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Face to Face Online? Reframing the Language We Use for Digital Formats?

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Since so much communication at work and home has gone online through the Covid lockdowns we have been witnessing a whole new vocabulary of everyday life. As much of this communication is likely to stay online, it pays to take a critical look at the vocabulary we are using.

It is fairly straightforward to find a word for online meetings, communication, networking, conferences and social events. They are all done **online**. We might sometimes use the word **digital**, or name a platform to be used as a way of defining the channel of communication too. We might say: let's meet on Zoom, or Webex. These are the online tools and we use their names to denote online communication.

Sometimes the word **remote** is used. And this makes me think. The word comes from the world of IT, so it can be seen as an appropriate way of describing communication from a distance using electronic tools. The aspect of distance is correct, of course. I might be in the next office or another continent to the person or people communicating with me – so remote, at a remove, or distant.

But what other associations does this word have, apart from its purely technical sense? Remote means a long way off, isolated, lonely. Imagine a remote house in the woods somewhere miles away from civilization. The word tells me I am not connected, even though of course, technically speaking, I am connected. But in terms of relationships I am not connected: I am remote.

Connected is another such word. Technically I am connected, but am I connecting with the people using the same electronic tool? Isn't this what we should be aiming for when we are working online: the best possible working relationships, meaning the best possible interpersonal connections? It is not about being merely technically connected, but about being connected with people, being human.

There are plenty of people who are experiencing a loss in the quality of interpersonal connection online, even when the technical connections work with no hiccups or major difficulties. But with online work and communication here to stay, I think we need to make the best of it and to do our best to ensure good connection between people in these electronic formats. It may partly be the ways that we use such formats that is making them less satisfactory than they can be. And also the way we frame them in our language.

If we use terms that make them seem somehow inferior, then are we seeing them as second-best

from the outset? If we do not do our best to create meaningful interpersonal connections online, then are we capitulating?

A kind of devaluing language for the online formats has become very commonplace. The online world is **virtual**, and the non-digital world is therefore by implication **real**. How often have you heard someone say “meet for real” by way of explaining the difference between online and not online? The implication is that the online world is not real. We are holding meetings online, making plans online, training and teaching online, doing politics online, negotiating and mediating online, and meeting our families and friends online. All the things we are discussing and deciding are very real. The people I am talking to via an online format are real people.

Another term we encounter again and again by way of contrast to online communication is **face-to-face**. This baffles me, and it shows how hard it is to find language that appropriately describes what we are experiencing, and, indeed, how we want that experience to be. I have, frankly, experienced nothing so “face-to-face” as online communication, where I have a screen in front of me on which I can see pretty well only the face or faces of the people participating, and they can see my face. Isn't it rather that online is our “face-to-face” format, while meeting in physical rather than digital spaces is “body-to-body”? Of course, the wording “body-to-body” won't and should not become common terminology (though occasionally you hear “in the flesh”). What I want to say is that by using “face-to-face” to denote a distinction between online and analogue communication, we are devaluing the latter, in many cases unintentionally.

Or take **in-person**, which is generally accepted as a term that denotes communication in one physical space in contrast to using the internet or telephone. What would the opposite of this be? **Out-of-person, off-person?**

Paul Watzlawick wrote of the distinction between **analogue** and **digital** communication, whereby the former could not be turned off and the latter can be. But this isn't going to help, or become common linguistic currency. We are not going to be using the distinction between analogue and digital in our everyday communication, nor would that work in terms of the theory. There is an analogue element to our digital communication anyway – the facial and body language that we are still using when working face-to-face via a computer screen.

To make online communication work well we need to see its potential. This includes online mediation and online training. Both are about more than just being able to connect people technically from distant physical locations. We need the relationship work that so much of our communication requires to also be successful online. It is certainly a basic human need to be with other people in a physical space, and I am not championing a world where this is not possible, nor am I trying to whitewash over the challenges many people have experienced with online formats. Another new term is “Zoom fatigue,” and indeed being online so much can be exhausting. But have we forgotten how exhausting it was to commute and spend days in long series of meetings in offices?

We should be making the very best we can of the online formats, and perhaps that will be more difficult if the language we use for these online formats frequently contains assumptions about them that devalue them. It is all very well to be critical of existing terms, but then what alternative terms might there be?

Before answering that question, a brief digression into German. It is interesting to see how other

languages to English have been dealing with the distinction. In German we have the word online, which is most often contrasted with **Präsenz**, so you get compounds like **Präsenzunterricht** and **Präsenztraining** for teaching or training in a physical room. The opposite of presence is **absence**. Are we all absent when communicating online? Alas, sometimes we are, as we are not focused on the one channel of communication, but have other applications open too, because the machine we use offers so many different communication channels. Should we be absent when working with others online? Of course not, but the use of the dichotomy between presence and its implied counterpart absence is giving us the permission to be just that: absent. Which, I guess, is one reason that so much university and school teaching done online in Germany (and in many places around the world) involves no direct verbal and visual (face-to-face) synchronous communication between teacher and student. Instead we get recorded lectures, online spaces where lecturers lecture and cameras and microphones are not used, settings where students are reluctant to turn on their cameras, uploads on platforms, and the like. All of these have their uses, but if they lead to the absence of shared synchronous and simultaneous spaces – to a great echo chamber of absence – then we are doing something wrong. We must instead be aiming for the greatest possible **presence** online.

If you work in a language other than English, what insights do the terms used for online and physical spaces give you about the assumptions we are making about them?

So I have come to favour a simple distinction between **on-site** and **online**, whereby for on-site I will preferably substitute a more specific term such as in my office, on campus, etc. This won't become a standard wording, and it won't be a perfect solution, but at least I am trying through language to give each **format a chance to create meaningful face-to-face encounters between real people who are present.**

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