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### **Informational Tribalism: Born from Technology**

Informational Tribalism is the act of disregarding established or proven facts that do not align with an individual's belief or accepting something as true or correct regardless of evidence to support the belief. After rejecting established information, one will then become intellectually isolated and only believe or accept information that comes from the few sources they deem credible or trustworthy (whether they are factually based or not). This distrust of information is usually found in fringe groups or those who believe strongly in conspiracy theories. Tribalism is not isolated to conspiracy culture, however. It also exists in political circles, healthcare (such as anti-vaccination groups), and more. Tribalism should not be confused with simply being opinionated or stubborn; stubbornness can be changed with facts and data; Tribalism is the denial of anything one does not already believe in and tends to go hand-in-hand with the Dunning-Kruger Effect.

The trend towards Tribalism seems to be growing more rapidly as technological advances make information more readily available to the public. I propose that Tribalism *is* directly related to the rapid and global advancement of technology and is a reaction to the disruption that rapid change causes in individuals and communities, as well as a direct reaction to specific technological tools (such as smartphones and social media). These tools (phones, computers, etc.) do not cause Tribalism directly, but are incubators for the virus that is Tribalism.

The study of Tribalism falls under the humanities, as the study of the humanities is ultimately proposed as a solution to the problem. But the study focuses also on electronic textuality and the changing nature of information. It is proposed that the rapid change and advancement of technology

has led to a distrust of information and sources. Therefore, studying how information is shared and distributed is crucial to understanding why Tribalism is becoming more common.

### **Understanding the Origins**

Tribalism has been a part of human behavior for as long as humans have been around. Tribalism is another way of expressing an individual's tendency to cling to information they believe while rejecting anything that contradicts it. It is beyond the scope of this project to dive into the psychology of Tribalism. But it's worth mentioning that people have been swayed by snake oil salesmen, convinced of crystal healing and magical tinctures, and convinced antiquated ideas were true simply because they were thought true in the past, and no amount of information proving otherwise will change their minds. Considerable research has already been accomplished looking into gullibility and stubbornness (which effectively form the two behavioral halves that makeup Tribalism) an individual can display.

This project specifically looks at how technology has altered Tribalism and whether that has led to an increased tendency to behave in such a way, thus creating Informational Tribalism. Prior to the Internet, an individual's exposure to global ideas was limited to their specific neighborhood, literally and figuratively. The chances of someone being bombarded by alternative ideas such as anti-vaccination groups, flat-earth groups, Illuminati conspiracy culture, and so on, was relatively slim. But in a technological era, anyone can be bombarded by conspiracy culture from across the globe daily (whether they seek it or not). And this leads to the question-is Tribalism becoming more common and dangerous thanks to rapid technological advancements?

Sources and information will cover three general topics: introducing what Tribalism is, how and why it is growing, and how to stop the dangerous trend.

First, works including those by Bhattacharya, Jolley, and Gordon show how technology and widespread information availability disrupts traditional acquisition and digestion of knowledge. The

second block of research including that by Aupers, Gulbrandsen, and Hilbert provides numerical data showing the growth of information as a function of data over a 20-year period and how rapidly changing technology pushes individuals towards Tribalism. The final collection of sources discusses the value of the humanities. While the sources do not discuss Tribalism, it is my belief that the value they see in the humanities is what will help stop the trend towards Tribalism.

Much work has been done looking at the growth of technology and the impact it has on public distrust of the information it makes available. There is also a considerable amount of information discussing the rise and growth of conspiracy theories since the Roswell incident and modern media that is considered to romanticize the idea through shows like the *X-Files* or *Finding Bigfoot*. However, these studies and the wealth of information fail to connect the technological growth and that romanticizing of conspiracy culture as the cause of Tribalism's growth. It also fails to consider how fictional shows, as mentioned above, can lead to distrust of factual sources or information.

In one essay from Barbra Quint of *The Searcher's Voice*, she discusses the potential dangers of tribalism taking place when trusted sources of information (such as newspapers or websites) go out of business, close, or are no longer available for one reason or another. She continues to discuss the importance of recognizing the difference between a fact that can be substantiated or proven versus a personal opinion or interpretation of that fact. In conclusion, she suggests a number of ways to combat the tendency towards tribalism. One such method is a debate where the individual defends an opinion or idea contrary to their own belief. Finally, she suggests that trusting information from sources that are, in general, more reliable than others will help prevent problems that arise from facts being mingled with opinion. .Gov websites, she suggests, are more likely to provide results that an individual can trust. And if they show a reason to go against a more reputable source of information it is necessary to have a strong argument against said reputable source (Quint, 25).

Quint's work, brief though it is, does a lot to assimilate and summarize the problems listed individually in other sources presented in this work. But, like a lot of other studies presented, it misses the root of the problem: Why do individuals and groups become distrustful of even so-called "reputable" sources, such as .gov's, as Quint suggests? And what are the long-term effects of growing intellectual isolation when an individual or group clusters around their own ideologies and shuns established, verified, researched, or verified sources of information?

Bhattacharya, Jolley, and Gordon's articles will be used to explain how Tribalism is the result of a postmodern reaction (albeit a subconscious one) to the rapid technological advancement and how it has disrupted the 'normal' of everyday life. Aupers and Gulbrandsen's works will be used to show more specific methods on how technology fosters a trend towards tribalism. Finally, Gulbrandsen, O'Gorman, and the remaining texts will be used to show methods for stopping the trend towards tribalism.

Carolyn Steedman's chapter in *Research Methods for English Studies* discusses a few methods and strategies for preparing an individual for performing research, specifically with using archives. In her discussion of research, Steedman also discusses the philosophy of research and the nature of the information and its relationship to a researcher. She speaks of the pitfalls of "lost" information and the "Tragedy of believing that an archive contains everything there is to know and might be knowable" (19). Later she continues to show the inherent fluidity and mystery of history and information when she says she came to understand, "History-writing in generic terms, as a form of magical realism, with the historian's contribution not the mountains that move, the girls that fly, the rivers that run backwards, but the everyday and prosaic act of making the dead walk and talk" (21).

Steedman's theories on information and history will be used to analyze the concept of facts, information, and truth as a potential explanation and reasoning behind Informational Tribalism as viewed through a postmodernist perspective.

One of the most valuable pieces of research that indirectly tracks the growth of Tribalism is the work done by Hilbert, Martin, and Lopez. The trio performed a research study charting the world's ability to store and compute information over a 20-year period. They conclude that humanity could store approximately  $2.9 \times 10^{20}$  bytes on computers as of the study's conclusion.

Though data is not a direct analog or method of judging society's technological advancements (for example, number of bytes stored does not indicate whether a nation has a space station orbiting the earth or has cured cancer), it is a good metric for generally describing the development of society and technology as a whole.

This article will be used to give context and measurable data when discussing the advancement of technology. While it can't give a complete picture of global expansion and advancement, data storage numbers help describe the general rate of technological growth over the past decades. The data will also be used to make assumptions about the pace of development in the future.

Besides outside studies, this project will also rely on interviews and questionnaires to establish a pattern of thoughts, ideologies, and behavior in a variety of individuals to better ascertain the scope of Informational Tribalism. Categorization of the interview information will be employed as a tool to inform the postmodern analysis to find a correlation between demographics and a tendency towards Tribalism.

Armed with the knowledge of Tribalism's genesis and growth, and combined with data provided by interviews and questionnaires, this study will attempt to answer the "What next" question that has yet to be asked. If Tribalism is indeed a growing trend and continues to do so, what is the result? What is the logical conclusion? Is it a bleak future of ignorance, regression, and a trend towards more literal tribalism and isolation? Or is it a temporary trend born as a result of humanity's awkward adolescence in the Information Era?

## **Why Does Tribalism Matter?**

This project will analyze how technology and the media (both fictional entertainment and factual news) have changed the way people interact and share ideas and explore whether that has fostered Tribalism. The report will also consider if there is a way to stop the dangerous trend.

Tribalism, in varying degrees, is a part of everyday life for the average individual. It is most easily recognized in political environments. Consider President Trump, for example. Many individuals support his plan to build a wall, as well as other ideas, with all their heart. No amount of information or facts that his ideas are bad or that he has done something wrong (leading to impeachment) will change their minds. Conversely, there are individuals who dislike Trump, and regardless of what good he might do or the benefits of his plans, will denounce him vigorously. This is Tribalism in its purest: holding a position and belief regardless of facts or truth and rejecting anything that might prove contrary. But it's not limited to politics. Flat-earthers, anti-vaxxers, moon landing deniers, and other conspiracy groups show the same behavior and deny facts in favor of isolated opinions. Opinions are fine when backed by facts, figures, data, and experience. But when opinions are based on lies, inaccurate information, or the words of a certain individual not because of their knowledge but simply because of their personality, progress and growth immediately halt and are replaced by stagnation, aggression, and intellectual regression.

It is important to understand why there seems to be a growing trend towards disregarding long-established facts (such as the shape of the earth). It's even more important to understand what the results of such Informational Tribalism might be if the trend continues to become more severe.

The results of the study will not only show the value of the humanities in every undergraduate program, from geology to dance majors, but help provide a framework for preventing Tribalism from growing in the future.

According to Walliman, speaking of integrity in research says, "It is only valuable if it is carried out honestly. We cannot trust the results of a research project if we suspect that the researchers have not acted with integrity (43). He later goes on to say that, "Honesty is essential, not only to enable straightforward, above-board communication, but to engender a level of trust and credibility in the outcomes of the research" (44).

Research is founded on integrity and honesty. When properly done and peer-reviewed, research projects are trustworthy pieces of information. But many individuals believe the usual beacons of truth are hiding sinister agendas or run by secret organizations (a belief that the Freemasons run the government is a common example of this). Distrust of verifiable information can undermine the research process. Further, replacing verified facts with false information will have a practical effect on how information is gathered and spread.

### **Methodology: Understanding Tribalism through Interviews and Research**

In order to reach a satisfactory conclusion about how and why Informational Tribalism develops and how the trend towards increasing informational isolation can be curtailed will include two primary sources of information.

First, interviews and personal accounts from individuals who consider themselves or are considered by others to be part of conspiracy culture. This will include persons who believe the earth is flat, the moon landing was a hoax, that 9/11 was an inside job, that we have a hidden cure for cancer, that bigfoot is real, and other similar conspiracies. Further accounts will be taken from surveys or questions sent to individuals of various political affiliations. It is common for individuals who believe strongly in a specific party's platform to reject or disbelieve anything all other parties purport or claim, whether that information has statistics and facts to back it up or not.

Interview questions and questionnaires sent digitally will first establish basic demographic information relevant to the topic of Tribalism. Questions will address socioeconomic position, religious beliefs, political affiliation, age, gender, educational background, and other related questions. Questions will then shift towards more open-ended topics such as, “Where do you get your news from? Why do you use that source and not others? What is your opinion of information from other sources?”. This information will be used to establish the mindset and beliefs of an individual in the context of their more technical and factual data (such as age and gender). Further questions will focus on opinions and beliefs, such as, “What is your opinion on climate change? How accurately do you feel modern news outlets portray factual events? What do you feel the most reputable sources of information of any kind are?”. Final questions will also ask respondents to list any groups, parties, organizations, or movements they associate with or support/believe in.

Questionnaires will be targeted towards Facebook, YouTube, and other social media groups who identify or label themselves as part of a conspiracy culture group or subscribe to a particular belief (such as anti-vaccination groups, political affiliation groups, and more). For more in-depth information one-on-one interviews will need to be conducted. Skype and other video platforms will be used when and where possible, but most interviews will need to be conducted through voice only, or through email and digital messaging platforms such as Discord.

While digital chat is less personal than a face-to-face interview, it does remove some of the variables that a personal interview might have. An individual who gets nervous in front of other people or is not an eloquent speaker will not need to worry about any potential weaknesses. Further, while body language can say as much as any spoken word, text communication removes the need for a deep analysis into the *way* the information is presented and allows a focus purely on *what* information is gathered.



The second source of information will be analysis of peer-reviewed scholarly publications as mentioned earlier. Steedman's theories on the past and history as something of a "Discussion in loneliness" (28) can be used to help explain how and why individuals might refute or deny the factuality or usefulness of seemingly concrete ideas or information from scholarly sources. She continues by saying that, while reading in an archive (which can be extrapolated, in the study of tribalism, to mean the study of the past and research), "You are reading for what is *not there*, as well as what is" (26). This magical realism, as she stated, can perhaps be the reason why sources and information are distrusted, ignored, or refuted despite seemingly verifiable tests and results.

It is possible that, through, "The tragedy of believing that an archive contains everything there is to know or that might be knowable" (19), individuals can be led to disbelieve or distrust a source no matter how credible or reliable it would appear (as in, scientific studies produced in labs and substantiated through independent verification or peer-reviewed articles). Sources that consider the magical realism and loss of "what is there" will be used to evaluate the information gathered through interviews and questionnaires to discover whether there is a correlation between tribalism and postmodernist perspective that suggests multiple realities and belief that there is no universal knowledge or truth that an individual can know.

### **An Intellectual Panacea**

Tribalism is an inherently dangerous phenomenon, one that leads to a rejection of facts and verified information. It does not matter specifically what facts or information an individual uses to replace objective facts; Tribalism means questioning and ignoring the foundation of scientific and scholarly research that has been created and built throughout centuries of hard work by individuals and institutions. From the spread of disease caused by anti-vaccination groups to the rejection of science by flat-earth groups, Tribalism has the potential to disrupt modern society.

Technological growth is not something that is likely to stop soon, nor is it something that should be stopped. Problems that arise from growth, like Tribalism, are a thorn in the side of what is a general improvement in global knowledge and the sharing of information. But Tribalism is a problem that can cause dangerous disruptions and spread misinformation in politics, education, science, and healthcare.

It's no secret that studying the humanities in college is considered career suicide by many. What can you do with an art degree? What are you going to do with an English degree if you aren't going to teach? The questions could go on. But the humanities are the panacea for a rapidly evolving world. It's time to stop seeing the humanities as a niche field or something separated from general life and career paths. Rather, this project proves that every individual can find value in studying the humanities-both as a primary degree or as supplements to another field. Study of the humanities will, ideally, provide individuals a set of tools and skills that will allow them to analyze information from a variety of perspectives and avoid the pitfalls of conspiracy culture, fake news, and other intellectual traps that lead to Tribalism.

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