

Facebook and COVID-19: They deleted the app, then came coronavirus

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Cooped up at home outside Milwaukee with her husband, 17-year-old twins and the family dog, Sarah Giffin had big plans to reorganize the

basement and read the classics.

But as the coronavirus gradually severed all of her ties with the outside world, Giffin did something she never thought she would. She went back on Facebook.

"It was that yearning for connection. We are all just sort of craving it," Giffin, 49, says. "You really do get this sense that we are all in this together on Facebook. You can see people's worry and their heartache."

Users like Giffin thought they had deleted Facebook from their lives forever. Then came COVID-19 and a new age of social distancing. With the majority of the U.S. population on lockdown and under orders to stay physically apart, some are returning to the giant social network, if only to get through the current crisis.

They share their fears and anxieties, home-cooked meals, goofy or tender moments with kids and pets and loads of coronavirus memes. Religious services and public health briefings draw big crowds as do streamed fitness classes and dance parties. Then there are all the calls and messages for life-and-death updates.

Facebook won't disclose any specifics on increased users or usage during the pandemic but recently said that Italians are spending 70% more time on all its apps including Instagram, Messenger and WhatsApp, with major spikes in messaging, phone calls and live streaming. Audience and advertising measurement firm Comscore reports that U.S. visits to Facebook rose 7% the week of March 9 and 11% the week of March 16.

Created to bring people together, in recent years Facebook has driven wedges instead.

Scandal after Facebook scandal—rampant misinformation and Russian

interference in the [presidential election](#), the Cambridge Analytica scandal that compromised tens of thousands of accounts, the mishandling of personal information—riled users to the point that some decided to desert their online besties rather than stick around.

Encroaching isolation during the pandemic has melted that resolve. Even some of Facebook's sharpest critics are logging in again. Veteran technology journalist Walt Mossberg, who denounced the company's policies and deactivated his account in 2018, says he has relented for now.

"With this pandemic, I need to keep in touch with friends & family who simply aren't on Twitter," Mossberg wrote on Facebook. But, he says, after the pandemic ends, "I'll quit again."

On Facebook during the pandemic only

The same goes for Giffin.

Before her feet hit the floor the morning after Donald Trump was elected, Giffin deactivated Facebook. Six months later, she revived her account but only to pop in once in a while to catch up with friends or linger over that day's memories.

She still blames Facebook for the spread of disinformation during the 2016 presidential election. But for now, she has swallowed her misgivings to connect with friends each day, like the husband-and-wife restaurant owners she met on last year's trip to northern Italy who chronicled their new normal—kids out of school playing puzzles or music at home—as this reality gradually mirrored her own.

On Sundays, Giffin goes to church on Facebook. She shares articles about the coronavirus to keep her community up to date. And last week,

after self-imposed silence, she fired off her first Facebook post in three years, pleading with friends and neighbors to take the nation's life-and-death struggle with the coronavirus more seriously and stay indoors. It got nearly 100 likes.

These quick hits of companionship on Facebook have helped Giffin cope, much like the off-screen moments she treasures, when her teenage boys challenge her to a game of Boggle or cozy up for a family meal. She's been delighted to discover more connection, and less conflict, on Facebook than before.

But the minute the pandemic retreats, Giffin says, so will she. "I believe the worst of us will still be there when this is all over," she says, "so I will be checking out."

Some Facebook users who have returned during the pandemic aren't sure how long they will stay. Thomas Tseng, 48, a market research professional from Los Angeles, says he never really quit Facebook, just removed the app from his phone about three years ago. He'd log in from time to time to receive birthday wishes or when he was tagged in a post.

Fake news and bogus conspiracy theories in the run-up to the election, then the countless privacy incursions, wore on him.

"I finally decided it wasn't worth my time," he says. Tseng still uses Instagram, as many die-hard Facebook critics do, but he felt it was important to boycott the company's namesake app.

Then, a few weeks ago, he logged back in to Facebook. He says he didn't want to be disconnected from friends and relatives during the coronavirus. But he notes, he's less engaged than he was before. "So it's still up in the air if this is a temporary or more permanent move," Tseng says.

Not even a pandemic could drag them back

Other longtime holdouts say nothing, not even a terrifying pandemic, could coax them back.

Eric Tollefsen, 48, quit Facebook four years ago to escape the political bickering and hasn't been back since. A visual merchandiser who moved from New York to Los Angeles a few months ago, he texts his loved ones instead.

"To be honest, I can't foresee a situation where I would ever go back to Facebook," Tollefsen says.

Mike Mierendorf, 36, a business consultant from Minneapolis, can't either. He deleted his Facebook account in 2018 as his distrust of the service grew and usage petered out. Video and group chat apps have kept him, his wife and their two young kids, in touch with friends and family.

There's a standing Thursday night Zoom get-together with friends in Denver, where Mierendorf used to live. One side of the family gathers on GoToMeeting. Nearly every day, parents and siblings connect over FaceTime.

His daughter visits with classmates at her Montessori preschool on Houseparty. His son chats and shares silly messages with his kindergarten class on the Marco Polo app. At night when the kids are tucked in bed, he and his wife play virtual games with their neighbors on Zoom.

"If this quarantine has accomplished anything that is good, it is that we are connecting with people more regularly than we had before," Mierendorf said. "Friends and family are all ensuring we stay connected however we need to."

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