

The COVID-19 pandemic pushed social media to become increasingly tribal

March 28 2022, by Najmeh Khalili-Mahani



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Media theorist Marshall McLuhan suggested that [each media-related extension of man comes at the expense of another organ](#). For example, by increasing reliance on visual media, we lose touch with oral

communication.

McLuhan also formulated the [laws of media](#) which states that all media aim to extend the body, and when they do so some media become obsolete, some get revived and when a new medium is pushed to its limits, it reverts to an early version.

McLuhan's theories take on a new significance as we witness [a reversion of social media](#), which I refer to as "tribal media." By this, I mean media that reflects a fragment of a society consisting of like-minded people within specific political, economic, cultural and personal parameters.

Social media has now been around for two decades, and has been treated [with ambivalence since its inception](#). The global COVID-19 pandemic may have pushed social media to its limits, and reverted it to an earlier version: chatrooms.

Until a few years ago, one of the greatest worries about the internet was how addictive it could be. However, when we studied the [relationship between screen addiction and stress](#), we found a [silver lining](#): There was a possibility that addiction to screens helped reduce the emotional burden of other stressors, such as financial worries or relationship problems.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced a different consideration of whether or not social media use produced stress and anxiety. Those who were searching for the potential harms of screen addiction on brain development now had to contend with life and work activities moving online.



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Pandemic reversal

In March 2020, our research team used the occasion of the pandemic to explore [whether social media causes or relieves stress](#). We asked respondents about the change in their patterns of different media usage as a result of the pandemic. One year later, we repeated the same question. What we found was a significant change in the nature of people's interactions with social media—users avoided what was perceived as sensational and political content, but gravitated towards building community.

We observed this trend in another independent analysis of how older adults used social media and [communications technology](#) to cope with [public health measures](#) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We found that, for them, [social media and new platforms such as Zoom were important only in as far as they connected them to their own families and communities](#).

The pandemic made social media and communication platforms the inevitable extension of us. But by bringing us into this forced global embrace, [it may have also forced us to split along tribal divisions](#)—what anthropologist Gregory Bateson refers to as [schismogenesis](#). These divisions occur because of, and are exacerbated by, increasing conflict in communications about contentious topics such as lockdowns and mandatory vaccinations.

Chatroom revival

COVID-19 revealed that social media companies are neither neutral nor benevolent. They pick their own tribes too. And when this happened, users reacted.

Research by [the Pew Research Center](#) found that more than 40 percent of Facebook users had begun abandoning the social network before the pandemic.

This followed a chain of controversies involving [selling data to Cambridge Analytica](#) to gathering data about the psychological profile of American voters and allowing the [Russians to interfere with an American election](#).

When Facebook was accused of profiting from the spread of misinformation, they used the same type of data-mining methods [to monitor and censor posts on their platform](#). Users could no longer ignore

the fact that [Facebook gathered and capitalized on their information for corporations that would pay for the data.](#)

As a result of this accelerated exodus, [the company's shares dropped by 25 percent.](#) But Facebook acquired [the end-to-end encrypted group chat app WhatsApp](#) and launched [private chatrooms unregulated by censoring algorithms.](#)

Both of these platforms represented a revival of chatrooms.

Tribal platforms

Donald Trump's use of Twitter as his personal propaganda machine, especially in relation to his public health disinformation, pushed social media [to a new edge.](#) When [Twitter blocked Trump's account,](#) it illustrated the power of social media in political interference. [Media commentators sounded the alarm,](#) concerned that a corporation's meddling in determining the legitimacy of narratives sets a dangerous precedence and threatens the right to the freedom of expression.

When cultural and ideological [schismogenesis surfaced in different narratives of health and safety,](#) Twitter decisively took a position. In response, Trump created his own media platform: [Truth Social.](#)

There might still be a silver lining in changing our habits with regards to tribalized media usage. Anthropologist Heidi Larson, director of [The Vaccine Confidence Project,](#) warns that [centralized "censorship" of information runs a greater risk in creating conspiratorial forms of information communications.](#) Larson suggests that [targeted social media is better suited to promote trust and serve public safety.](#)

It is not surprising that over the past two decades of globalized [social media,](#) we are now returning to the controlled-access chatrooms for

people with proven ties and loyalties to each other. Whether this 'tribalization' is an effective response to how we cope with the stress of a world in which [social media can be weaponized in times of war](#) remains to be seen.

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