

Pros and cons of new social media app

SOCIAL media is currently abuzz with the new audio-based social media app Clubhouse, which connects people through conversations and speeches in specifically themed “rooms”.

Of course, sharing of views should be encouraged and diversity of perspectives celebrated. And it is always refreshing to have a colourful and respectable discourse. However, the model that Clubhouse offers could potentially raise some red flags.

Clubhouse is an invitation-only application, in which one must be invited by someone who is already in it. Some say this is a form of elitism, which is something that we can do without nowadays especially with all the hidden elitism suggested by the current Covid-19 physical distancing measures.

But this is not the issue here. It is true that it is entirely the application developer's prerogative to determine who the apps' potential users are. However, it is inevitable that one is more likely to invite like-minded people and those who will echo his or her sentiments and

assertions. This would certainly not contribute to a healthy discourse but instead create an echo chamber where biases are amplified and people join not to be informed but only to confirm what they believe.

Additionally, this will create a safe space for radical, anti-establishment ideas and conspiracy theories to take hold before being spread like wildfire. No doubt there are moderators in every room, but we must remember that these people do have their biases, too.

And there is the issue of accountability. One thing we must remember is that freedom of speech does not mean it is free of responsibility. Once the conversation is over in Clubhouse, the room will be closed and the live audio chats conducted within will disappear.

This feature might empower its users to say whatever they want, including falsehoods and misinformation, without fear of reprisal or having to be accountable for their views. This is because their speech in Clubhouse will not be easily traced.

It would be naïve to think that the application does not have the potential to provide a disillusioned information reality to its users, where radicalisation is amplified and distortion and misrepresentation become the rule of the day.

Worse, its users could create their own bubble where groupthink is encouraged, and members are immune to opinions opposite of their own and they become utterly tone deaf about the reality outside of their bubble.

The jury is still out on Clubhouse, so perhaps it is best that we treat it as just a glamorous and exclusive version of a WhatsApp group for the time being and not be spell-bound by its hype.

This is not about freedom of speech. It is the opinions being churned and amplified there that we must be wary of.

The opinions could be right, but the Clubhouse model might not be the best way of sharing them.

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