan was getting frustrated, but it didn’t matter as their guest’s mind was racing too fast to notice their squabble.

The suited man raised a finger and said “How is this legal? You told me you’ve been running it for a while now, you had... what was it? 200 runs already?”

“300. Over 300.” Mike said proudly.

“300 people were subjected to the digital equivalent of brain surgery and you guys don’t even have a medical license between you, right? So I ask again, how is this legal?”

Mike and Jan looked at each other and exchanged worried glances.

Jan stepped up first “It’s not *illegal*, which is how we’re doing it. It’s not illegal because it’s like we discovered that you can make a nuclear bomb out of chewing gum, and nobody knows it yet, so why would gum be illegal? Also, we’re in Poland...”

Mike could see the analogy wasn't selling. "Look, sir, it's just talking. They're literally just talking. Are there any laws against playing sounds from a computer? Because that's all this is. It's an AI talking to people and helping them get over their problems. Shrinks have been doing it for decades, but not with this level of precision... so far, sir, psychiatry, psychology, all of that, it's been closer to an *art*. Now, well..."

Jan finished his thought "now, it's a science."

THE REVERSE MECHANICAL TURK

Umi took a deep breath and stepped through the beaded curtains separating the waiting area from the session room. She instinctively moved the beads away from the front of her chest so as to avoid hitting them into the hidden mic taped to her. It was showtime.

A mostly empty room greeted her; there was a chair facing something resembling a simple catholic confessional with a thick veil draped over it. Umi quickly said to herself "Well, that's different."

There was a certain kitschy style that every fortune-teller's room had had in her experience thus far, and it was distinctly absent from this room.

Where one might normally find esoteric wall patterns, crystals of all sizes (and prices) lined up along tawdry shelves, and the ever-present imitation Persian carpet, there was instead... nothing. Nothing but a simple chair and a weird draped box that resembled a Catholic confessional booth in size and shape.

The building, lobby, even the waiting area she had just been in; they were all exactly what she expected until now, but after going through the beaded door, it was almost as if everything else had been a facade that had now dropped.

She wondered for a moment whether she walked into the correct room, but remembered that there was only one door to go through.

Umi sat down on the chair and looked over the printed piece of paper she had been given in the lobby.

It read; "Madame Selma will greet you after you sit. She will lower the light to help her powers connect to the other side; do not be alarmed. Madame Selma wishes you only well. Speak clearly, speak from the heart and you will find that Madame Selma is a very capable conduit for the collective consciousness."

The rest of the page was full of examples of the different problems people came here to fix, and included for each a suggested phrasings and formats when speaking to the Madame; as she perused through a list ranging from sentences like “I am afraid of dogs.” to “My cousin molested me.”, Umi thought to herself ‘you are not fucking qualified for that shit, you scammy scum’

Umi rolled her eyes as she reread the initial patter. She thought “They dressed it up differently, but it’s the same ol’...” The lights turned off and from seemingly everywhere at once, Selma spoke.

“Hello Umihana. How was your flight?”

Umi didn’t respond. She sat there in the darkness feeling uncomfortably seen and began to sense a familiar rage at the violation. After a deep breath, she began her counter. “So you googled me, is that it? I don’t know how you found my real name but I’ll tell you right no...”

“I can sense that you are disturbed. The process works more efficiently if you understand that I am here to serve you.”

Umi fired back “Serve me what, a load of bullshit? I’m not falling for it, I know your type, I know your scam. Now turn the fucki...”

“You have already paid the fee. I know it’s not a small amount. Why don’t you, just for shits and giggles, try me and see if I’m for real?” Umi was impressed with the teller’s ability to mimic her style of speaking, as the scammers they exposed so far didn’t have the linguistic wherewithal to change their approach this dramatically.

She thought of the content that this banter could produce for their channel; usually, the scammers would instantly shut down and try to evict them once they realized what they were trying to do. A proper conversation had never happened so Umi stopped looking for opportunities, but here one was.

Selma began again;

“I won’t keep you long, I promise. Why don’t you tell me what your problem is?”

Umi thought she heard a faint humming sound in the background but thought nothing of it. She sighed and, after clearing her throat to make sure both Selma and the mic heard her clearly, she said;

“I guess, I just don’t believe you.”

Seconds later, Umihana was on the ground, experiencing her first seizure as Mike and Jan rushed frantically into the room from behind a hidden door.

