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From the "Global Village" to the "Tribal Battlefield": Digital Tribalism and the Paradox of Social Media Connectivity

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Abstract. In 1964, McLuhan proposed the concept of the "global village," predicting that electronic media would compress spatial and temporal distances and bring humanity together into a synchronous and empathetic global community. Sixty years later, social media has achieved instant global connectivity at the technological level, yet its use has been accompanied by polarization, hostility, and identity confrontation. Drawing on McLuhan's media theory and relevant findings from social psychology and platform studies, this paper offers a theoretical analysis of the mechanisms of this paradox. This paper argues that McLuhan's technological prediction about "connection" is partially correct, but his theory equates "connection" with "understanding" and neglects the enduring power of human tribalism. Digital platforms are not the creators of tribal conflict but its structural amplifiers. Algorithmic recommendation, the outrage economy, group polarization, and identity fusion work together to turn social media from a "global village" into a fragmented "tribal battlefield." The findings have implications for platform governance, digital literacy education, and the development of mechanisms for cross-group dialogue.

Keywords: global village, digital tribalism, social media polarization, algorithmic amplification, identity conflict

1. Introduction

In 1964, Marshall McLuhan proposed the concept of the "global village" in Understanding Media, arguing that electronic media would eliminate geographical and cultural distance and re-tribalize humanity into a closely connected community [1]. This prediction appears to have been verified at the technological level in the era of the Internet and social media: information can cross national borders instantly, individuals can interact in real time with strangers on the other side of the world, and global issues can quickly attract widespread attention [2]. However, technological connection has not brought the expected understanding and peace [3]. On contemporary social media platforms, polarization, hostility, identity confrontation, and information warfare have become the norm [4]. Different groups occupy separate spaces within algorithmically curated information flows, and the cognitive gap between them continues to widen [5]. The "global village" vision depicted by McLuhan appears instead as a fragmented "tribal battlefield" [6]. This contradiction in platform interactions during key events leads to conflicting narratives, where a hashtag can unite some while others perceive it as evidence of bad faith. Different platforms interpret information through varied

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lenses, creating disputes over facts and policies and eroding trust within communities, with social media amplifying these divisions globally and personally.

Existing studies on social media polarization mostly focus on single mechanisms such as the echo chamber effect, filter bubbles, or algorithmic recommendation [5]. These studies provide extensive empirical evidence, but few systematically examine the paradoxical relationship between "connection" and "conflict" through the lens of McLuhan's "global village" theory [1]. In addition, scholarly criticism has paid insufficient attention to the romanticized tendency in McLuhan's concept of "re-tribalization" [7]. McLuhan imagined the tribe as an organic community but ignored the dimensions of exclusion, hostility, and willingness to sacrifice within tribalism [8]. This theoretical blind spot makes the "global village" prediction insufficient to explain digital tribalism [2].

This paper addresses why social media's potential for connectivity has not brought global unity, but instead given rise to confrontation between identity-based groups. To address this question, the paper combines theoretical critique with a synthesis of the literature from three perspectives: communication studies, social psychology, and platform studies. The analysis proceeds as follows: first, to examine the theoretical logic and utopian presuppositions of McLuhan's "global village" thesis; second, to turn to digital tribalism and analyze how algorithms, platform economics, and group psychology jointly shape tribal boundaries; finally, to reveal the internal mechanisms of digital tribal conflict and discuss their theoretical and social implications. At the theoretical level, this paper attempts to revise the utopian assumption about media that "connection necessarily brings understanding" and proposes "digital tribalism" as a supplementary framework for understanding social media. At the practical level, this paper considers platform governance, algorithmic transparency, and digital literacy education, emphasizing the importance of cross-group dialogue mechanisms in a pluralistic society.

2. Theoretical foundation: McLuhan's "global village" thesis

2.1. The medium is the message

McLuhan's core proposition, "the medium is the message," holds that media form itself shapes social structure more than the content it carries [1]. The immediacy, synchrony, and de-spatialization of electronic media have changed the way humans perceive the world [2]. In McLuhan's view, electronic media extend the human central nervous system, enabling humanity to re-enter a "tribalized" synchronous experience [7]. This proposition provides the theoretical foundation for the "global village": if media form determines social relations, then the widespread adoption of electronic media will inevitably bring about fundamental changes in social organization.

2.2. Electronic media and the dissolution of space

Electronic media compress geographical distance, allowing distant events to enter individuals' awareness in real time. Television, radio, and later the Internet bring people from different regions into the same information field. McLuhan believed that this dissolution of space would prompt humanity to share synchronous experiences and collective identity, thereby moving toward a global community [7]. Within this logic, connection itself is assumed to generate solidarity almost automatically: as long as technological barriers are removed, humanity will naturally move toward understanding and cooperation [2].

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This assumption was plausible in the age of broadcast media. When a moon landing or a global sporting event was shown on television, millions of people shared the same image at the same time. But shared attention is not shared interpretation. Two viewers can watch the same broadcast and derive opposing political meanings. The same image can be read as heroism or humiliation, as progress or decline. Electronic media create common reference points, but they do not guarantee common frameworks of judgment.

2.3. The utopian presupposition of the "global village"

However, the concept of the "global village" implies an untested assumption: connection equals understanding, and technological integration equals social cohesion. McLuhan regarded electronic media as an integrative force but did not fully discuss the conflict and division that connection may bring [2]. In fact, synchronous experience does not necessarily produce empathy; information circulation does not necessarily bring mutual understanding. When different cultures, values, and interest groups are placed in the same information field, the possibility of conflict may actually increase. This utopian presupposition obscures this possibility.

2.4. The idealized tendency of "re-tribalization"

McLuhan's concept of "re-tribalization" has a distinctly romantic tone [7]. He imagined the tribe as an emotionally close community but ignored the exclusionary mechanisms of tribalism [6]. Research in anthropology and social psychology shows that the core of tribalism lies not only in a sense of belonging but also in the willingness to sacrifice for the in-group and the readiness for hostility toward the out-group [8]. When individuals strongly fuse their personal identity with their group identity, they are willing to make extreme sacrifices for the group and develop strong hostility toward external groups that threaten group boundaries. McLuhan saw only the integrative function of the tribe but did not foresee the strengthening of tribal boundaries and the escalation of confrontation in the digital environment.

The village metaphor is revealing here. Villages are not only places of intimacy and mutual aid. They are also places of gossip, status rivalry, exclusion, and long memories of insult. Bringing the world together at electronic speed may therefore reproduce village-like dynamics on a global scale. People know more about distant others, but they do not necessarily like them more. They may feel more threatened by them, and more determined to defend their own way of life.

3. Theoretical turn: from global village to digital tribalism

3.1. Geographic community and digital identity groups

Digital tribes are no longer bounded by geography [9]. They form self-enclosed ecosystems on social media platforms through shared symbols, emotions, and shared targets of hostility. Fan groups, political camps, and consumer brand communities are all typical forms of digital tribes. These groups do not rely on face-to-face interaction but maintain internal cohesion through likes, shares, comments, and algorithmic recommendation on platforms [10]. Moreover, because of the "context collapse" effect of social media, audiences from different contexts are brought into the same communicative space, making identity confrontation more direct and frequent [9].

Digital tribes can form around almost any object: a candidate, a football club, a health practice, a conspiracy theory, a language, a religion, or a memory of historical injustice. What matters is not the

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object itself but the emotional investment and boundary work that surround it. Members develop shared vocabularies, inside jokes, heroes, and villains. They also develop routines for policing dissent. Someone who asks too many critical questions may be treated not as a fellow member with a different view, but as a traitor or an infiltrator.

3.2. Algorithmic amplification of group boundaries

Recommendation algorithms are not neutral tools for information distribution. They prioritize high-engagement content, and content expressing anger, fear, and hostility generates far more engagement than ordinary discussion. By recommending similar content, algorithms reinforce users' existing views, continuously increasing agreement within tribes and expanding the cognitive gap between tribes. It should be emphasized that algorithms are amplifiers of tribal hostility, not creators [10]. Therefore, even without algorithmic recommendation, the basic functions of social media—posting, sharing, and following—would produce these problems. The amplification of extreme voices existed before algorithms; algorithms merely accelerated their confrontational expression.

The important point is that algorithms do not need to be malicious to produce this effect. They only need to optimize for attention. If posts expressing anger, fear, and moral outrage receive more clicks, comments, and shares, those posts will be shown more often. Over time, users may come to believe that everyone in their network agrees with them, and that people outside the network are not just wrong but dangerous. The algorithm is not the author of the conflict. It magnifies what users already find engaging.

3.3. The outrage economy and engagement incentives

Platform business models create structural incentives for hostile content. Attention is a scarce resource, and anger can always attract more attention. Taking sides and sharing hostile content both contribute to platform engagement. This is the result of structural incentives on platforms. Platforms are not neutral products but components of conflict. When hostility generates traffic and revenue, it is difficult for platforms to avoid bias toward confrontational content when designing recommendation mechanisms [10].

3.4. Group polarization and identity fusion

Group polarization theory suggests that discussion within a closed group often strengthens members' initial positions [3]. Members express loyalty to the group more frequently during interactions, thereby pushing the group's position toward radicalization [8]. Identity fusion theory further explains this phenomenon: when individual identity is deeply fused with group identity, people are willing to make sacrifices for the group [6]. The digital environment accelerates this process: interaction within the tribe and the persistent perception of external threats rapidly deepen identity fusion, so group radicalization can occur within a short time.

In face-to-face groups, polarization is limited by the social costs of rudeness, the presence of moderates, and the ongoing need to live together after the argument. Online, these limits are weaker. Users can leave a conversation by blocking or muting others. They can find a new audience that will affirm a claim until it feels true. The absence of friction does not make people more reasonable. It often makes them more extreme, because the only feedback they receive comes from people who already agree.

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4. Internal mechanisms of digital tribal conflict

4.1. Filter bubbles and echo chambers

Filter bubbles and echo chambers are two commonly proposed mechanisms of digital tribal conflict [5]. The combined effects of algorithms recommending similar content, users' selective exposure, and confirmation bias continuously increase agreement within tribes while the shared cognitive foundation between tribes is, to a certain extent, neglected. However, the existence and strength of the echo chamber effect are highly dependent on platform context and polarization should not be attributed to this mechanism alone [11].

4.2. Confirmation bias and selective acceptance

Users are not passive recipients of algorithmic recommendation. They actively seek out information consistent with their existing beliefs and avoid viewpoints that conflict with their own positions. The discussion process on social media shifts from "persuade—be persuaded" to "confirm—be confirmed." Users' motivation for participation changes from "understanding the other side" to "proving that one's own side is correct." This shift narrows the space for cross-tribal dialogue, and the quality of public discussion declines accordingly [11].

This cannot be explained solely by a lack of knowledge or effort. People are motivated to protect their identities and communities. Challenging a deeply held belief can feel like betraying one's group, especially when the issue is tied to religion, nation, race, or moral values. Social media makes this protection easier by offering endless sources of confirmation. It also makes it public. Every like and share is a small statement of allegiance. Over time, users may become more skilled at defending their position than at understanding why others hold a different one.

4.3. The decline of cross-tribal dialogue

In an era when algorithms prioritize "us vs. them" narratives, the ability to engage in constructive dialogue with people outside one's tribe appears increasingly scarce and important [10]. The decline of cross-tribal dialogue not only weakens the shared cognitive foundation of a pluralistic society but also poses challenges to democratic deliberation. When different groups no longer share basic facts and rules of discussion, conflict transforms from differences of opinion into identity confrontation.

5. Practical implications

At the practical level, this paper offers suggestions for platform governance, algorithmic transparency, and digital literacy education [12]. Platforms should re-examine the recommendation logic centered on engagement and reduce the spread of hostile content. Algorithmic transparency should become a basic principle of platform design. Digital literacy education should focus on developing users' ability to engage in dialogue across groups, helping users identify and resist tribalized narratives. The development of mechanisms for cross-tribal dialogue is a necessary condition for a pluralistic society to maintain a shared cognitive foundation.

None of these measures is a complete solution. Platform governance can be slow, contested, and vulnerable to political pressure. Transparency can be superficial. Digital literacy can become another way of blaming users for problems created by platform design. Still, doing nothing means accepting that the loudest and most hostile voices will continue to set the terms of public life. A more realistic goal is not to eliminate tribalism, but to prevent it from monopolizing the public sphere.

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6. Conclusion

Starting from McLuhan's "global village" thesis, this paper analyzes the theoretical logic and internal mechanisms by which social media evolves from a "connection tool" into a "tribal battlefield." McLuhan was not wrong in predicting "connection"; he was wrong in equating connection with unity. Technology has indeed compressed space, but human tribalism has not disappeared as geographical distance has diminished; instead, it has re-emerged in a different form and been strengthened in the digital environment. Digital platforms are not the creators of tribal conflict but amplifiers. This paper calls for a reconsideration of the utopian assumption that "connection necessarily brings understanding." McLuhan's concept of the "global village" needs to be re-examined. It describes technological potential but does not explain certain social consequences. Digital tribalism emphasizes the central role of identity, boundaries, and hostility in digital connection.

This concept helps explain why technological progress has not brought social cohesion but instead intensified group confrontation. A better theory of digital media should avoid two extremes. One is technological utopianism, which assumes that more connection will automatically produce more peace. The other is technological determinism, which treats platforms as all-powerful machines that control users. Neither captures the messy reality. Digital media create conditions, but people, institutions, and markets decide how those conditions are used. Digital tribalism is useful because it keeps both sides in view. This paper is based primarily on theoretical analysis and literature synthesis and does not include original empirical data. Its conclusions may not generalize across contexts; the discussion of digital tribalism cases in the Global South is limited. Future research can compare platforms, develop methods for algorithm auditing, and experimentally evaluate digital literacy interventions.

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