

Polarization on social media

A Psychoanalytic and Group-Analytic

Reflection on the Failure of Tolerance

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One of the most dramatic aspects of the digital revolution is the establishment of ubiquitous cyber communication. Not only has it facilitated interpersonal communication, rendering it both simple and immediate, it has also created a virtually unlimited distribution mechanism. Online, one can speak one's mind to a vast circle of people, far exceeding one's previous capacity to find an audience. Complete strangers have become infinitely accessible. This process also saw the emergence of groups of interlocutors, who congregate around certain issues, ideas or views. All kinds of materials are spreading about willy-nilly in cyberspace; people go shopping, deals are signed and delivered. At first glance, all that has been happening over the past few decades looks like a universal breakthrough; but this revolution is happening so fast that attempts to fathom its meaning are falling behind the manifold changes that keep unfolding before our very eyes.

The discourse on the online communication revolution often centers on harm versus benefit. Those who highlight its benefits stress that communication has been made available to everyone, in a way that eliminates class difference and breaches the walls of exclusive social groups. Therefore, some claim that digital technology has a democratizing effect (Law, 2016). People's potential for belonging to a virtual group has grown significantly, thereby alleviating altogether experiences of loneliness, social isolation and depression (Bacon, 2018; Bainbridge, 2019). Many people who first meet on the internet form full relations later. Many get married. During covid-era lockdowns, social networks have proven that they can serve as a source of belonging, relieve anxiety and provide sources of relevant knowledge. Indeed, in many cases, social

networks ignore the interests of regimes of privileged groups, allowing the sharing of information which had so far been kept secret. A case in point is Russia's decision to shut down certain social media companies after invading Ukraine to keep destabilizing information about the war and its costs away from the Russian public. One can say that, in any field where many people share a broad common denominator – such as common identities, shared emotions, shared dangers or shared joys – social networks have proven their merit in bringing people together. It is a well-known fact that powerful and influential social protest movements have spread through social network communication, movements whose exponentially growing reach had affected (and still does) the entire world. The #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements are examples of this.

However, in recent years, we have become increasingly aware that social networks might increase and even create polarization, when it comes to the views of individuals, groups and different parts of society. Such polarization might, in turn, increase feelings of antagonism and lead to acts of mutual hostility. Indeed, content posted on social media often seems to be inciting against anyone holding a different view, delegitimizing them and even promoting violence against them. In this chapter, we will discuss the potential (and realized) impact of social media polarization on the emergence of a cultural climate of intolerance to difference and a plurality of perspectives, thus hindering the potential for tolerance.

I do not intend to claim that cyber networks have invented something new about tolerance that did not exist before. Xenophobia, incitement, the formation of opposing groups, the dictation of beliefs and feelings by vested interests – all of these have existed throughout history. It seems that the unique significance of cyber networks in terms of tolerance and intolerance lies in their massive distribution, now a World-Wide-System, and in humanity's increasing dependence on hand-held electronic devices, that are gradually almost becoming a part of the human body. It has never been easier for interested parties to influence people remotely and the techniques for achieving this influence are constantly being upgraded. Election campaign headquarters or network companies are able to create closed societies and use these to dictate their contents to millions of people at the touch of a key. The combination of these factors might increase the threat to tolerance.

I will begin by demonstrating polarization on social media, through a talkback-based discourse on covid vaccination in one of Israel's digital newspapers.

A polarized and hostile debate between those supporting the covid-19 vaccine and those opposing it broke out after a discussion in the Israeli parliament that was held on Zoom and open to public participation. In this discussion, as Sharon Alroy-Preis, head of public health services at the Israeli Health Ministry, was talking, a woman who attended the discussion on zoom interrupted her, blaming Dr. Alroy-Preis for was being paid by Pfizer, the company that manufactured covid-19 vaccines, and was therefore biased and even downright deceptive. The immediate official response officially denied these claims, but the polarized discourse had already outburst on the internet networks.

The following excerpts include samples of the arguments made by those opposing vaccination and those supporting it:

- The “Green Pass” [Israel’s official ‘covid-pass’] is a terrible thing – creating discrimination and turning our society into a society of privilege versus second class citizens. I’m asking everyone to try their best not to discriminate anyone on any grounds. We need a healthy society, not a society of control freaks.
- Get out of our veins, we’re not getting vaccinated and there is no way we are handing our children over to dubious science, four million people vaccinated out of nine million, you’re out of your minds, it’s only going to get worse, you should quit, you have failed, goddamned villains!
- Pay no attention to all the trolls, like those who manipulate your mind. these people are promoting forced vaccines they are getting paid for it like all the media channels! All the doctors are being shut up and they’re losing their jobs for speaking out about the poison vaccines, there isn’t a single one who dares talking about the agenda 21 !!!!!!!!!!!
- Yes!!! Finally!!! Vaccines kill! There’s only 7 million people left in the country, 2 million died from the vaccines but it’s all covered up...
- Pay respect for that woman who attacked Alroy-Preis! She’s on the right side of history.
- So tired of that Preis lady, as long as she keeps threatening, she’s gonna get threatened and the truth about her needs to be heard except but usual the

ministry of sickness keeps shutting up anything that doesn't suit their agenda, just as they're hiding the comments of people hurt by the vaccine.

- Yeah go kill off your healthy children, don't cry, at best they'll turn out sterile!!!!

And on the other side:

- What triggered the analysis was a publication in the New England Journal of Medicine, on September 15th 2021, of the findings of a study on the efficacy of the booster shot, done by a group of researchers along with Dr. Sharon Alroy-Preis, head of public health services at the Israeli Health Ministry, according to which the booster shot makes you 11.3 times less likely to get infected by covid-19 and 19.5 times less likely to develop serious illness.
- Why are you cursing and why wish such terrible things to people? Where is all this nastiness coming from? Didn't get enough hugs as a child? Someone holds a different opinion than you and you instantly become a keyboard superhero... wow...
- Nice cursing. you are pathetic, when are you going to send me off to Syria you weed and cocaine snorter??? Just five million left in Israel, 4 killed by the vaccine... go curse some more you low-life miserable creature...
- I'm doing myself a favor by taking this vaccination. Go inject yourself cyanide I don't mind. People are dying without the vaccine but you are an ostrich sticking its head in the sand, not seeing what's going on around you, it's because of people like you that the holocaust happened, shame on you
- As time goes by and proof of how efficient and vital vaccination is becomes more available, the wackos in the anti-vaxxer cult only cry out louder, it's going to end in murder. We have to put a stop to this cult, to their website, declare them a dangerous cult and state that the materials they are spreading online are seditious. It should be an international effort. Biden, the US president, already declared that they are murderers.
- Totally, the incitement and the lies are getting to people and one of these loonies in going to end up pulling the trigger like Yigal Amir [the man who assassinated prime minister Yitzhak Rabin]. Read the comments here and tell me I'm wrong.

- A piece of advice for the anti-vaxxer who interrupted the discussion – turn on your vibrator on medium or higher and chill the fuck out – moron.
- I couldn't give a shit about you, you're not even on my radar, I need to keep making a living because I love my job and my paycheck and you anti-vaxxers cult can keep on howling. I don't give a damn about you and your fucked up kids, worst case scenario one of them dies and then you'll have some more you keep spewing out babies non-stop anyway so no big deal if one of them dies from the vaccine!

We are witnessing the formation of two opposing and polarized sides, that are aggregating around the total justification of their position and the absolute rejection of and intolerance towards that of the other side. At the beginning of this conflictual argument a moderate question is presented to the other side; it is either ignored or met with expressions of anger and accusation (“goddamned villains” versus “it’s because of people like you that the holocaust happened”), or with mockery, scorn and dismissal (“a society of control freaks” and “cocaine snorter” versus “you keep spewing out babies non-stop”). Some of these messages are highly aggressive, including wishes of harm on members of the other side to the extent of wishing illness and death on them (“get the fourth shot and go kill off your healthy children” versus “inject yourself with cyanide for all I care”). Other messages highlight paranoid messages (“[they’re trying] to manipulate your mind” versus “one of these loonies is going to end up pulling some Yigal Amir stunt [...] it’s going to end in murder”). It can be seen that on both sides there is a steady gradual escalation of expressions of aggression and hatred. Finally, the messages of this argument between proponents and opponents of the vaccine seem to resonate collective traumas involving the holocaust, class differences and social oppression.

The messages entail seemingly fact-based arguments, which are presented as if there is no need to offer any evidence or proof supporting them. They are also utterly ignored by the other side. Anything that seems like an attempt to refute the opponent’s claims gets no response and the entire discourse has the quality of utterly giving up on any attempt to discuss actual facts. Moreover, it appears that any alternative viewpoints are dismissed in advance, due to the absolute resoluteness of the speakers on either side.

Within each side, attention outwards seems limited and even diminishing. Otherness is not invited into dialogue and even experienced as hated in advance.

The separatism and entrenchment of these two groups is absolute. No mutual consent is created, no expression of any shared ‘togetherness’ or cooperation. It is a kind of digital war, in which people shoot at the other side from their trenches, behind made-up names, free of any accountability or concern. What used to be a face-to-face encounter with flesh and blood people (even in a crowd or a mass) is changing, before our very eyes, into mutual anonymous attacks written in a closed room and sent out to multitudes of people at the push of a button.

The fact is that within each side there is not a single message of calming things down or restraint of his comrades. Not only is aggression within each side allowed to roam free, it is even silently accepted by a mass of readers who refrain from expressing their opinion. Paradoxically, it seems that tolerance is extended to those espousing the same view as oneself and completely withheld from those holding the different views. Tolerance, defined by the Oxford Dictionary as the ability or willingness to tolerate the existence of opinions or behavior that one dislikes or disagrees with, does not prevail between the two sides. There is no indication of any willingness or intention to facilitate the co-existence of opposing views or contain disagreement. Moreover, one can assume that the overt aggression repels those who feel uncomfortable about it from intervening. They may wish to avoid expressing their reservations about the menacing speakers in their own side, after having encountered the venom these speakers have directed at others. Their silence leaves the conflict to the most aggressive as they themselves gradually become silent bystanders.

‘Show Me the Money:’ Putting Profit Before People

I will expand on the social and interpersonal mechanisms that may explain this in the next section, offering psychoanalytic and group-analytic interpretations thereof. However, beyond the interpersonal and intergroup processes, it seems that the very business model of many social networks leads them to take advantage of polarization to make a profit.

Social networks essentially function like huge e-commerce markets, where products and services are offered to hundreds of millions of people (who are now about two thirds of the world’s population). While declaring that their intentions are to help

bring people together, the companies who own and run these networks earn huge sums of money by advertising products and services. Consider the following statement of intent by one of Facebook's spokespeople:

“The goal of the Meaningful Social Interactions ranking change is in the name: improve people’s experience by prioritizing posts that inspire interactions, particularly conversations, between family and friends [...] We’re continuing to make changes consistent with this goal, like [new tests to reduce political content](#) on Facebook based on research and feedback. (Washington Post, October 26, 2021)

Despite such declarations, Facebook's business-social policy has been severely criticized recently, following former employee Francis Haugen’s disclosure of internal company documents that indicate that Facebook’s management knowingly exploited polarization for profit.

Haugen told British and American lawmakers last month that Facebook would fuel more violent unrest worldwide unless it curbed its algorithms which push extreme, divisive content and prey on vulnerable demographics to keep them scrolling. (Reuters, November, 2, 2021)

The controversy surrounding Facebook's business policy is just one example of a global-scale social occurrence in which the business policies of social networks preserve and maintain polarization while eroding tolerance. Looking into the relationship between social polarization and financial gain reveals that the business model of these companies is to ensure that each user is exposed to network content for as long as possible, while being as actively engaged as possible. The more time a user spends in front of the screen and the more engagements they are involved in (likes, comments, shares, etc.), the greater their exposure to ads for products and services and the more likely they are to spend money.

It turns out that content that is controversial, divisive or anger-provoking is more likely to pique users’ interest and increase their number of engagements. This means that, as the documents leaked by Haugen suggest, network companies may create a built-in preference for controversial and angering content in order to increase their profits by exposing users to buying opportunities.

“Engagement-based ranking does two things: one, it prioritizes and amplifies divisive and polarizing extreme content and two it concentrates it,” Haugen said. “Insofar as problematic content is often more engaging than unproblematic content, ranking-by-engagement runs the risk of favoring the problematic. [...] The posts that sparked the most comments tended to be the ones that made people angry or offended them. (London, October 25, Reuters)

The choice of which content is presented to network users is determined by an algorithm created by a team of programmers, in line with company policy. The algorithm aims to study the consumption habits, preferences and inclinations of each individual user as well as the overall content and expressions that thrive across the network. In accordance with this information, the algorithm presents each individual user with a personalized feed that reflects their expressed interests. This creates a feedback loop by which the algorithm keeps reinforcing each user's existing viewing habits by flooding them with familiar content that supports their present outlook, while *de facto* preventing them from encountering new and different points of view.

However, when social networks stream content that reinforces existing polarized attitudes and reduce dialogue with others and otherness per se, the basic conditions for the development of tolerance cannot be met. Moreover, a business model that favors the kind of divisive content that provokes anger and increases engagements makes the encounter with otherness inherently more aggressive and intimidating. Through the selective prism of the social network's algorithm, the other becomes more threatening and more likely to evoke repulsion than curiosity.

Consider, in this context, Žižek's analysis of how capitalistic dictates penetrate our lives, transforming the super-ego through the invasion of consumerist social law:

The superego is, therefore, the obscene and despicable inversion of the permissive 'You can', into the prescriptive rule "You must". At this point the permitted pleasure becomes an ordered pleasure. You need. You must because you can [...] we have here the opposite paradox of the pleasure itself, that chasing after it becomes a duty. In a permissive society the subjects experience, as a kind of duty, the need "to have fun", to really enjoy themselves, and as a result they feel guilty because of their failure to be happy".

To this formula we can add the missing part: the imperative to enjoy can be transformed into the duty to buy; shame about what you do not have is how external power becomes internal motivation. The collective mind, when overwhelmed with capitalistic oedipal messages, property even when one has no money. Insidiously, one does not feel like property: what you do feel is the belief that following the dictates of capitalism is tantamount to self-fulfillment – you will be happy this way, if not today, then surely tomorrow.

A Psychoanalytic and Group-Analytic Perspective

Thus far, our accumulated knowledge about the impact of technological changes on individuals, groups, organizations and societies has not been cohesive. It is difficult for research efforts to keep up with the pace, diversity, impact and ubiquity of these changes in a way that would allow us to fully comprehend their implications (Ofer, 2021). However, certain aspects of psychoanalytic and group-analytic thinking can be utilized to fathom these consequences.

Despite the proven contribution of cyber networks mentioned above, there is growing fear and concern in contemporary psychoanalytic thinking about their potential to alter or harm people's personalities and distort the deep meanings of interpersonal relationships. Several authors have argued that this is indeed the case and that social network use might inhibit the normal development of users' personality, especially for younger users.

It should be noted that the emotional worlds of children who grew up in the previous century involved a more or less conventional constellation of two parents, their children and their biological family environment. This structure is now changing through the addition of new configurations, some of which rely on fertility technologies that challenge even the basic conceptualization of the Oedipal constellation. In addition, as Lemma (2017) argues, children's interface with screens plays an increasingly significant role in their physical/psychic/sexual experience. According to Lemma, such stimuli do not require intricate psychic work and create a culture of instant gratification, enhanced consumerism, voyeurism and the idealization of exhibitionism. The gratification of primary needs is also mentioned by other authors, with Bainbridge (2019) adding that "the term 'binge watching' connotes both gluttony and addiction" (p. 65).

The digital possibilities available at the touch on a keyboard might be experienced as the realization of one's archaic wishes for effortless rewards. This is not just about sexual gratification through porn or the ease of online shopping. Relationships may also come to be experienced as consumer commodities, as more and more people look for and find their partners through simple online applications, which allow one to change their choices like choosing a movie on a streaming service: the next will surely be better, more fun. In psychoanalytic terms, the increasing availability of instant gratification online might revert the hard-won achievements of sublimation, working through and resorting to one's inner resources, which are grounded in the crucial human experience of absence and lack (Bion, 1962).

Some authors (Knafo & Lobosco, 2017) mention the emergence of perversions of interpersonal relationships, the extreme version of which is addiction to social networks (Turkle, 2015; Muchnick & Buirski, 2016). Bainbridge (2019) argues that, in cyber culture, interpersonal relationships may become more imaginary than real: "Relatedness is now imagined in the ether rather than lived in reality for many people, conjuring up what Sherry Turkle terms as being 'alone together' (2011)."

Some claim that the use of cyber technology also has a negative impact on overall human cognitive function, in ways that might harm our functioning as human species. Social networks strive to take over the human attention span, creating constant and unrelenting distractions which impair their users' ability to concentrate. Hari (2022) argues that the use of such technology disrupts sleep and reinforces the hold of screen culture on human leisure, supplanting activities such as reading books and acquiring information from diverse sources. According to Hari, our attention is being stolen from us unawares. 'Stolen focus' might come at the expense of one's free-floating, associative attention, in which distractedness and curiosity about newness and otherness offer an opportunity for personal and interpersonal development. The latter kind, which Bar (2022) calls 'mindwandering,' represents open, associative and gradually expanding attention, a kind of potential space (Winnicott, 1953/2003) that can contain opposites and even contradictions. Such open attention represents an inclusive creative space, from which all manner of innovations may arise. It facilitates tolerance and may even enhance it. Optimally, the two poles of closed, focused attention and open, floating attention should be part of a dynamically balanced system, which allows mutual enrichment and back-and-forth movement. The impact of contemporary cyber technology risks making closed attention excessively dominant, in

a way that pushes this system out of balance, reducing the impact and contribution of open attention.

Considerable psychoanalytic and group-analytic attention is devoted to observing social phenomena taking place on social networks or as a result of their impact. Many authors note the dangers of disinformation on social media, which can distribute lies to the masses as easily as the truth. The dominance of cyber culture involves a certain decline in reliance on mainstream information outlets, such as television news programs, and an increasing tendency to rely on social networks, which are especially vulnerable to lies and disinformation (Beland et al., 2020). The ‘stolen focus’ may stem from the intervening of capitalism in our lives (Hari, 2022), as users are constantly seduced into and rewarded for directing their attention to commercial needs. This seduction-reward dynamic may overtake users’ free will, while intentionally obfuscating their ability to notice what is actually going on and make different choices (Williams, 2018).

Such reliance on cyber networks for information might lend itself to abuse and exploitation by interest groups. Today, political campaigns often spread information and disinformation in order to defeat opponents. Trump’s years in office are harshly criticized for his deceptive use of social media, with some authors arguing that he and his staff spread vast amounts of distortions, disinformation and outright lies in a way that profoundly undermined social trust. Brenner (2021) views Trump’s presidency as combining two plagues – “a highly contagious virus and a disinformation campaign gone viral” – attributing Trump with intentional and witting use of social networks to incite the public against his opponents and remain in power. Rudden (2021) views the ‘January 6th insurrection’ as resulting from deliberate incitement by Trump and his supporters on social networks.

Thus, incitement can also be promoted by online communication. Xenophobia is a ubiquitous component of the contents spread online, contributing to the growth and severity of social polarization in recent years. Gadotti and Valente (2021) have found that, during the covid-19 pandemic, social polarization in Brazil grew on social networks, exacerbating disagreements and increasing intolerance. Also exploring the role played by social media during the pandemic, Kalsched (2021) notes that “collective imagination can be hijacked by social media” and replaced by conspiracy theories which are haphazardly dictated and distributed. Some authors view this as an invasive “virtual impingement” (Balick, 2012).

Regression to a Cyber-Womb

Beside the possibility of easy, fast and simple interpersonal communication, social networks also offer a sense of belonging to a group, empowering the self-worth of its members. In group analysis, the need to belong is considered innate as well as a component of mental health (Foulkes and Antony, 1957, p. 21). In some theoretical approaches, the need for positive self-worth is considered as vital as physical nourishment (Kohut, 1971). The social network seems to be working well in this area. It creates a “hall of mirrors” (Foulkes, 1957, p. 150) where everyone who belongs to the group is reflected through the “likes culture” of everyone else and reciprocates by being a positive mirror for others. Moreover, the essence of inner group relations is conceptualized in group analysis by the term “Matrix.” Both main meanings of this concept are relevant to us in this chapter: first, as “the common pool of meaning, the total network of communication, the matrix of the group” (Foulkes, 1975, p. 122); second, as a *womb*, a platform for life and growth (Webster dictionary, 1981).

Being included in these groups addresses an important personal need to belong and to mutually maintain positive self-esteem. Indeed, social networks are home to various support groups, whose members engage in open, profound personal conversations, which are personally valuable and even therapeutically significant. There are several mass platforms – including Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, etc. – where any user can create their own online groups and join others as a member. However, the effort to belong requires constant maintenance in the form of sharing one’s opinions, reporting on one’s personal life, uploading pictures and videos documenting events from the user’s life as well as commenting on all of the above. In each of these groups, the unspoken expectation is that members should express support and admiration towards the contents uploaded and comments shared by other members. This expression is often performed through the like/dislike indicator, which has become ubiquitously accessible throughout all platforms, with a high number of likes raising, or at least preserving, one’s positive self-worth.

Thus, the cyber group pushes its members to become increasingly similar, according to its implicit norms and rules. Anyone perceived as different, disagreeable or irritating might end up ignored, marginalized, devalued, and eventually excluded. Differences might be perceived as negative and attributed to those outside the group or

to members of other groups. It seems that such rules, as well as the price they exact, are silently accepted by members or even pushed to their pre-conscious.

Being a part of a cyber group inevitably entails the exclusion of the unfit. There are mechanisms for removing people from the group (such as ‘unfriending’ or ‘blocking’ someone on Facebook). Belonging to a social network group may subconsciously entail built-in indifference to the exclusion of others, as those excluded become literally transparent to group members. Each user unwittingly becomes a bystander to the exclusion of others, while they themselves are preoccupied with maintaining their own inclusion. This introduces intolerance into the interpersonal reality of social networks. While the ambience of the group looks and feels welcoming, it might be intolerant to those it finds unfit according to its unwritten norms of belonging and affiliation.

Unlike cyber groups’ communication, the full interpersonal encounter may assure discreteness and enables the expression of difference, insecurity and personal distress, thus potentially serving as a containing and tolerant space. It seems that virtual communication offers easy and imaginary relations, which do not require responsibility and concern and free us – at least to some extent – from getting to know the other in a true and profound manner, with all the similarities and differences they hold. Substituting the former for the latter may leave people increasingly devoid of experiencing the challenges involved in tolerance. Moreover, the increasing preference for imaginary relations over actual ones may turn the other into a stranger and even make knowing them obsolete.

Knafo (2015) describes cases in which men prefer living with full-sized feminine dolls (with functioning ‘genitalia’) to struggling with real relations with women. “There is no stress,” says one of these men. “I won’t lose half of my assets to a bitch,” says another. “I want to enjoy all the carnal satisfaction with none of the real-world difficulties of honoring another person in a relationship,” adds a third (p. 488). Note the total rejection of otherness expressed in their preference of dolls to women. I suggest that the imaginary perfect, flawless doll is a metaphor for the omnipotent archaic wish for total compliance and boundless acceptance that is promised in the social networks’ sub-grouping, provided that one respects the rules of similarity.

I suggest seeing this withdrawal as a regression to a sort of common womb-like primordial matrix, where members can lead a hybrid life, split off from complicated and frustrating external reality. Within this hybrid life, while relationships between

people do exist, including active group matrix communication, the regression to the primordial matrix encloses these relations within a commonly imagined cyber womb.

I propose the terms *Primordial Matrix* and *Cyber Womb* to conceptualize a collective illusion of a cyber space where all needs are met. When individuals collectively agree to allow group norms to define their emotional needs, they may indeed feel that they belong to an embracing group and live in a sense of relationships' plentitude. Their needs for recognition and positive self-esteem are also abundantly satisfied, provided that they rein in individual differences to conform to the domain of similarities. Their epistemological needs seem to be taken care of, too. The cyber womb can provide its participants with an illusionary sense that they know all they need to know about the reality they live in, while remaining totally ignorant of the extent to which they are following someone else's dictates. Indeed, it appears that most users might be kept utterly dissociated from recognizing that their experience of affluence and freedom of choice is underpinned by the dictates of business or political interests, which aim to prevent access to information to/from fields of content that fail to coincide with their agendas.

A new expertise is being created. Mind engineering experts turn network participants into people whose feeling and beliefs are dictated outside of their (stolen) consciousness. It is therefore possible that we are witnessing the emergence of a cyber culture in which consumption habits are formed alongside the hidden agendas that support them: easy communication, accessible information and instant gratification at the price of relinquishing one's freedom of thought and opinion, diminishing the human capacity for tolerance. Moreover, locking people in what is familiar to them, causing them to see the other and their otherness as disruptive, reinforces paranoid-schizoid psychic states.

Following Steiner's (1990, p. 226; 1993) notion of psychic retreat, turning a blind eye to reality might emerge as a defense mechanism fending off painful truths. This might involve denying and dismissing feelings of guilt and responsibility and a retreat from truth to illusionary omnipotence. I suggest that cyber-womb groups may form a privileged interpersonal environment that maintains a shared experience of entitlement. A self-perception of omnipotence may arise from a sense of belonging to an enormous cyber group. Indeed, in many cases, this experience does satisfy omnipotent wishes and enables a reduction of responsibility and guilt towards others as

well as a rejection of complexity. This combination of entitlement and exemption from guilt can result in shameless cruelty toward excluded people.

As concern for the other is disavowed, violent behavior, shaming and sexual perversion may be more common in the emerging cyber culture. Because device use is often unsupervised by parents or even unknown to them – as some parents are far less digitally savvy than their children – the age of both perpetrators and victims may become younger and younger (Knafo & Lo Bosco, 2017). In these cases, it seems that the combination of easy access to other people on social networks and the emotional compartmentalization these networks create, hinders the user's experience of acceptance and concern. Tolerance might be reduced in the user's world of interpersonal relating or replaced with objectification.

As mentioned, the increasing use of social networks impacts human attention, with users' 'closed attention' becoming excessively dominant at the expense of 'open attention.' This may entail serious consequences for interpersonal relations in general and the level of human tolerance in particular. Open attention is what allows us to be curious when encountering otherness and difference; it is what enables us to learn from what is unfamiliar to us and thereby engage in an exchange of ideas. Tolerance is also severely impaired by tense, even outright hostile, inter-group relations. By zooming out to the state of society at large, we see how, just like the pro- and anti-vaccination proponents with whom we opened this chapter, online groups can enter confrontation with one another. Just as attention can be stolen to promote the interests of various parties, personal identities might be hijacked in favor of collective identities. Perhaps belonging to a group dictates that one must proclaim that they unreservedly embrace the group's identity. Users might avoid opposing their group's prevailing sentiment for fear of being excluded, as it seems that hostility can terrorize even those who are seemingly on its side, keeping them in check.

Polarization between groups is not a new phenomenon and has existed as part of human nature, independently of cyber culture. The split of the social domain into opposing groups of "us" and "them" is a basic structure in the social organization of human beings; it is almost a given of human nature. Within this split the "them" group may be transformed into an enemy, imbued with projections and other negative attributions, through an ideology that tends to resist dialogue and exchange. This

process might be impulsive, unavoidable, and unconscious (Berman, Berger & Gutmann, 2000).

Hopper (2003) argues that, in response to existential and annihilation anxieties, society as a whole mobilizes the social defense mechanism of aggregation/massification. Within cyber networks, groups of “us” and “them” are formed, maintaining a hostile split between them that results from the aggregation defense mechanism. Within each group, the need for belonging translates into common attitudes of averseness and hatred towards other groups, thereby turning intolerance into a prominent social glue. It grows even more acute in cases where in-group messages attribute danger and threat to the opposing group (even when this is the result of projection). Intentional incitement, accompanied by disinformation and accusations of ‘fake contents,’ might intensify and reinforce the paranoid-schizoid character of this social unconscious organization. When this state becomes extreme, we believe it might result in a vicious circle in which aggregation becomes the key defense mechanism, intensifying the very anxieties from which it is supposed to protect.

It seems, then, that the fate of tolerance in social networks is related to the degree to which the cyber womb is closed and shut off from diverse and difference-laden external reality. There is still a possibility that the internet womb will be a space where self-confidence and mutual-recognition grow, where people are encouraged to follow their curiosity about others and otherness. In these cases, the womb can give birth to people ripe for tolerance, just as online dating can eventually materialize in marriage. The opposite possibility is that this womb will remain the permanent home of those who shy away from an encounter with any reality not mediated by their cyber-belonging. Now, we come to the possible contribution of psychotherapy.

Psychotherapy

In recent psychoanalytic literature, it has been argued that cyber culture “hijacks” the unconscious (Knafo, 2015) or “colonizes” it (Evzonas, 2020) for its own needs. Indeed, it is conceivable that the current intensity of screen-use and the growing duration of online social interactions may come to shrink our inner world. The intrapersonal space in which fantasies are created, wishes and fears resonate and experiences are processed may be diminished and impaired. It is possible, then, that cyber culture hinders the birth of subjectivity in young people and its preservation in older people. People who are

affected by this are likely to turn to psychotherapy out of the feeling that their personal identity is dissolving, out of loneliness, social fears and the resulting depression. As therapists, we should expect that our patients' personal encounter with cyber culture will be brought into therapy. It is to be expected, then, that we will meet patients for whom cyberspace is an important part of their lives. Among them, we might encounter a new kind of secluded lifestyle.

Moreover, the exposure to cyber society might cause people to internalize its characteristic social processes and assimilate its inner relations and values. What happens to young people who identify with the need to belong at the cost of impoverishing their personality? What happens to their psyche when they routinely avoid exclusion by participating in the exchange of support and admiration? What happens to people who are constantly distanced from the other, otherness and the challenge of tolerance inherent in interpersonal differences?

Noa

Noa is a pretty, energetic, witty and up-to-date 29-year-old woman. She works as a human resources manager at a hi-tech company. However, she came to therapy because of difficulties in steadily belonging to a group of friends and finding a partner. When in the company of potential friends or partners, she felt various anxieties that thwart the growth of these relationships, even though they began in an atmosphere of pleasantness, passion and hope. She said that she was easily hurt and often reacted with anger and offence. During the period from which the following description is taken, she was in twice-weekly psychotherapy.

Noa's father is a medical doctor and her mother is a teacher. During her early childhood – she had realized this later – her father had been busy as a fresh medical intern: apart from isolated, unexpected and momentary expressions of love, he was present-absent, nervous and preoccupied – a still-faced father. The worst was his angry, cold scolding. Unable to decipher these enigmatic alternations no matter how desperately she tried, Noa became anxious and agitated. When he reprimanded her, Noa shrank in pain, feeling rejected and humiliated. In those moments, her mother rushed in to relieve her pain, hug her and comfort her. Noa and her mother created a protective bubble of softness and comfort, which was probably necessary for them both. The comforting bubble they co-created remained at Noa's disposal throughout her life,

allowing her to retreat there when facing stressful and painful situations. However, this protective dyadic bubble prevented her from coming to terms with her father's otherness. There was no dialogue with her father's strangeness, which left her scared and rejected as well as prevented the development of an age-appropriate Oedipal romance with him. Over the years, her relationship with her father softened and improved, but the sealed-off shelter of her relationship with her mother remained active and she regularly resorted to hiding there in response to interpersonal distress in the following years as well.

In elementary school, Noa was socially excluded. Looking back, she now sees those experiences as traumatic. They were four friends. As they walked together, she found herself pushed onto the sidewalk to be included. She was hurt. She complained to them while hoping to copy-paste her mother's pattern of responding with an enveloping hug, into their relationship. It did not work. Her friends continued to drift apart until, one day, they stopped including her altogether. Noa felt banished, humiliated and helpless, lonely and lost. The bubble of her relationship with her mother comforted Noa during this period as well: she shared her insult with her mother and her mother resolved the issue with a hug.

In our meetings, she told me that she belonged to a small group of dance enthusiasts (she herself hardly danced), who met to watch dance shows, their relationship following the performance schedule. Moreover, she was active in various WhatsApp groups, which occasionally led to real-life social gatherings. While talking at length about her disappointment with the insufficiently welcoming attitude of her friends, she barely made eye contact with me. In time, she felt more relaxed in the therapeutic setting and began experiencing me as a listening ear and an understanding heart. Beyond that, I did not feel the development of any personal transference towards me. As I tried to understand the meaning of her transference to me she once said: "For me you are the world outside". It seemed that both the therapy room and the WhatsApp groups to which she belonged acted as derivatives of the bubble she and her mother had created together.

Repeated Covid lockdowns created the perfect justification for her to delve even deeper into her online groups. Relieved, she exclaimed: "Covid killed the FOMO." Indeed, the lockdown – which kept everyone from leaving their homes – solved her problem: it eased her envy of people who engage in real relationships, freeing her from this challenge. In therapy, we were empathically exploring her fears of going out,

meeting people for the first time and taking the risk of being rejected again. I understood the relief she felt in response to the pandemic restrictions.

When the lockdowns ended, she gradually began to feel that her bubble-bound life was becoming a barrier that constricted her life and her vitality. I drew attention to her internal barrier, hypothesizing that going out involved an experience of personal risk and that she may be aware that there are situations and moments when no one can accompany her or go out in her place. Noa felt hurt by me. She felt that I was abandoning her and experienced me, with anger and pain, as she did the father who had turned his back on her when she was a child. The experience of protection, which up until that point was growing and becoming more established in our relationship, disappeared in an instant.

The next period in therapy saw Noa oscillating between the comfort and trust she came to feel with me and feelings of tension and threat that arose when she experienced me as ‘pushing her out into the wilderness.’ Anything short of absolute comforting support felt jarring and painful to her. Like the gradual construction of a depressive position, Noa slowly assimilated our relationship as protective and challenging, similar but different. Her willingness to remain with the ambivalence and partiality of her experience of safety gradually helped her leave her bubble.

She started meeting people. She even entered a relationship with one of them, Jonah, whom she described as a fifty-year-old bachelor, who had ended every relationship in his life within several months. As the therapy progressed, she realized that she chose to get close to him both because she hoped that he will stay with her and because if, God forbid, they should break up, the inevitable fate of her predecessors will help her avoid overly harsh self-recriminations. He invited her to his elegant apartment and made her dinner. Noa was fascinated and excited by her encounter with these new smells, tastes and touch. The bubble was replaced by real relations.

Soon enough, Jonah did something that hurt her and Noa wanted to end the relationship, hoping to avoid further pain. To her surprise, he was angry with her; he expected her to stay and talk and stop threatening to break up. For the first time, she found herself face to face with a living, mutual interpersonal reality in which she was both hurt and hurtful. The relationship indeed ended several months later but, with the help of the therapy, Noa was now well outside the enclosed bubble that both protected her and shut her away.

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It seems to me that contemporary psychoanalytic psychotherapy should get to know the cyber life of the patients with the assumption that this life exists simultaneously, and sometimes in a dissociative and partially inaccessible to the therapeutic discourse. There may be new forms of transference towards the therapist (like the hostile external reality outside the cyber bubble).

I wish to propose that psychotherapy can play an additional and unique role vis-à-vis the threat posed by the flaws of cyber culture, as these are manifest in social networks. Psychotherapy can contribute to preserving one's subjectivity when it is threatened by the dictates of belonging on social networks. Both individual and group therapy can facilitate recognition of what is different and unique in each person, fueling the hope that such difference can also be accepted by others. Psychotherapy can help extricate people from being manipulated by the dictates of special interest groups. Sometimes, this involves empowering the person's ability to tolerate a certain extent of fear of exclusion, so that they could risk making their personal voice heard. It seems that the same things that help patients become subjects, owning their personal opinions and tastes and their right to deepen and broaden their experience and knowledge, also promote tolerance. Whatever helps the patient withstand the temptation of instant gratification in pre-designated areas allows them to encounter otherness and benefit from it. Whatever helps the patient embrace their own difference and expect that others accept it as well, may help them contain the other's difference without resorting to exclusion.

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