



Group-Chatting Platform Discord Might Change Social Media With Its Business Model

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[BOBBY ALLYN](#)

The group-chatting platform Discord is growing by leaps and bounds — and it doesn't sell targeted ads. Could it be a model for other social media?

AILS CHANG, HOST:

Microsoft is reportedly in talks to acquire the social media platform Discord for \$10 billion. Discord started as a gaming community, but now it's much more than that. It's a place for conferences, concerts, book clubs and homework help. NPR's Bobby Allyn reports.

BOBBY ALLYN, BYLINE: Max Roquettes (ph) is an 18-year-old in the Chicago area who spent much of the last year hanging out on Discord. It started as a place to be with friends while playing video games. You can talk over text, audio or video.

MAX ROQUETTES: You can see when they're typing. It's a live conversation. It's really like a mix of, like, Reddit and a group chat.

ALLYN: And like Reddit, people on Discord chat under anonymous usernames, and many use anime characters and animal memes as their avatars. Some of the most popular communities are what you might expect - gaming, tech topics, cryptocurrency - but Roquettes says increasingly it doesn't just feel like a bubble for nerdy people who spend too much time on the Internet.

ROQUETTES: With the pandemic, a lot of my non-techy (ph) friends have kind of come on to Discord recently just to get help with their homework and interact with, like, new communities and, honestly, just because they have more time spent alone at home.

ALLYN: Roquettes, who is in high school, knows about homework help on Discord because he started a community that connects tutors with students. It's grown to nearly 7,000 people in recent months. He even uses it himself when his homework assignments stump him.

ROQUETTES: Having Discord for learning gives, like, another resource for me to kind of reinforce what my teachers are showing me.

ALLYN: In other homework communities, people stream live videos of themselves silently completing their assignments. In an interview with NPR, Discord CEO Jason Citron says he's seen it all on the platform. The social network has doubled its size in the pandemic to nearly 150 million users.

JASON CITRON: Our growth last year was pretty wild.

ALLYN: Karaoke, sneaker trading, Wall Street analysis - it's all going down on Discord. Citron says small private chats of fewer than 30 users is the most common way people are using it.

CITRON: So it's like friends of friends. You can almost think of it like an online potluck where you know some of the people but not all the people.

ALLYN: It's an intimate space where people don't worry about being snooped on. That's what has really drawn people to Discord. Its business model is almost like the anti-Facebook.

S SHYAM SUNDAR: But what is different about Discord is it doesn't track us or sell us to advertisers.

ALLYN: S. Shyam Sundar studies social media at Penn State University. Discord makes money through subscriptions for perks like better streaming quality and sillier emojis. Sundar says building a social network free of ads is tapping into deep worries right now over tech companies knowing so much about our lives.

SUNDAR: They've reached a kind of a tipping point in terms of our tolerance for advertising, even though it's relevant and even though it's tailored for us.

ALLYN: Just ask 18-year-old Discord user Janine Guzman (ph). He prefers Discord over other social media, specifically because what he says and does on the site is not being data mined by advertisers.

JANINE GUZMAN: I think that's really important that you don't want to, you know, target them with ads that will sucker them into buying something to make these companies that you're selling their information to happy.

ALLYN: Like on every corner of the Internet, chats on Discord can turn nasty. Discord says last year, it had to ban more than 250,000 users for things like harassment. Citron, the Discord CEO, says it has community guidelines against violent threats and extremism.

CITRON: If we discover that people are doing this based around a topic that violates our guidelines, we shut it down.

ALLYN: But most of the policing on the platform happens by volunteer moderators who set their own norms.

Bobby Allyn, NPR News, San Francisco.

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