

## Understanding Polarization Effects on Voice-Based Social Media: A Clubhouse Analysis

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# *Understanding Polarization Effects on Voice-Based Social Media: A Clubhouse Analysis<sup>1</sup>*

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## **Abstract**

Modern societies have been strongly influenced by the development of digital media, which has facilitated not only the transmission of information and symbolic content, but also the creation of new forms of action, interaction, and social relations. The pervasiveness of digitization increased between 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to the lockdown of the entire world population and moved sociality predominantly online. The year 2020 also saw the emergence of a new social media platform called Clubhouse, which was based entirely on oral communication. The “global village” is recovering what Walter Ong calls secondary orality, which is typical of electronic media in literate societies, characterized by the recovery of speech in electronic form. Today, the development of technologies has introduced what Derrick de Kerckhove calls tertiary orality. The objective of this article is to follow the

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re-emergence of oral cultures as a new mode of online communication, focusing on the Italian community and the divergence between different groups of users strictly associated with polarization in highly propagandistic discourse.

Keywords: netnography, polarization, transgender studies.

## 1. Introduction

Is the change from atoms to bits indeed irrevocable and unstoppable? (Negroponte, 1996). If someone had to answer this question in the late nineties, they would probably have said no. Today, almost thirty years after the release of Nicholas Negroponte's book, we can say that we are utterly dependent on bits. Living without digitization might be possible if we were part of indigenous tribes living outside the globalized world. However, digitization has brought about an unstoppable revolution characterized by four forces: decentralization, globalization, harmonization, and empowerment (Negroponte, 1996), which has completely changed the way we live, including the way we interact with other.

The communications of the modern world have enabled the vast global spread of messages transmitted in ways in which space and time are often no longer the privileged dimensions, allowing individuals to relate to each other within frames of online interaction mediated by the new social media (Thompson, 2018).

If it is true, then, that social media has evolved exponentially over the last decade, it is equally true that it has managed to penetrate the social context by influencing, instilling, and often creating hitherto unknown phenomena.

This paper provides a contribution to the study of new oral social platforms, focusing in particular on the Clubhouse platform, an entirely new and little discussed social networking service, which had a great moment of popularity during the second phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to addressing aspects of an interpretative nature, this research therefore represents an additional source for the analysis of the social consequences effected by new technologies and the latest social media platforms.

The decision to investigate Clubhouse also derives from the fact that, in its first year of activity, the platform relied exclusively on oral and acoustic communication between individuals to the exclusion, at least until July 2021, of any other type of interaction.

While we do not currently know whether this experiment will be successful, our hypothesis is that orality will regain a predominant place in global communication in the future. At the current stage of research, however, it is not yet possible to verify this assumption, and it will be necessary to follow closely

the evolution of the phenomenon of audio platforms, of which Clubhouse represents the most successful attempt thus far.

## **2. From primary orality to secondary and tertiary orality**

Communication is one of the elements that defines humanity. If communication were only intra-personal, we would not need media, a means to communicate with others. But what makes us human are relationships with others, i.e. interpersonal and group interactions. Moreover, humans have developed communication techniques that are more refined than those of any other animal. The most refined is certainly language, understood as the ability to communicate with words, which is the foundation of most of the media that have contributed to the development of human culture. It is communication that gives rise to a person's identity and role in society. It can even be said without stereotypical banality that communication is social life and social life is life itself.

Early humans most likely communicated using sounds, cries, and gestures, thus forming an initial signaling code that gradually became more complex until it culminated in the development of articulate speech during the Middle Palaeolithic period (Barnard, 2016). Spoken language made it possible to grasp reality in a new way and became the primary mode (or medium) of human communication for thousands of years. Even today, there are small groups of people hidden in the forests of the Amazon or Borneo who live in the same way as their ancestors did 50,000 years ago; such cultures that still do not use writing are called “primary oral cultures” (Ong, 2012 [1982]).

In the world of oral culture, all communication took place (and still does today, in the case of non-literate communities) within close encounters between people. The limitation of this form of communication is that the human voice can only be heard at limited distances unless microphones connected to sophisticated transmission equipment are used.

It is certain that emotions played a very important role in the world of primary orality. It has been argued that the involvement of individuals in the act of communicating in the age of so-called primary orality was much wider than in today's world (Gronowski, 2010). Starting in the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, as social communication has shifted first to printed paper, then to electronic and digital media, thus giving preference to written or otherwise visual forms of communication, the involvement of the whole individual has been reduced in the overwhelming predominance of sight over all other senses.

The oral communication that predominated in the pre-literary phase of humanity had its strengths and weaknesses. Its strengths included the

development of extremely powerful mnemonic techniques, as the human brain could only preserve the data of human knowledge handed down from generation to generation. However, the significant weaknesses of primary oral communication included lack of introspection and, above all, analytical skills, as well as the near impossibility of distinguishing the remote past from the immediate past (cf. Jaynes, 1976).

Social and cultural anthropologists have devoted a great deal of attention to oral cultures – both those of the past and the very few still present on the planet. As early as the second half of the last century, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1958) stated that it was mainly through the use of words, rather than medicines and herbal teas, that people of these cultures healed their fellow men or harmed them, even to the point of causing death by alleged curse.

According to the literary historian Walter J. Ong, words intervened much more concretely in real life and the results of disputes depended more on the use made of words than on what we would today call “objective” factors. While writing helps to support abstract thinking and distances it from the continuous arena in which individuals confront each other, oral culture seems to be much more agonistic and characterized by direct confrontations (Ong, 2012[1982], 43) in which insults and curses are not lacking<sup>1</sup>.

The age of writing, which developed from the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC onwards and reached its peak in the 16<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries, increasingly sidelined, or rather silenced, oral culture. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a number of very powerful mass media adopted the acoustic dimension, either exclusively (see radio) or in a mixed way, accompanied by images (for example, sound cinema and television). However, in all such cases, there were always written scenarios to which the oral expressions had to adhere extremely strictly<sup>2</sup>.

The explosion of electronic communication, starting at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, represented the powerful, but at the same time ephemeral, return of written communication. The masses of users who had been denied access to mass media communication, which until the introduction of the Internet had remained the exclusive prerogative of selected professionals such as journalists,

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<sup>1</sup> Ong uses the definition of “verbomotor” for the lifestyle of oral cultures, borrowing an expression first used by the French anthropologist Marcel Jousse, who addressed oral cultures but focused mainly on gestures and rhythm as a form of technique to make the fixation of cognitive data in the human brain possible (Jousse, 1925).

<sup>2</sup> It could be argued that theatrical improvisation went outside the rigid schemes of scripts. Indeed, unlike other media, theatre had a very old tradition connected with improvisation, first attested as early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC at Orta di Atella in Campania (cf. Meine, Sußner, 2020). The very long tradition of popular theatre is the basis for the persistence of improvisational theatre, which in any case has always been a marginal phenomenon compared to theatre based on scripts or canovacci.

people of culture, science, and power, and show business stars, poured onto computer keyboards<sup>3</sup>.

With the evolution of what came to be known as social media,<sup>4</sup> there has been a shift from one-to-many and many-to-many communication to exchanging opinions on a global scale. Facebook in particular, even though it is not part of the sphere of interest of generation Z and is also moving out of the sphere of interest of many individuals belonging to what is known as generation Y (Edison Research, 2019), has become the platform on which the emotions and opinions of more than two billion people have been concentrated through written form: the monthly active Facebook users worldwide is in fact - despite the degrowth has begun - is still 2,936 billion (Statista, 2022).

There has been much discussion about the limits of communication in general, and in particular about the infinite possible interpretations of written texts<sup>5</sup>. However, the critical discourse seems to have remained confined to a purely theoretical sphere, without the mass of users of written texts ever becoming seriously aware of it. Proof of this is precisely the experience of communication through social media, in particular Facebook, which in a short time has become a tool for heated discussions between individuals and groups, a tool that in some cases has even been considered to have encouraged the organization of revolutions or at least popular uprisings, and has proven very dangerous in the dissemination of manipulated news, which on this social network has reached unprecedented levels (cf. Geeng, Savanna, Roesner, 2020).

The pervasive use of written (or textual) communication through social media initially led to an underestimation of its public value; however, in the immediate aftermath, interest exploded, in the field of legal studies and beyond, in issues related to crimes committed through these mass media.

The decision to create platforms on which users could literally “fight” through written statements was most likely intended from the outset, once Mark Zuckerberg and his collaborators realized that social communication was

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<sup>3</sup> As Umberto Eco noted, using instead of the expression “masses of individuals”, the much more expressive “legions of imbeciles” (Eco, 2015) in reference to the users of Twitter, but in general to users of the social media platforms most in vogue at the time of his speech at the University of Turin in June 2015.

<sup>4</sup> The term “social media” seems more like a semantic appropriation pushed by the corporations present on the market than a term corresponding to a reality of communication. In fact, if it is true that the so-called social media connect individuals on a global scale, it also leads them to have attitudes of asociality and aggression never known before (cf. Robbins, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> A long series of examples, including humorous ones, concerning the very difficult relationship between text and the reader were presented by Umberto Eco (1990) even before the explosion of virtual communities on the Internet.

becoming tribalized and that communication models such as the transmission of information, at least in terms of marketing, were no longer functional. A few years before the emergence of virtual communities and then of social media, James W. Carey had indicated what he called the “ritual model” as the most productive communication model for the future (Carey, 2009). One of the basic functions of his ritual model was to “maintain the community over time”, rather than the attempt to influence space, as was the case in linear transmission models. The success of this theory has been seen in the tribal marketing strategies mirroring the ritual model Carey proposed that today represent a model adopted, even if not explicitly, by the major social network giants, first and foremost, at least as far as the Western world is concerned, by the American company Meta Platforms Inc. (formerly Facebook Inc.)<sup>6</sup>.

### **3. Clubhouse as the first mainstream audio-only social network**

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) was characterized predominantly by written formats for some time until the introduction of VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol), which made it possible to carry a vocal signal. It is thanks to the technological innovation typical of video games (Burnham, 2001), in which creators and players participate in rewriting the codes of games and interactions between users, that we have begun to experiment with the use of orality in the world of virtual communities.<sup>7</sup>

On 18 March 2020, a new social media platform emerged called Clubhouse, which was entirely based on oral communication.

There were other platforms before 2020 like *CB Talk*, *Zello*, and *Discord*, and many others that were created after the launch of Clubhouse like *Spotify Greenroom*, *Twitter Spaces*.<sup>8</sup>

Clubhouse, ranked hottest Silicon Valley Start-Up for all of 2021, offers synchronous audio streaming. It was created by Paul Davison (formerly Google, Baine, and Pinterest) and Roan Seth (formerly Google).

During the first year since its launch, Clubhouse subscription (still in beta mode) was only available to iOS users and by invitation only. Each new member

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<sup>6</sup> On the success of tribal marketing see Cova, Giordano, Pallera (2008).

<sup>7</sup> The majority of video games are multiplayer online (MMO). This allows players to complete levels through group action, create a common language, and progress in the game through tips and tricks that only occur through interaction, thus leading to a social adoption of technology (Turkle, 1995, Kendall, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Other platforms such as Telegram, which is currently growing significantly, offer group audio chat possibilities. However, the main activity of Telegram is still focused on written formats (Tonkih, 2021).

was given five invitations, and fresh invitations were issued according to usage. The app's popularity led many users to sell membership codes online<sup>9</sup>. Invitations could be purchased on Reddit, eBay, Craigslist, and private Facebook groups at prices ranging from twenty dollars to over a hundred.

There was an increase in this phenomenon following an interview with Elon Musk on 1 February 2021. Musk's appearance was so popular that the app went haywire (only 5,000 simultaneous listeners could be had at any one time) and generated secondary "overflow" rooms<sup>10</sup> on Clubhouse, YouTube, and other live-streaming platforms<sup>11</sup>.

Shortly after Musk's interview, the hashtag Clubhouse invite code trended on the Chinese social media site Weibo. Users began selling invitation codes at prices from 150 Yuan to 400 Yuan on the e-commerce sites Xianyu and Taobao, even though the app was not technically available for download in the country (users can access it by switching to a non-Chinese Apple account)<sup>12</sup>.

Clubhouse became available to android users on 21 May 2021, but still by invitation only, and on 21 July the platform was finally opened to anyone who wanted to join without any limit.

Moreover, in the beginning, Clubhouse was voice-only synchronic and did not offer the option to write any text. It was only permitted to add a link to Twitter and Instagram on the bio profile. This proves once again that we live in a culture of convergence where old and new media interact in increasingly complex ways. There is no single black box controlling the flow of information and communication. Due to the proliferation of channels and technologies, we are in an era where media are everywhere and interact and interchange with each other (Jenkins, 2006). On 14 July, the platform launched a new feature of chat called backchannel.

The landing page, called Hallway, shows different rooms that are spaces for discussion that users can enter. You cannot see and you cannot enter rooms if you have been blocked by a user who is among the speakers. There are different types of rooms: open to everyone; social, i.e. visible only to users followed by whoever opened the room; and closed.

There are also thematic clubs where it is possible to create closed or open subject rooms. At Clubhouse, it's possible to become a member of a club that

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.newsweek.com/clubhouse-ebay-listings-sell-invites-audio-app-ios-hundreds-dollars-1571609>

<sup>10</sup> Rooms are definite the vocal chat on Clubhouse platform.

<sup>11</sup> <https://techcrunch.com/2021/01/31/elon-musk-goes-live-on-clubhouse-but-with-the-room-full-fans-stream-audio-on-youtube/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://qz.com/1968015/clubhouse-invite-codes-are-becoming-hot-merhan-dise-in-china/>

matches the user's interests. The clubs can be found either by searching from the landing page or scrolling down to the bottom of user profiles, where it shows the clubs the user is a member of. Clubhouse in August has switched the relationship of club members from followers to membership. The management of a club consists of three hierarchical roles: Admin, Leaders, and Members.<sup>13</sup> The Admin can choose to make membership in the club open (meaning anyone can join as a Member) or by approval (meaning that all users who apply for membership are approved on an individual basis). It's also possible to hide the "Join the Club" button from the club page to make it truly invite-only. The Admin manages membership types and can nominate the leader. The Admin can edit the club settings or name, and add or remove members from the club. They can also start rooms and schedule events that notify all club members, and can be informed about and attend shows or events. Leaders can only create rooms and schedule events that notify all club members, and Members are the ones who attend rooms and are notified of events.

In each room, there are different types of participants: the Moderator, the Speakers, and the Audience (which is categorized as followed by Speakers and not followed by Speakers). Moderators are the ones who create the room and manage the space, and they have different powers: they can decide who to have on stage, give a speech, turn off a speaker's microphone or put them back in the audience, and they can even kick a person out of the room without allowing him or her to return. Speakers come up from the Audience to interact in the room and the Audiences are people who can only listen until they ask to come up to the stage.

There have been several updates since the implementation of chat in July. In September, Clips were introduced, which allow anyone to share 30-second clips of public rooms and can be enabled or disabled by the Moderator. October saw the introduction of Pinned Links, which allows the Moderator to pin a link to the top of the room, and any Moderator can change or remove the link anytime. In November, Replays were introduced, a handy feature offered by Clubhouse that enables anyone to catch up on past chats. This allows for Clubhouse rooms to be listened to in a podcast-like way, but with more interactive live features like Pull-To-Refresh (PTR), Leave Quietly, mic taps, etc. And January saw the introduction of Sharing, i.e. a new way to spread the word about great rooms.

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<sup>13</sup> An analogy could be drawn between Clubhouse groups and the so-called guilds in role-playing games (RPG). In RPG guilds we find permanent users, internal hierarchies, and social, emotional, and psychological support (Taylor, 2006).

#### **4. The future of social networking services and the rise of voice-based platforms**

The development of digital media has strongly influenced the birth of modern societies. It has facilitated the transmission of information and symbolic content and the creation of new forms of action, interaction, and social relations. Relationships with others and with oneself have been modified by the exponential development of computer networks, which in addition to creating new forms and new channels of communication, are shaping the lives of individuals, structuring society around a bipolar opposition between the net and the self (Castells, 2000[1996]) that often tends to blur, if not vanish.

The same concepts of space and time have been radically transformed, giving rise to new ways of sharing the same virtual environment, which makes studying these asynchronous connections essential for understanding the cultural and social effects of this new “technosociety” (Lovink, 2019).

The first communication tools that appeared on the Internet allowed users to write on pre-established interfaces, which led to a new literacy that simplified language and the sharing of interpersonal messages. From words written in diaries on IRC, MySpace, Reddit, Facebook, Twitter, and others, we progressed to image sharing. From pictures sent and “posted” on Instagram, the progression to video (Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and others) has been almost entirely automatic: it has become the norm to tell one’s personal story or social and political engagement in 30-second pictures that vanish within 24 hours or are shared perpetually.

Suppose Narcissus, in the observation of an extended mirror image of himself, enters into a state of numbness and narcosis. In that case, the human being succumbs to the same sort of fascination when coming into contact with a new invention that tends to extend the self. “Thus, each medium’s individual and social consequences derive from the new proportions introduced into our personal affairs by each such extension or new technology” (McLuhan, 1967[1964], 25).

One example of the social consequences that social networking services have introduced is the increasing concern that social media might lead to social anxiety in users (Jelenchick, Eickhoff, Moreno, 2013). The most discussed example is Instagram. On social media, people also often selectively reveal themselves and construct their preferred identities or characteristics by applying a range of enhancement filters. According to studies, such use did not directly increase social anxiety; its effect was completely mediated by social comparison and self-esteem (Jiang, Ngieng, 2020).

Getting back to the use of voice on social networking services, the “global village” results from the introduction of electronic media such as radio and

television into literate societies (McLuhan, Powers, 1996 [1992]). For de Kerckhove, new technologies have led to a tertiary orality or tertiary sensoriality, “that of multimedia systems, virtual reality, and the web. It is an electronic orality, like the latter, but unlike it, it is based on the simulation of sensoriality, rather than its transmission. Through, for example, the ‘beep’ of mobile phones or computers, tertiary orality is characterized by a tactile language that gives feedback to our actions, in a sort of organic simulation” (Buffardi, de Kerckhove, 2011, 41). For de Kerckhove, real time is the condition of tertiary orality but until now most social media has been characterized by an extension of time where asynchronicity has been the norm. For these reasons it was deemed necessary to study a platform such as Clubhouse that made possible online interaction that allows information or content to be transmitted to individuals who are distant in space but not in time.

In this regard, it is worth recalling the debate that opened with the introduction of the telephone. For the first time, it was possible to interact with people at a long distance in real-time and to create connections even with strangers. It was even assumed that without the telephone, it was impossible to develop a sense of community and that this medium served to remove the feeling of loneliness and insecurity of farmers’ wives; yet for some critics, the telephone increased fears and loneliness, not only because virtual encounters replaced physical ones but also because, for the first time, an object had been imposed that crept into the home and increased the social inequalities between those who could afford it and those who could not (Balbi, 2013, Rospocher, Balbi, 2021).

From the first observation, Clubhouse allowed its members to expand their network<sup>14</sup>. People present themselves through an element of bodily physicality that is the voice in a synchronic virtual space. Users, from careful observation, have preserved their uniqueness without having to resort to actual fiction as happens in other social networks; this has occurred not only because a subscription requires a first and last name, but also because constantly speaking does not make it easy to get away with telling lies or pretending to be someone else.

Users in Clubhouse use words to discuss, engage in intellectual discourse, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, and exchange a lot of useless chatter. As Rheingold said, people in virtual communities do almost everything they do in real life, leaving their bodies behind (Rheingold, 1993).

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<sup>14</sup>We consider the word *Network* to represent a sociotechnical and material system made of interrelated technologies assembled by humans, social groups where humans meet face-to-face, in virtual settings, or in groups that never meet but to which people belong.

As human beings, we have perceptions, thoughts, and personalities that are affected by how we use the medium and how it uses us; we also have mediated *many-to-many* interactions online, where relationships and communities arise.

The social networking capital, knowledge, dialogue, and recognition make Clubhouse a virtual space where people are placed at the center of a virtual community, and we believe this the future of social media sites.

## **5. Polarization effect on voice-based social media platforms: the Italian case**

In its early days, Clubhouse in Italy was populated by journalists, politicians, actors, singers, well-known names from the world of entertainment, entrepreneurs, and intellectuals, which led to the creation of lively debates and learning rooms.

Well-known print journalists succeeded in managing the moderation such that even the presence of more or less controversial political figures in their rooms did not give rise to loud verbal clashes and polemics. This is not the case when moderation is managed by individuals who try to steer the discussion to favor a specific politician or a specific current of opinion.

In the past, polarization centered around important subjects that needed to be addressed, and we were forced to confront and resolve these disagreements. Now our once-peaceful society has been lacerated by technologically-driven opportunistic polarization shaped by algorithms and insiders (Sunstein, 2009; Talisse, 2019). Communications technologies promise to be modulated to the needs of niche audiences or specific individual users, leading to an increase in diversity in society and the breakdown of cohesion (de Sola Pool, 1990). Like-minded individuals naturally clump together and end up unreasonably increasing the trust of others and themselves. They become incapable of finding unifying principles or acting upon points of consensus. A society in which it becomes easy for each small group to pander to its own tastes will have a harder time mobilizing unity and establishing consistency in intellectual debate, such a society will promote individualism. Living and interacting with like-minded people, constantly hearing our beliefs affirmed, increases our confidence because we are overexposed to supportive voices and underexposed to contrary voices. Social media uses algorithms to accelerate this process.

Moreover, group polarization leads to embracing a more extreme version of the initial opinion, increasing our certainties with rationality-undermining effects that affect both sides.

Any of us who spend our time around like-minded folks should seriously question our confidence in our shared beliefs.

It has been noted that rooms with highly divisive topics were often opened to increase the audience.

From January 2021, Clubhouse was a battleground between supporters of politician and journalist Mario Adinolfi and his opponents, mainly individuals from what has come to be referred to as the “Afro-descendant community”, i.e. BIPOC young people born in Italy or adopted in the last twenty years by Italian families, or from the LGBTQ+ community, i.e. individuals and organized groups of people practicing non-heterosexual sexuality and non-cisgender identity<sup>15</sup>. The debates focused particularly on a proposed law against violence or discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity, better known as “DDL Zan”.<sup>16</sup> Still, they also covered other issues: from international politics to COVID-19 vaccination to a referendum on euthanasia. Two traditional political ideologies clashed, the conservative one supported by Mario Adinolfi and his followers and the liberal one supported by the above “communities”. The conflict was also reported in the national press. Everything took place within the platform, which decided on 15 April 2021 after repeated reports to block Mario Adinolfi’s account for a few days<sup>17</sup>.

From observations of the Clubhouse and Instagram profiles of the “Afro-descendant community”, it consists of young people belonging exclusively to Generation Z. The LGBTQ+ community is largely represented by Generations Y and Z, with some users from Generation X. Users from all generations have registered on the platform.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> There is no evidence that all those who participated in these Clubhouse discussions were part of organized communities; however, even in the form of individual interventions, people who sided with one of the two “communities” was considered by the audience as belonging to one of them.

<sup>16</sup> “DDL Zan” refers to the bill (*disegno di legge*) proposed by a member of the lower house of the Italian parliament, Alessandro Zan. Zan is an LGBT activist and one of the main supporters of implementing a law to providing civil unions for same-sex and non-binary couples (Acernese, 2021).

<sup>17</sup> Mario Adinolfi’s reactions to his ban from the platform were reported by the Adnkronos news agency (2021).

<sup>18</sup> Even if voice chats play a dominant role within the gaming world and create a sociality between different players, we believe that the gaming world is already highly polarized such that it cannot be confused with a voice-based platform. Video games often create realities that move from the despotic to the utopian to the diachronic or that re-tell historical facts. This leads us to avoid lumping the two models together as the gaming world has a completely different purpose than that of simple social media such as Clubhouse.

## 6. The netnographic observation

The synchronicity typical of oral platforms such as Clubhouse and this type of human moderation prompted us to experiment with an archaic form of moderation characteristic of the agora of ancient Greece. In our netnographic research, we attempted to study the relational and cultural experiences that arise from the use of Clubhouses according to the principle of “following the medium” (Rogers, 2013), despite the clear fact that it is impossible not to consider the convergence between different social media as vital to the ultimate purpose.

We hypothesize therefore that not only will voice-based platforms play a dominant role, but that orality will be increasingly present in CMC communication.

We adopted two distinct approaches in our research.

Laura Caroleo observed the field in covert access or *lurker* mode, deciding to reveal her identity as a researcher only 13 months after the first data collection and only with regard to interviews. Giuseppe Maiello used an overt access approach, disclosing that he was an anthropologist without ever emphasizing this fact or his research aims.

According to the latest data released by Clubhouse in April 2021, there are 10 million members worldwide and 400,000 members in Italy<sup>19</sup>. Although we have contacted the platform directly, we have not been provided with updated data. However, the Clubhouse press office has provided data showing that over 700,000 rooms take place on the platform every day, with an average daily stay of 70 minutes<sup>20</sup>.

The lurking period served to analyze the community by identifying opinion leaders, key members, and reference rooms. During the information-gathering phase, the researchers took notes, captured screenshots of the rooms, and analyzed the profiles of opinion leaders and members and the most active clubs. Only after the introduction of Replays was it possible to listen again to some of the most interesting rooms (in order not to violate the application’s policies).

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<sup>19</sup> [https://www.repubblica.it/venerdi/2021/11/19/news/clubhouse\\_social-326469898/](https://www.repubblica.it/venerdi/2021/11/19/news/clubhouse_social-326469898/)

<sup>20</sup> Here is the text of the e-mail we received from the Italian press office of Clubhouse: “Hi Laura, I have spoken with the HQ of Clubhouse and they have confirmed that the only data they can make public are those contained in the boilerplate of the press releases that I quote below. *‘About Clubhouse. Clubhouse is a new type of social network based on voice. People around the world come together on Clubhouse to talk, listen, and learn from each other in real time about topics like music, comedy, politics, dating, and more. Over 700,000 rooms take place daily on the platform with users spending an average of 70 minutes in rooms at a time. For more information about Clubhouse, visit clubhouse.com or follow the company on Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn’*”.

Observations showed that the most popular and oldest clubs have between 24,700 members (*Clubitalia*) and 1,500 members (*Italian Observer*). Equally important are the clubs *Italiani in USA* (1,300 members), *Italiani nel Mondo* (1,200 members), and *Growing Up Italian* (10,600 members) where people of Italian nationality living abroad meet.

Also worthy of note are the clubs of the Luigi Einaudi Foundation and the Guarini Institute of John Cabot University, as well as openly political clubs such as *Destra e dintorni*, *Left Italia*, and *Antifascismo e Costituzione*

An honorable mention goes to *My Dire Club*, which has maintained an active room for 1,653 hours.

Approximation and misinformation have emerged, resulting in the spread of fake news.

The platform has witnessed the emergence both of counter rooms, to counter-argue and counter-inform, and echo chambers. This has been characterized by a worrying political apathy, conspiracy theorizing, and demystification of scientific truths.

The main areas of confrontation over 13 months of observation have touched on: DDL Zan and LGBTQ+ issues, the referendum on euthanasia and soft drugs, cancel culture, the Black Lives Matter Movement, vaccines, the war in Ukraine<sup>21</sup>, and highly divisive daily news. It was noted that the most popular rooms were and are those with a talk show format in which highly controversial topics are debated.

Unfortunately, all these negative phenomena occurred when the rooms were no longer being opened and moderated by journalists and experts but by ordinary users. Although we debated carrying out our interviews on Clubhouse, they were deliberately conducted via telephone in order to detach us from the analyzed medium and used specific questions structured around a predefined grid.

The individual interviews were based on a dyadic relationship between interviewer and interviewee to understand the perception of polarization within the Clubhouse platform. The interviewees were chosen using a non-probabilistic criterion.

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<sup>21</sup> Under the international club *The Big Picture*, there's a room open since 24 February entitled "Ukraine Sitrep: Live Updates, Developments & Analysis". Around 1 million people had passed through as of 20 April; we don't know how long it will remain open and how many more people will enter.

## 7. Results

Out of all Clubhouse users, we chose as privileged witnesses one conservative politician and opinionist (A) and one liberal transwoman activist (B), plus other informants whose identities we will of course not reveal.<sup>22</sup>

To the question “Why do you use Clubhouse, and what do you think about oral platforms?”, (A) says:

I use Clubhouse because it happened to me. I joined the *Boomers* group<sup>23</sup>, who promoted a daily room on Clubhouse every day from 12 pm to 15 pm, and I found myself captivated and amused. Moreover, belonging to a group made everything less demanding. I’ve experimented with this new social media, which has allowed me in over 1,000 hours in the *Boomers* room to talk to around 100,000 people directly, which I consider a real achievement in just over a year. From a social media perspective, Clubhouse provides a different type of contact and is reminiscent of the logic of traditional media, with its programmability and seriality. I have not used other oral platforms such as Twitter spaces because I thought they were less fun.

As for (B):

Clubhouse was recommended to me by a friend because he thought my voice and thoughts could find space on an oral platform. Moreover, it is a choral platform that gathers many opinions.

I immediately appreciated the fact that what you had to say and who you are got through to others. Having a constructed image often confuses the idea of what I think and who am I, stereotyping me as a blonde.

On Clubhouse, speeches are much more practical and efficient because you don't have the disturbing elements you have on Instagram live. Here you have free flow of thought.

To the question about polarized arguments and the possibility of convincing someone to switch to his side, (A) answered:

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<sup>22</sup> We decided to transcribe these two interviews due the fundamental role played by this informant in our research

<sup>23</sup> The word *Boomers* refers to a room opened first under the club *La Voce D'Italia* and then under the club *Storie* founded by Adinolfi. The *Boomers* room was the most divisive and the most frequented on the platform. Its characteristic is that it has a well-defined moderation, people who are dedicated to maintaining the room's performance in a scrupulous manner.

I think I can do questionable seminars. I did it on the vaccine issue, the euthanasia referendum, and the Zan bill. My opponents saw me as someone who could sow doubt. The objective is not to take a person who thinks differently from you and bring him to your side. There is an audience, people who pass through polarized rooms, and the idea is to play on this dynamic and succeed in sowing doubt in the opposing camp, and I did it.

To the question about why people participate so vehemently in debates while remaining adamant in their positions, and to what end, the privileged witnesses answered:

(A). I am a professional journalist, an intellectual, and a polemicist in this country. You have to distinguish between two levels: the level of your opponent whom you can't convince, and then you have the audience that is listening. At Clubhouse, I have the stage where I discuss with polarized people, but I also have an audience that is more important than the stage. The aim is not the confrontation but the impact on the listener. The aim is to win battles. I had opposing positions on some topics, and I worked to bring these positions to society and the media. I couldn't find a newspaper against the referendum on euthanasia, so I articulated my opposing opinion backed up by facts. Everyone thought I was defeated like an underdog, just as they did on the Zan bill and the vaccine. The battle is never lost from the start if you create dialectical conditions.

(B): I think they do it because they have a huge ego and are narcissistic, which is a solid component of oratory. Many speak to give air to a truncated ego that feeds on self-aggrandizement. That's the purpose; to massage the ego.

Both were banned from the platform for violating hate speech policies, so we asked how they felt when they received the ban from Clubhouse.<sup>24</sup>

(A): I felt offended because I have been working as a journalist for 31 years, and no one has ever managed to take me to trial for defamation. Also, I am cautious about the words that I use. I never offend anyone. I discuss an idea very fervently but never offend a category or a person. I was certain that I was not guilty of hate speech. I had been challenged by some organized users, opponents who didn't want the doubt I mentioned earlier to be spread. In the end, Clubhouse had no choice but to give me back my honor and my profile.

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<sup>24</sup> (A) was banned on 16 April 2021, and (B) on 12 March 2022. We did not find a clear explanation of hate speech in the community guidelines. <https://community.clubhouse.com>

(B): I didn't get any response from the platform. They kept claiming that I violated all the guidelines as a hate-monger. I'm used to being excluded and silenced.

To the question as to how mutual aggression should be limited on oral platforms, the privileged witnesses answered:

(A): I am against blocks, I have never blocked anyone no matter what I have been told. I am against blocks and it is right to register the rooms to protect ourselves in the appropriate places through replays. Anyone who is uncomfortable has in the recording the certainty and the proof to be able to take legal action.

(B): A platform like Clubhouse should have human vigilantes and not algorithms. If you're explaining the history of racism, the *n-word* plays a role and is not merely something you should not say. The use of the word explains why that word exists, and it is also essential in LGBTQ history to use some words that are part of an identity discourse that cannot be forgotten. You can't apply cancel culture.

We wanted also to know more about the perception of polarization on written and oral platforms. According to the privileged witnesses:

(A): On written platforms, everything is much harsher and more offensive because of the use of fake profiles. The polarization on oral voice-based social media is immediate and the rooms are already polarized, as is evident from the discussion.

The polarization on oral platforms remains even if we all find ourselves talking in other rooms. It is not that the opposition has become favorable to you. You seek to insinuate doubts in those who come to listen.

(B): Facebook remains written. The orality is lost unless it crystallizes into conversations over time that are resumed.

(A): The verbal violence in Clubhouse is much harsher. Even me, I am harsher. Rather than verbal violence, there may be more arduous debate on Clubhouse.

(B): In my opinion, there are two different types of violence, also because of the traumas one has experienced. Having voice dysphoria, I have suffered violence on Clubhouse that I have never suffered on other platforms. At Clubhouse, I was publicly mocked because of my voice. People who couldn't place me called me names and gave me the worst epithets. Actual violence was when I confronted a person to whom I was explaining my lived

experience as a trans woman, and after speaking about it for 2 hours, I was told that it was not the case and that I was contrary to nature.

All other informants we approached also believe that Clubhouse does not allow for misrepresentation, also because the introduction of vocal cues complicates anonymity online.

Another interesting aspect that has emerged is that the element of bodily physicality that voice represents has led users to appreciate Clubhouse greatly. The voice is seen as a warm element that brings people closer together, because audio is considered an intimate medium. The rooms, presenting themselves as chats with multiple people, empathize with the voice and create a small community that some define as familiar.

The literature also suggests that the use of voice can create a closer connection between users by increasing social cues, mutual trust, and cooperation in a manner similar to the standards of face-to-face communication. Through voice, it is possible to perceive whether a speaker is human, what gender they belong to, their personality, and from there to judge the intelligence of others to whom the speaker in the first clause would be compared and understand if a person is compatible with the speaker (Reeves, Nass, 1996; Nass, Gong, 2000; Nass, Lee, 2000).

## **8. Conclusions**

To date, the stream or audio flow of Clubhouse can be considered a continuum of information that reaches everyone connected at that instant of time. Let us imagine the data stream as a file and the social network as a new form of browser, since the audio is sent in real-time and not deferred, everyone is present in that room and, at that moment, appear to be unobjectionable, since those who find themselves engaged in discussion in a room in real-time are as if they were present in a living room.

In its first year of existence, Clubhouse seems to have experienced a trend similar to that of the most popular social network globally, Facebook. In concrete terms, Clubhouse also went through an initial phase of discovery, attempts to understand the possibilities offered by the platform, and finally acceptance as a “social” network offering discussions and exchanges of ideas in telematic and non-physical spaces. Like social networks based on group communication in written form, Clubhouse also soon created groups of users with similar ideological positions and worldviews. This inevitably led to more or less bloody ideological clashes, even to the use of the room exclusion system, or even, as in the cases we have seen, to blocks and complaints.

Despite often declaring that they felt “offended” by the words of those who opposed their opinions, the individuals and groups consider the blocking of the unwanted user as the most appropriate way to “punish” their opponents.

Clubhouse is also conceived as a platform for political propaganda and despite the restrictions imposed by the platform, there is no lack of gender bias.

When asked about their perceptions of polarization, all of our respondents – both the privileged witnesses and the other informants – gave varying responses, although it emerged that most thought that oral platforms were more polarized.

Both authors of this study, based on their observant participation, confirm that the hopes of those who saw in audio-only social media the possibility of overcoming the profound polarization created particularly with the global rise of Facebook and Google, have yet to be realized.

Furthermore, we cannot confirm our hypothesis on the potential for success of voice-based platforms and an increase in oral communication in computer-mediated communication based on the Clubhouse experience. Not only because the data currently available are extremely scarce, but also because this perspective is not common among users of voice-based social media themselves. However, the impressive increase in the number of users of podcasts and audio books, and the parallel decrease in users of printed books and newspapers or magazines, seem to indicate that a shift from written to oral communication taking place is in any case. It is not clear, however, whether social media, apart from a few experiments such as that of Clubhouse, is able to adapt to this trend.

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