'Media and Communications in an Imagined Post Abnormal World of 2026'

Micro and Macro Roles of Media and Communication in an Imagined Future

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about sudden changes in people's lives all across the world. The lockdowns and social distancing norms to curb the transmission of the disease forced people to change their lifestyle – the way they live, work, socialise and communicate with each other. Significant dependence was seen on online and digital communication and the usage of communication technology. The pandemic seemed to suddenly open up the digital world and accelerated trends that earlier were considered to be further away into the future. The world changed and adapted to the demands of the pandemic situation and even tried to instil a sense of normalcy by calling the pandemic ways the 'new normal.' It is interesting to ponder upon, if this was the 'new normal,' then can the times beyond the present, the unforeseen future, be called the 'post abnormal?'This paper attempts to visualise and project an imaginary future termed as the 'post abnormal,' exactly five years from the time that this paper is written, in the context of what kind of role and impact media and communication will have on people's lives in the future at individual and collective levels. To visualise the future, the expected and anticipated trends were studied by going through the media and entertainment outlooks published by various consulting firms and industry trade bodies, research papers, journals, newspapers and magazines on the topic. Focussed group discussions and in-depth one-on-one interviews were done with communications, media and technology veterans. Finally, to visualise the future, this paper took the Uses and Gratifications theory developed by communications researchers, Elihu Katz and Jay Blumler in 1974 as the base framework, and projected what kind of uses and roles media and communication are going to have at micro and macro levels. The paper visualises that in the 'post abnormal' world, Media and Communications play important roles in the society at individual and collective levels. It fulfils needs like cognition and socialisation, it is used as a medium of expression, to divert and relieve stress, to entertain, to create a sense of

belongingness and to transmit values among other utilities. However, the content and delivery mechanisms of Media and Communication have changed, with significant emphasis on the usage of Communication-Technology.

Introduction

The world has been facing a global disease outbreak, the COVID-19 pandemic, since February-March 2020, caused by SARS-CoV-2 or coronavirus. Governments and public health institutions across the world enforced social distancing and stay-at-home guidelines to battle the pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020). While specific restrictions varied between countries, the government measures to fight the coronavirus outbreak largely involved closing or restricting non-essential physical forms of businesses, shops, schools, movie theatres, gyms, as well as curbing or limiting public transportation and social gatherings. It also involved complete lockdowns for most people - advising them to stay at home and allowing movements only for those activities that are deemed essential – buying groceries, going to hospitals etc. Under these situations, social interactions between people reduced drastically, bringing challenges of being socially isolated from most people, other than immediate family members. Being socially cut-off and largely confined to their homes, the COVID-19 pandemic brought in enormous changes in the way people consume media and entertainment.

Literature Review:

According to Data Reportal (2021), 4.66 billion people around the world used the internet in January 2021, up by 316 million (7.3 percent) as compared to the same time last year. Global internet penetration stood at 59.5 percent, while the social media users around the world were at 4.20 billion as of January 2021. Social media users grew by 490 million as compared to the previous year, delivering a year-on-year growth of more than 13 percent. In fact, the number of social media users in January 2021 was equivalent to more than 53 percent of the world's total population.

Since the initial months of the pandemic, globally the digital media use increased drastically as people spent significantly higher time at home due to the coronavirus lockdowns (Kemp, 2020). Across the world, the COVID-19 pandemic brought in changes in the way people consumed media and entertainment. According to a FICCI EY (2021) report, the Indian M&E sector fell by 24% to INR 1.38 trillion (US$18.9 billion), in effect taking revenues back to

2017 levels. The largest contributors to the fall were the film segment (INR119 billion), print (INR106 billion) and television (INR102 billion). Digital and online gaming was the only segment which grew in 2020, their contribution to the M&E sector increased from 16% in 2019 to 23% in 2020: (EY FICCI 2021).

A PWC (2020) report states that in only a few months, COVID-19 accelerated the ongoing changes in consumers' behaviour by bringing forward a series of digital disruptions that might have occurred in the future years. The consumers responded to the new situation by consuming more content and experiences at home and online. Media providers that were already positioned to meet the revised circumstances created by the pandemic, such as the over-the-top (OTT) video content providers and platforms as well as multiplayer game providers thrived. The others facing challenges changed their strategies quickly. The same report gives the example of News Corp Australia accelerating its digitisation plans in May 2020 by abruptly stopping the printing of 112 community and regional newspapers and turning 76 of them into digital-only mastheads and closing the rest 36 altogether. It seemed much of what was going to happen anyway was suddenly accelerated due to the pandemic. The shift from print to digital at virtually all publications radically sped up (Rajan, 2020). The print industry has been witnessing a steady decline in readership and ad revenues which were migrating to other media, most notably digital (Adgate, 2021). India's print revenue declines were led by a 41% fall in advertising and a 24% fall in circulation revenues (FICCI EY, 2021). Not only print, various media and entertainment platforms have seen accelerated disruptions in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic.

The social lives of people to a large extent moved online and entertainment moved to overthe-top (OTT) television and online gaming. OTT platforms and digital media have been attracting new consumers and expanding to new locations and demographics. The pandemic magnified the already apparent shift from laptop or digital devices viewing to large screen TVs, adding a significant boost to the broadband internet and fiber-to-the-home (FTTH) companies (KPMG, 2020).

In India, the linear television segment saw a 22% decrease in advertising revenues and also witnessed a 7% decrease in subscription incomes. On the other hand, 28 million Indians paid for 53 million OTT subscriptions in 2020 leading to a 49% growth in digital subscription revenues as compared to the previous year. Growth in 2020 was largely owing to Disney+ Hotstar monetising the viewing of the Indian Premier League (IPL) cricket tournament by making it pay-and-watch, increased investments on original content by Netflix and Amazon

Prime Video and the launch of several regional language OTT platforms. (FICCI - EY 2021)
The film industry in India however suffered with the theatrical revenues dipping to less than a quarter of their 2019 levels in 2020. This loss of revenue was somewhat recovered through higher digital rights revenues which almost doubled during 2020 to INR35 billion. (FICCI - EY 2021)

The live event segment was perhaps the hardest hit of all as the audiences felt uncomfortable about participating in live events, and even though the segment witnessed numerous attempts to digitalise its offerings, it could only recover a small fraction of revenues through that medium. (PWC, 2020)
As the Media and Entertainment industry strived to meet consumers at their homes, businesses came up with new strategies and combinations to open up new revenue opportunities. According to a PWC (2020) report, digital platforms metamorphosed into performance spaces when for example, London's Wireless Festival streamed recorded virtual reality (VR) music performances to a homebound global audience in mid-2020. Gaming was integrated into e-commerce providing an immersive experience, capitalising on the closure of many physical retail spaces.

COVID-19 has made the consumption of media and communication largely dependent on communication technology. During the pandemic, consumers moved drastically towards online platforms, and the businesses and industries have responded in turn. During the lockdowns, people have had more time to spend on communicating and socialising online (Nguyen et al, 2020). It has given way to more and more people adopting internet and internet-based services to continue working from home and to communicate and interact with one another. Compared to the pre-lockdown levels, the internet services witnessed an increase in usage from 40% to 100 %. Network operator, Verizon saw a 20% increase in web traffic in a week in March 2020, 27% higher than usual; VPN usage increased by 49% with employees working from home, video watching increased up by 36% and online gaming increased by 115% (Schulz, 2020).Video-conferencing platforms like Zoom saw 10% growth in usage while content delivery services like Akamai saw a 30% rise in content usage (Branscombe, 2020).

The media and entertainment industry pondered upon if and how the business situations would go back to the pre-pandemic days. "On a macroeconomic level, analysts have been debating which letter most accurately describes the shape of the recovery: a V-shaped rapid bounce-back, a slower U-shaped recovery or an L-shaped trajectory. But a K-shaped

bifurcated recovery, in which some sectors rise while others fall, might be the most appropriate alphabetic reference for the economy as a whole and for entertainment and media (E&M) in particular" (PWC, 2020). "As the overall industry posts a 2.8% compound annual growth rate (CAGR) through 2024, some E&M segments will expand quickly - experiencing three years of anticipated growth in a single year - while others continue their downward path. To a large degree, COVID-19 and its after effects have pulled the future forward, as consumers take more control of their own media consumption in a world of ever-expanding choice."

IV. Rationale:

While writing this paper, it is not known how long the pandemic will last or whether the newly emerging trends and patterns of usage of media and communication that are heavily dependent on the online and digital media will continue once the prolonged lockdown measures, stay-at-home and social distancing norms are lifted and people are able to go back to their pre-pandemic life again. However, owing the significant impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on people's online and digital communication behaviours worldwide, and also the significant role that media and communication has played throughout the pandemic, it would interesting to imagine a future of media and communication that is shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many people might carry on with the newly adopted digital media consumption patterns even after the pandemic ends (GlobalWebIndex, 2020).

As Menon (2020) observes, "Even once the crisis passes, the psychological overhang from the virus might mean it would take some time for consumers to embrace external consumption models again, especially in areas that have been the worst affected by this crisis...This could pave the way for innovation and outreach solutions wherein consumers turn to virtual live events and new delivery models to connect. Technological advancements could play a pivotal role..."

It would be interesting to imagine a future, maybe five years from now. Would the COVID-19 pandemic end by then? What if it did not, and what if the coronavirus kept mutating, throwing up new waves of the pandemic? Would people learn to adapt to a new way of living? Since the times of the pandemic is called the 'new normal,' the imagined time five year from now, i.e. 2026, is termed as the 'post abnormal' in this paper because in this imagined future everything that seemed far away and very futuristic, have been brought forward because the pandemic accelerated the already visible trends in the media and communications industry worldwide. With people's method and usage of various

communication platforms changing, it is worth reflecting on what kind of impact media and communications would have in the 'post abnormal' times at both micro and macro levels. Through a detailed elucidation of an imagined world that exists five years since the first outbreak of coronavirus, this paper attempts at projecting a "Post Abnormal World of 2026" from a social, communication and media point-of-view.

V. Creative strategies used to generate a vision of the 'Post Abnormal'

The topic 'Post Abnormal' being a futuristic concept, the research has focused on the qualitative methods to gain in-depth insights into the future trends of Media and Communications in the context of COVID-19 pandemic.

The following steps were taken to visualise a 'Post Abnormal World' in the context of Media and Communications and its impact on a micro and macro level.

a) Various media, communication and technology outlook reports from consulting firms and industry bodies, articles published in newspapers and magazines, blogs related to technology and communication, study materials and research papers published in journals were studied to get an understanding of the projected trends of Media and Communication, as well as how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected and influenced the individual, social and professional lives of people.

b) Focussed Group Discussions (FGD) were conducted with Media and Digital Communication veterans using online Zoom platform. 3 Focussed Groups Discussions were held with 2 to 3 participants in each group. In total, 6 individuals participated in the FGDs, some of them being a part of multiple groups. Their viewpoints were recorded and analysed.
c) In-depth one-on-one interviews were conducted with Communication-Technology and HR experts. 4 such interviews were conducted online using the Zoom platform. Their responses were recorded and analysed.

For both FGDs as well as in-depth interviews, the main areas of discussion were as follows, with follow-up questions asked based on their responses:

1. What are the media and communication trends you envisage 5 years from now, in 2026, in the wake of the post-pandemic times?
2. How would the traditional media (physical newspapers, magazines, television) coexist with the digital in the future?
3. How is communication-technology going to influence the future of media at collective and individual levels?

4. Given the long durations of the pandemic lockdowns, social-distancing norms, physical isolation and so on, how are the social and human interactions of the future going to shape up?

d) The Uses and Gratifications theory, developed by two communications researchers, Elihu Katz and Jay Blumler in 1974 was then taken as the base framework, and given a perspective of the 'post abnormal' to visualise how people might use the media at individual and collective levels in the future. In the micro level, 5 uses of the media was taken - a) Cognitive Use, b) Social Utility, c) Diversion, d) Affiliation, e) Expression and in the macro level, 5 uses of the media were taken - a) Relaying News and Information, b) Interpretation, c) Linkage, d) Transmission (socialisation), e) Entertainment – and for each of these utilities what kind of role media and communication would play was it was visualised. While projecting the future, references of various reports and articles have been made, wherever applicable.

e) While in the 'Literature Review' segment of this paper, references have been made both in the Indian and the global context, the visualisation of the 'post abnormal' world is mostly in the global context, as the paper envisages similar media and communication trends fanning out in most parts of the world.

VI. Summaries of Recommendations Made During the Focussed Group Discussions (FGD) and In-depth Interviews

VI (i.) FGD – 1

-Linear television in the manner we know it is going to be extinct in another 5 to 6 or maximum 10 years. The premise that television is the big kid on the block, followed by print, and then digital – is going to be completely disrupted.

-OTT television is the future of television and every serious player in the field of television will migrate to OTT. Movies will be released only for the OTT platforms and will not have theatrical releases. It is already happening that way.

-OTT television, which currently focuses more on fictional and entertainment-related content, will add two more segments in a larger way - News and Sports, giving the users the opportunity to view better curated content in a seamless manner.

-OTT platforms will attract the advertisers by providing them with the opportunities of having artificial intelligence (AI) driven targeted advertising.

VI (ii) FGD - 2

-In the household in the past, whether it was television, or newspapers, there would typically be one television set, one or two newspapers in affluent urban families - maybe a

vernacular and English. Newspapers are now available on smart phones through apps. It is very easy for the readers to read and even interact - like, comment, give feedback etc., through the app. It is a personal device and a personalized experience.

-Even before the pandemic, people stopped taking newspapers from Monday to Friday, and maybe take multiple newspapers on Saturdays and Sundays, when they can devote more time to reading. But now in the pandemic, many people actually stopped taking newspapers because of the fear of transmission. People get news as and when it is happening through apps and social media. Multiple news apps are installed on their phones. The newspaper in the print format would be extinct in another 10 to 15 years and its digital format would thrive.

-The pandemic has actually accelerated existing trends, rather than bringing in any new trends.

VI (iii.) FGD – 3

- The future of media consists of the future of content and not merely the future of the delivery mechanism. The proliferation of the media in recent years has brought more people than ever before, within the ambit of the viewing population. More people accessing content has created certain challenges, and certain opportunities. The opportunity is that more people than ever before are accessing content, so there is a need for more diversity of content. It creates an opportunity for content creators.

- With the technology available, an individual now has the ability and the opportunity to be a broadcaster and reach out to a large number of people. However, there are also certain inhibiting factors there. The lone players might not be as scalable as the media organisations. Media organisations are better placed to make big investments in content and create content that is diverse and needs more energy, attention, and investment. It is very important for media organisations to seize the content opportunities, because scalability and big investments are possible at an organisational level.

- One area of concern at the moment is that too many people are into aggregation and reaggregation or content rather than creating new content. Having less people on the ground and cutting costs, might make the model robust for a while. But in the long run, it will hurt, because a media company would lose its uniqueness in a crowded space.

VI (iv.) In-depth Interview - 1

- Watching television used to be a community activity. There was a primetime viewing on the television, which the advertisers targeted. Every individual in the house can now

watch something on the smartphone. No one is fighting for the newspaper or fighting for television space. There is a true consumer utility at the core of it and that is what emerging technology does – makes things more convenient. The existing industries have a price to pay if they are not able to reinvent themselves.

VI (v.) In-depth Interview – 2

-There was a very distinct public and private space before for example, earlier even if you met and even if you came into my home, you won't be meeting with me in my bedroom. But now, through the video call you are. But you are interacting with a 2D presentation of it and a small portion of it, and not the whole gamut. How this is going to be on people's psychology, I don't think that has been mapped out. Everything is looked upon as a kind of a blessing. But each of these blessings opens up a Pandora's Box of sorts. Each of the new aspects, because of their limitations and their unique characteristic, will bring about its own new set of Pandora. And this can induce its own fatigue, whereby people will want to revert to the earlier. It will trigger its own set of nostalgia.

VI (vi.) In-depth Interview - 3

- COVID is a tipping point; it's a fulcrum around which many changes are being pushed forward through. Fr example, Zoom and WebEx was in existence before. But now even though people are using it, they feel its limitations. There is a need for more immersive experience. So the entire concept of feeling the spatial distance in an area - a 3D experience is something that people feel lacking in the current system and many technology companies are working towards providing that.

VI (vii.) In-depth Interview - 4

- We have created a social bubble around us. We feel we are connected to people, but we are using digital representations to fill in for real experiences, but are never getting that real experience. The question is how people are going to interact with people and especially strangers, and hold conversations. The virtual meetings are all planned and the spontaneity of having conversations with random strangers is going off. The more and more we feel physically isolated, the more and more people will try to reach out to others and express themselves through digital medium.

VII. An Imagined Post Abnormal World of 2026

Today is Saturday, 3rd September 2026. The COVID-19 pandemic which began in February – March 2020, affected the world in ways that were unimaginable earlier, changing the

manner in which people interacted with each other, worked and lived. With a sudden change in their lives and lifestyles, it took people a considerable time to adjust to what was then called the "new normal." But what was unknown in 2020 and therefore a question from the medical and non-medical fraternity alike - when and how would the pandemic end.

It was finally declared by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in 2022, that since the coronavirus is highly airborne, the masks are not foolproof because even with the masks on, humans still breathe the same oxygen from the air. Therefore many people started wearing oxygen suits, with inbuilt portable oxygen cylinders when they stepped out. Domestic, portable oxygen concentrators that enable people to produce their own oxygen from the air, and fill up the oxygen suits, started being used in every home. In indoor spaces, ionizers that are safe and effective in removing the harmful viruses are now a standard feature.

The pandemic never "ended", because the coronavirus lived on, mutating constantly into newer strains and finding new hosts to thrive on, challenging every false sense of security that people got through various immunizations and immunity development plans. But what happened as a result was that the humans learned to be resilient against each challenge the virus hurled at their way, and slowly adapted to a modified way of living.

According to a research conducted by Anderson et al (2021) on what life will be like in 2025 - the overall and almost collective view of the respondents were that it would be a "teleeverything" world where people's relationship with technology will deepen as larger segments of the population will have to depend more on digital connections for work, education, health care, daily commercial transactions and essential social interactions, and this observation could not have been truer in the 'post abnormal world of 2026.' However, it would be more appropriate to say that rather than bringing in completely new trends in the post abnormal world, the pandemic has largely accelerated the media and communication trends that were seen in the pre-pandemic world.

VIII. Role of Communication and Media at macro and micro scale in the imagined 'Post Abnormal'

VIII (i) Role of Media and Communications at Micro Levels:

When an individual communicates with a small or limited number of people, it forms a microlevel communication (Walsch, 2018). For example, an employee interacts with colleagues in a workplace, or a teacher talking to his classroom students. Micro-communications are personal, interactive and more immediate. Microanalysis of media looks into what functions the media provide for the individual.

At the individual level (microanalysis), the functional approach can be elucidated using the Uses-and-Gratifications Theory. (Communication Studies, 2019). "According to the theory, media users actively select the types of media and media content they consume to gratify various psychological needs. Its purpose is to explain how and why people use media." The theory was first proposed in the 1940s but it is primarily credited to the research of communications professor Jay Blumler and sociologist Elihu Katz in the 1970s. It holds that audiences have certain needs or drives that are satisfied by using both non-media and media sources. (Vinney, 2019)

Following the Uses and Gratifications Theory, media uses at a micro level can be broadly broken down into five categories: (Bajracharya, 2018)
a) Cognitive Use
b) Social Utility
c) Diversion
d) Affiliation
e) Expression

Even in the 'post abnormal world of 2026,' the media uses on an individual level can be traced in the basic needs like cognition, social utility, affiliation, diversion, withdrawal, and expression, even though the nature of uses have changed. The most obvious change that the pandemic brought was less face-to-face, in-person interaction and spending more time on Zoom, Skype and other virtual platforms. The 'communication technologies' were adopted in micro-level communications in a much larger way than before. (Taunton, 2020).

VIII (i) (a) Cognitive Use – Cognitive Use refers to acquiring information to aid the thinking and understanding process (Perspectives on Mass Communication, 2012). Communication and media plays crucial roles in the 2026 'post-abnormal world,' where physical places of learning and cognition are no longer in use. With multiple waves of the pandemic, and multiple lockdowns, the education system has been affected majorly. Many schools and education institutions across the world attempted to open for the students, but they shut down because of yet another raging wave of the pandemic. Online education, which started from 2020 onwards, had to re-invent itself to provide a more immersive learning experience. Learning and cognitive methods focused on providing facts and information that were suitable in a physical environment, were not as effective in the virtual environment because of the physical distance between the learners and the instructors (Babich, 2019).

In 2026, communication mediums like Virtual Reality (VR) are extensively used to enhance

the cognitive process of learning and understanding a topic. VR is used to engage learners in topics like science, geography, history, or literature by offering a deeply immersive sense of place and time. In 2015, Google piloted Google Expeditions (artsandculture.google.com) in hundreds of schools all over the world. The project was extremely successful, with Google taking more than 1 million students in 11 countries on virtual and interactive expeditions. This kind of immersive communication technology that took nascent steps in the prepandemic world is now ubiquitous in the "post abnormal world of 2026." From Google Classrooms of 2020, the adoption of technology like VR and AR in education media platforms have made the classrooms of 2026 a much richer and more immersive experience.

VIII (i) (b) Social Utility – Dependency on communication technology is seen in communication and social interactions at "micro-levels" because with prolonged isolation and social distancing rules, people suffered chronic mental illnesses, and technology was needed to bridge the gap that the restrictions on social interactions brought about.
Video calling platforms, like Zoom and Google Meet, which were extensively used in 2020 and 2021 to communicate and interact in professional and personal spaces, were no longer deemed sufficient, because they lacked in providing the actual experience of social interactions and after sometime led to an intensified feeling of isolation (Vega et al, 2020). Therefore the social meetings and interactions, both official and personal, of 2026 are heavily dependent on technologies like Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR), and Mixed Reality (MR).

From office boardroom meetings, to catching-up with friends in a cafe, or going for a romantic date, people in 2026 depend on VR to recreate the actual experience of meeting people, communicating and interacting with each other. For example, some cafes and restaurants offer a hybrid model where the meeting and interaction between two or more people happen in the restaurant recreated through VR, but the actual food is safely delivered to people's homes using drones and delivery-bots, so that people can enjoy real food and at the same time enjoy interacting with others in a virtual and safe environment.

VIII (i) (c) Affiliation - Affiliation refers to a person's desire to feel a sense of belonging or involvement within a social group (Communication Studies, 2019). One of the most significantly affected areas in the pandemic is people's work life. Many of the reports published during the early days of the pandemic claimed an increase in productivity. However, that was more of a "panic productivity," owing to the adrenaline boost that people got from the sudden shifts in the nature and location of their work. People also could have

been working hard to stay visible, relevant to the organisation and ensuring that their managers thought they were still adding value - even while working from home (Brower, 2021). But soon things started waning as people got tired and burned out. Managing children's online studies, taking care of the home needs and handling the new work-fromhome routines added to stress that got built up over time.

Prolonged work-from-home routines, led to the erosion of affiliation or feeling of belongingness to group set-ups – like work groups, professional associations and so on. In 2021, Facebook Chief Executive Mark Zuckerberg introduced a new technology 'metaverse', which was the next phase of the internet where the physical world combines with the virtual, creating a whole new environment in the process. He had imagined this is how people would work, play and live in the future (Bhatia, 2021). In fact, Zuckerberg was so convinced of the concept that he pivoted his trillion-dollar social media firm into a metaverse company in the coming years. Called Horizon Workroom, Zuckerberg's alternate reality blended the real world with digital imaginations with the help of a Virtual Reality (VR) headset like the Oculus.

In an attempt to bring back a sense of affiliation to various groups, virtual workrooms like Zuckerberg's Horizon Workroom have proliferated for remote collaborations. For example, people can now access their 3D offices with a VR headset. It is made up of several components that replicate group activities that one would do in an actual workplace (The Week, 2021).

Virtual workrooms let people come together to work in the same virtual room, regardless of their actual physical distance. Spatial audio processing renders the colleagues' voices closer or farther away depending on how close people are "seated" to one another in the virtual space. One sits at a table and watches their colleagues' virtual avatars engage in physical gestures while talking or getting up to walk to a whiteboard to use their (virtual) hands to draw or mark up a document (Takahashi, 2021). This kind of technology is not only used in case of workplace communication or interaction, but also in case of various social interactions to collaborate, communicate, and connect remotely. It gives a much more enhanced and immersive experience of virtual interaction, than that could be offered by the earlier virtual meeting rooms like Google Meet, Zoom, WebEx, and Cisco.

VIII (i) (d) Diversion – The multiple waves of the pandemic and the ensuing social isolation and constant health concerns about oneself and that of the family and friends have intensified

the need of using the media to "get away from it all" (Communication Studies, 2019) in the post-abnormal world of 2026. Different types of diversion needs like seeking emotional or intellectual stimulation, relaxation from stress and anxiety and finding avenues of emotional release have been on the rise since 2020. Often media is used to create a barrier or buffer zone between oneself and other people or activities. Media that was traditionally consumed as a group activity for diversion and entertainment with family and friends is now a very personal experience.

Linear television (Simi, 2021, June) that offered the viewers access to content via subscription to cable or satellite services, to watch programmes according to a broadcaster programming schedule are no longer used. The viewers have completely shifted to using Over-the-top (OTT) television that offers full control over their consumption and access to high-quality content. Every serious television broadcaster has migrated to OTT and is offering a variety of high-quality content. Televisions sets sold in 2026 are 'smart televisions' with in-built internet and OTT features. Instead of the television being a family entertainment device in people's homes, the television sets of 2026 are personal devices, with every member of the family owning one.

In populated countries like India, internet data is available for very low tariffs, because of the "hyper-competition resulting in a huge consumer surplus"(BBC, 2019). And the speed of the internet is extremely robust. 6G forms the framework of a fully-connected world of cheap and fast internet service with wireless speeds of up to 11Gbps and has the ability to tap satellite communication networks using specially designed 'nanoantennas' (Barak, 2018). Better speed, bandwidth and connectivity have changed the face of media and entertainment completely, with even remote geographical locations reaping the benefits of being a part of the connected world.

Films, which earlier were for family entertainment, have become an avenue of personal entertainment. The big banner films are bought by the OTT platforms and are not released in the theatres at all. As a result the stand-alone theatres and multiplexes have shut down, or shifted to other forms of businesses. Also, film piracies have been curbed to a great extent because the online viewing is completely regulated with people's digital profiles.
From a content perspective, films meant for family entertainment have given way to the need for a more personal viewing. With entertainment available on personal mobile devices and smart TVs in their private spaces, people have opened up to watching true-to-life, edgy and even dark and intimate content, which they would have otherwise not watched with their

families in the theatres (Osur, 2016).

VIII (i) (e) Expression – "Expression" is using the media to express one's inner thoughts, feelings, and opinion and promoting one's own image, reputation or status (Perspectives on Mass Communication, 2012). With social life in the physical world being restricted, people have taken to social media to increase their credibility or social standing or to affirm their sense of self (Mendes, 2020).

However the public conversations around the darker elements of social media – from data collection and privacy issues to fake news and propaganda – have led to more cautious ways of using them. In the "Post Abnormal World" of 2026, many people have left the public platforms entirely, sticking instead to small communities and friendship groups on more private platforms like WhatsApp, Telegram or Signal.

Those who still use the public platforms have gone into managing their online presences more cautiously and deliberately, not just in terms of what they share and what pictures they post, but also how they present themselves in an overall sense. There seems to be an intense need for private spaces where the actual, somewhat uninhibited sharing happens with a small audience in more secure networks, rather than for general consumption. While, the public accounts are cleaner, highly managed and as neutral and inoffensive as possible. Also, rather than people's personal, social, economic and political personas existing together on the same platform and intertwining, their social media lives are separated in various platforms. When people do interact and find avenues to express themselves in social media, their behaviour depends on which platform they are using, and in which context they are using them (Maryville University, 2019).

VIII (ii) Role of Media and Communications at Macro Levels:
Macro communication involves communicating with a fairly large number of people, through mass media platforms like television, newspapers, radio etc. Macroanalysis of mass communication considers what functions the media provide for society as a whole. (Perspectives on Mass Communication, 2012) Media functions are not mutually exclusive and any given example of media content may serve multiple functions.
The role of media at a macro level can be broken down into five categories (Perspectives on Mass Communication, 2012):
a) Relaying News and Information
b) Interpretation

15

c) Linkage

d) Transmission (socialisation)

e) Entertainment.

VIII (ii) (a) Relaying News and Information - In the 'post abnormal' world of 2026, the media still play a crucial role in relaying news and information, even though the fulcrum somewhat tips towards 'warning or beware surveillance' (Perspectives on Mass Communication, 2012). The mass media is used extensively to warn about impending dangers such diseases, economic declines and military threats. The newspapers and the television are extinct in their traditional forms, giving way to news apps and OTT television. With every user's identity mapped on the news apps and the OTT platforms, the Governments across the world have made it compulsory for people to check the warning news regularly, who also keep a track and remind people if they forget to do so. Information about everyday life such as stock market updates, political and economic news are also available in the news apps and the OTT platforms.

However, on the flip side, fake news and deepfakes have risen considerably because of the proliferation of the digital media, making it easier to engineer news. Fake news, often referred to as pseudo-news, is a form of propaganda created with the purpose of distributing deliberate misinformation or false news. An advanced alternative to 'Photoshop', 'Deepfake' uses a form of artificial intelligence called deep learning to make images of fake events, hence the name deepfake. Deepfake technology can create convincing but entirely fictional photos, videos and even audios from scratch. (Sample, 2020).

Fake news has been a significant problem globally in the past few years. It has become common to find popular individuals and even members of the state using misinformation to influence individuals' actions whether consciously or subconsciously (Botha et al, 2020). Ironically, AI which is used to create fake news and deep fakes are also the antidotes of this menace in the 'post abnormal' world of 2026. Tech firms have developed artificial intelligence systems that have been trained to spot fake videos or images and flag up fakes whenever they appear. Another strategy focuses on the origin of the media. Blockchain online ledger systems hold tamper-proof records of videos, pictures and audio so their origins and any manipulations can be checked (Sample, 2020).

VIII (ii) (b) Interpretation - Traditionally the media played an important role in providing interpretations, comments, analyses, and opinions on various events to give the audience a better understanding of its relative importance in the society. They helped the audience to get

exposed to a wide range of contrasting viewpoints, allowing them to weigh various sides of an issue (Perspectives on Mass Communication, 2012).

However there were also several potential dysfunctions of relying on the mass media for interpretation as there was no guarantee that the media interpretations are accurate or valid. Also, the media were often seen as politically polarised (Mitchell et al, 2014). Many individuals became overly influenced by the media interpretations, losing the ability to analyse situations or think for themselves.

With the advent of social media, came the 'social media influencers,' - people who built a reputation for their knowledge and expertise on a specific topic. They made regular posts about that topic on their preferred social media channels and generated large followings of enthusiastic, engaged people who paid close attention to their views (Garibay et al, 2019). The opinions of the influencer were then shared by their followers, thus gaining a wider reach than the majority of regular social media users. But with time, social media also became a platform that enhanced polarisation as many users felt they had the complete right to impart their views irrespective of it being a public space (Nair, 2021). Rather than promoting a healthy communication pattern, social media gave rise to attacking differing views, increasing extremist polarisation, and also cyber-crimes and harassments due to differences in opinions. (Barker, 2021)

In the 'Post Abnormal World of 2026,' the "interpretive" role of the media and the social media influencers remain. However, now the major social media platforms are regulated, as the governments and authorities, as well as general consumers have become much more cognizant about guarding misinformation and polarisation. The outbreak of COVID-19 was accompanied by a large amount of misleading interpretations especially on social media (Linden et al, 2020). Given the practical challenges of fact-checking and the difficulty of correcting misinformation and misinterpretation, the Government now uses pre-bunking or pre-emptive debunking on social media or Government-authorised information channels like digital newspapers, news channels on OTT television or their own information dissemination platforms like portals or apps as a proactive technique of avoiding polarisation of viewpoints.

VIII (ii) (c) Linkage - One of the roles of the media is to bring together various elements of society that are not directly connected (Perspectives on Mass Communication, 2012). The linkage can be based on common interests, or by matching wants with needs. In the 'post abnormal' world, where the people of the society are living in physical isolation and in their

own silos, the 'linkage' role of the media has become much more essential.

Social Media and digital communication platforms now play a very important role in linking various people with similar interests or needs - whether it is economic or commercial or personal needs. For example, it has impacted the healthcare system in a large way - starting from virtual doctor's appointments to reports, to organising and managing treatments at home, everything is handled through niche social media sites (Guzman et al, 2016). The hometreatment set-up has become much more sophisticated than the earlier days of pre-pandemic or pandemic, and now physical hospitalisations are limited to only allowing cases that are not possible to be treated in a home set-up. This entire process is managed through dedicated, niche portals or social media platforms. The first level interactions are with AI enabled bots that are much more efficient now than in the earlier times, thereby limiting the interactions with a human being. This has made the healthcare system more responsive, efficient, faster – freeing the doctors' time to intervene in cases which cannot be handled by a bot. Such linkages are also seen in other service industries like banking and financial institutes, utilities, retail and so on.

Another example is, given the isolated existence of the humans in the physical world, in the post abnormal world social media platforms play a crucial role in linking volunteers and experts in the wake of a natural disaster or human-created catastrophe. Social media helps to activate individuals and teams based on their skill sets and availability at a particular location. These digital responders use their time, expertise, as well as their personal networks for then providing actual help in the disaster sites.

Digital communication has even led to linking politicians and government officials and the citizens through online town halls. Physical rallies, political meetings, or face-to-face interactions with government officials are completely banned. The online meetings through social media platforms and online portals have helped in providing transparency on governance, freed-up the resources needed to organise physical meetings especially that are of large scale, and strengthened the connections between the politicians and government officials and the citizens, while providing the citizens a platform for direct input on government initiatives (Eldridge, 2016).

VIII (ii) (d) Transmission of Values (Socialisation) - The transmission of values is an important function of the mass media. Socialisation refers to the ways an individual comes to adopt the behaviour and values of a group - by watching, listening, or reading, people learn how they are supposed to behave and what values are important (Communication Studies,

2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it very apparent that human beings share the same sorrows, same hopes and same social needs globally. It has shown how interdependent people are and what happens to one person can soon affect many others, even on the far side of the planet. For instance, COVID-19 exerted strong effects on people's mental health and brought about a huge mental-health crisis across the world (BBC, 2020). In this context, the media has a larger role to play in helping people to socialise and feel a part of a larger society. The various groups on the social media platforms have been helping people to socialise and connect with people of shared values.

However, in the 'post abnormal' world of 2026, social media has brought about a certain fatigue in people, who feel that the connections and socialisations with a larger group are actually not deep enough. People feel lonelier spending hours every day using social media as a substitute for real connection and it has worsened the feelings of loneliness and inadequacy. It has increased the number of 'social anxiety sufferers' who temporarily feel some connection with others, but the moment they are off social media, their feeling of connection dissipates (Amatenstein, 2019). Therefore many people have reassessed their relationship with social media – and more and more people have left public platforms entirely, sticking instead to small communities and friendship groups on more private platforms like WhatsApp or Telegram.

VIII (ii) (e) Entertainment - In the 'post abnormal' world, Entertainment is still a very predominant function of the media; however its nature has evolved to suit the demand of the times. COVID-19 has rendered some popular activities off-limits, like festivals, movies in theatres, and events like live music and trade shows. When the pandemic broke, the shift towards OTT platforms for on-demand entertainment was quite apparent. Gradually the shift became more prominent and in the 'post abnormal' world, television is completely ondemand and has moved to the OTT platforms. The OTT television is driven by artificial intelligence (AI) and the programme content and advertisement that a user sees on television is customised based on his/her viewing preferences and profile. To tackle the fatigue of handling multiple subscriptions from the user point of view, in the worldwide there are about 2 to 3 media giants who have consolidated the OTT platforms and function as "OTT aggregators" (Evans A. et al, 2017), allowing users to have a single account with single login and payment preference.

The OTT platforms still have a high demand for original OTT original content for specific target audiences. The younger generations are prolific consumers of online gaming consumption while the older people favour traditional TV content available on the OTT platform. Much of the growth has happened in digital gaming. (Ballhaus et al, 2021) Platforms like Facebook Gaming, Amazon's Twitch and Google's cloud-gaming unit Stadia with YouTube have an array of premium games-related video content and have made gaming seamless for the consumers.

Television viewing is much more personalised, with each member of the family having their own device. Therefore there is a clear preference for edgy, realistic, somewhat dark content over family entertainment content of the pre-pandemic days. All movies, big budget or otherwise, are made for and released on the OTT platforms. Movie theatres have mostly shut down across the world, only a few remain to provide an experience of the pre-pandemic world, especially to the younger generation.

In December 2018 Netflix had premiered, 'Black Mirror: Bandersnatch' offering the consumers a flavour of interactive movies, where the viewers could make their simple own choices that affected the storyline of the movie (The Conversation, 2019). What was a nascent step in a movie then, has now become a much more complex and interactive feature, allowing the viewers to choose how a storyline progresses and how a movie ends in the movies of 'post abnormal' times. Much like television, linear radio too has given way to on-demand radio in the form of podcasts and digital streaming music.

While in the pre-pandemic world, Media and Entertainment companies created 'universes' of content for sustained engagement, in the 'post abnormal' world, the media and entertainment companies form a collaborative 'metaverse' - a more open, multi-brand environment built around consumers that enables intellectual property of many different companies to coexist on a single online platform. As envisaged by Ballhaus et al (2021), "DC Comics' Batman can interact with Disney's Captain America while Travis Scott performs."

Conclusion

In the 'post abnormal' world Media and Communications still play important roles in the society at individual and collective levels. It has cognitive and social utility, it is used as a medium of expression, to divert and relieve stress, to entertain, to create a sense of belongingness, to transmit values and to help people socialise, among other utilities. However, the nature of Media and Communication has changed, with a lot of emphasis on the usage of Communication-Technology. People, especially the older generations, who were

previously averse to or not so comfortable with the digital technology for communication in the pre-pandemic world, have adopted the digital methods with a lot more ease. However, it is also important to explore if the 'Post Abnormal World' has given rise to digital inequalities and has increased gaps, especially in the context of age (older and younger generation) or geographical location (urban and rural). In this visualisation of the future of communication, the digital divide has not been explored and it leaves for a scope for further study. Addressing the digital dichotomies becomes all the more important as the world faces a future of uncertainties and rapid changes.

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