On the Transformation of Presences – An Introduction

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Presence – empirical fractions

Between 2020 and 2021, two cohorts of students at the University of Basel – similar to probably most universities worldwide – began their studies under COVID-19 conditions. Accordingly, they got to know the university, attended the courses, and engaged in conversations with fellow students and lecturers exclusively in a mediated form via platforms such as Zoom or Teams. This led to a strange effect for me as a lecturer and especially as a student advisor.

During the fully mediated semesters, I had countless advising talks with students via Zoom that were far more personal, emotional and, thus, intimate than similar conversations in direct face-to-face communication in my office. Students sitting in their teenage bedrooms in their parents' home have told me frequently, sometimes in tears, how dissatisfied they were with their Zoom studies in mediated COVID times and how "damn depressing" the whole situation was for them. I gained insights into the students' room dispositions as well as their emotional arrangements that had previously been far removed from me. After a few sessions, I knew their stuffed animals, which pop stars' posters hung on their walls and whether they liked or disliked tidying their desks. Thus, this communicative shift created an unusual figuration of intimacy, an arrangement of closeness consisting of actors, media (devices), feelings, spaces and objects. Strangely enough, distance teaching led to less distanced communication.

When the university reopened, I met the students with whom I had previously entered such intimate figurations, and we continued the counselling sessions in my office. However, now, in what should have been a face-to-face communication, we experienced a breaching of the familiar relationships we had built during our former Zoom sessions: At the same moment, we were simultaneously strangers to each other as much as we were familiar. However we – the consultant and the student – had no social script at our disposal for dealing with this strange familiarity. We had to learn that the different modes of our presence – our appearance in the video call and in my office – each afford unique selves and, thus, distinctive communicative pairings: Without media – whether as "body glossings" in Goffman's sense (1971, 27)

or as apparatuses of representation – we would not be able to communicate externally what we suspect inside ourselves. In this way, we experienced impressively and emotionally how we were aligned with the media settings through which each of our selves encountered other people's selves (Ronzhyn and Cardenal 2023).

In other words, these two settings create two different "cultures of presence" (Gumbrecht 2004). Remarkably, the mediatized culture enables a deeper dimension of intimacy here because, I assume, it increases visual proximity and, at the same time, restricts sensuality: Ego sees Alter – and its world of things – in closest proximity, but without having to process the highly contingent physical-haptic dimension of this perception. This condition makes it easier to be close while, simultaneously, being a stranger. This argument goes hand in hand with a basic assumption about physical presence formulated classically by Erwin Goffman (1959): Bodies that are present challenge us communicatively because we sense that their territoriality goes beyond the mere cover of the skin. However, we cannot ask the other body exactly what its territoriality is. If it were not so embarrassing, we probably could ask the other person who inhabits the other body. Nevertheless, if we were to do this, we would no longer be having an everyday conversation but an intimate one, for which new, more complicated scripts were necessary.

The disruptions I experienced as a student counsellor had consequences for my teaching, or more precisely, for my teaching of theoretical concepts. It came as a surprise that students could now understand some specific theoretical debates in the social sciences quite well due to their pandemic media experiences. In my discipline, cultural anthropology, this applies above all to the theoretical discussions surrounding the so-called 'crisis of representation'.[1] While it has always been a vast didactic challenge for me to convey the methodological and epistemological consequences of the writing-culture debate from the 1980s to young students, this no longer seemed so complicated. The core of this debate became a very empirical everyday experience for many students in COVID-19 times.

Without formulating this conceptually, many students have learnt implicitly that there is a constitutive relationship between media environment and living environment, between media *Umwelt* and *Lebenswelt*. They have experienced that the inherent logic of media systems determines, to a certain degree, what these systems observe. The students have experienced interactions being thrown back on the discursive and technical conditions of the media which make life and interactions communicable. This seemingly pretty abstract idea now reflected an everyday experience that could be easily conveyed. At the same time, however, I realized that the theoretical considerations about everyday life I teach in courses now seemed very fractured.

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1   A brief reminder of what this debate was about: It was about nothing less than the uncertainty if the ethnographic account does not primarily say something about the form of the ethnographic account or about what is ethnographically observed.

If everyday life changes, does not the theory of everyday life also have to be new and different?

Presence – theoretical fractures

From a classical phenomenological perspective, everyday life is the territory of reality where basic interactions occur between at least two individuals present. Two actors encounter each other as black boxes and must somehow reduce the contingency of doable actions so that communication is possible. These individuals are physically present at a shared location, observe each other's body and consider the physical presence of the other in their actions. This spatial-temporal co-presence situation implies challenges and resources for mutual coordination. Everydayness is given when these interactions are processed according to tacit knowledge, whereby the selection of interactional steps is not reflected consciously but made implicitly (Goffman 1959). Integrating digital communication into everyday life has disrupted such a theory of everyday life. Finally, all the grand theories of everyday life agree to focus on face-to-face communication among people who are physically present, whether Alfred Schütz's "Lebenswelt", Erwin Goffman's interactionism, or the communicative practices to which Harold Garfinkel and Harvey Sacks have turned.

According to such conceptions, the actors draw on enculturated scripts, bodies of knowledge, format templates and role expectations, so that expectable practices can follow. Thus, everyday life is the area of physically perceived reality in which actors refer to incorporated macrostructural scripts and schemes. Without this reference, it would be precarious and problematic. Referring to Husserl's famous metaphor, everyday life can be seen as the realm of the world in which actors can drift as if in a stream without having to leave the stream: the stream of never-to-be-explained actions and assertions (2009, 162 ff.). This everydayness characterizes precisely those interactions between present bodies that lie below the perception threshold of conscious interaction. Goffman calls such everyday interactions "encounters" (1961), whereas Niklas Luhmann uses the witty expression of the "Kommunikation au trottoir" (1986, 75): According to Luhmann, it is a paradigmatic scene of everyday life that we walk along the sidewalk and rush past other people without having to address them as interaction partners. They are strangers with whom we have wordlessly agreed to remain strangers – without this agreement leading to closeness. Accordingly, one can ask if a Zoom-like everyday life is possible at all, since there are no sidewalks in Zoom where unintentional interactions could occur.[2]

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2   Therefore, it is not surprising that journalistic articles have also focused on the lack of "Zufallsbegegnungen" (encounters by chance) in virtual spaces and asked how elementary

Karin Knorr-Cetina (2009) coined the term "response presence" to mark the co-temporality of communication participants, meaning that they can react to each other without any temporal delay in the same physical environment. According to this, the shared perception of the physical environment provides the framework for the interactive experience of presence. In addition, there are the requisites, the props, the culturally labelled and marking objects, which denote a specific presence as common reference points precisely when they are in the background of the everyday stage. Following this argument, Luhmann (2002, 102–111) points out laconically that it needs the presence of specific tables and chairs for young people to call each other students.

Moreover, the argument has even been put forward that interactive attendance systems are, to a certain extent, decoupled from social systems (Kieserling 1999, 25f.): The intrinsically organized patterns of the interaction would eventually predominate social markers in their formative power for the act. Finally, in an interaction, (at least) two bodies would have to arrange themselves in such a way as to form a temporally bound unit, but without forgetting that they are autonomous units. To a certain extent, this is the productive paradox of every interaction: Without bodies, interaction is impossible, but without interaction, the individual body cannot be perceived in its individuality.

These phenomenological, theoretical figures, having emerged during the 20th century, certainly did not foresee that in the 21st century, a certain part of this everyday interaction occurs between bodies which are physically distant. In this respect, empirical studies that build on this theoretical tradition must always insert the phrase that the concept of interaction used by those such as Schütz, Goffman and Garfinkel exclusively describes physically present people and must be adapted to digital time. The extent to which digital presences have become everyday life in just a few years can be seen in the fact that an empirically and theoretically impressively dense study from 2015 which deals with videoconferencing in ethnomethodological terms starts from the premise that videoconferencing is not everyday life but a break in everyday life (Mondada 2015).

What I would like to stress here is that the social sciences are still waiting for a grand theory of digital everyday life – a theory conceptualizing everyday interactions regarding digital and physical presences. There are certainly numerous reformulations and extensions of theories of everyday life. But there is still no genuinely new theory that is explicitly dedicated to our hybrid everyday life.

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such encounters are, for example, for everyday office life. Cf. https://www.faz.net/aktuell/kar riere-hochschule/kolumne-nine-to-five-auf-dem-virtuellen-flur-19403474.html (24 January 2024).

The contributions to this anthology certainly do not attempt to provide such a theory. Instead, they are empirical explorations of everyday life in which presence between those present can become precarious.

Presence – empirical observations, conceptual reflections

The contributions in this anthology are based on a panel that I (co-)chaired with Eberhard Wolff (Zurich) at the EASA Congress 2022 in Belfast.[3] We had initially planned only to discuss the new COVID-related everyday media life on the panel. But among the submissions were excellent contributions that went beyond COVID, which sharpened our perspectives on the mediated university.

This combination made us realize that COVID was ultimately just a catalyst for a change that would have happened even without the Zoom semesters. Nevertheless, students were particularly affected by the "zoomification" of the university and, thus, the mediatization of everyday life. That is why it was important for us to invite not only senior researchers as contributors, but also the voices of (post) graduate students.

Accordingly, this anthology gathers contributions written by both junior and senior researchers, master students as well as professors. I am also pleased that the contributors and their fields refer to three continents: America (Brazil), Asia (China, India, South Korea) and Europe (Austria, Germany, Romania). This allows the volume to capture a wide range of experiences and empirical observations. Therefore, the aim is not to find a conclusive answer to the question of how everyday media can be conceptualized. Rather, the aim is to compile a broad panorama of observations, theoretical considerations or even just thought experiments of how different forms of presence are organized together and alongside each other.

The first contribution "Scoping the virtual world. Identity reshaping as an epistemological prerequisite for research" delves into the impact of virtual reality on identity creation and self-expression. It emphasizes the need for social scientists to conduct phenomenological analysis before virtual fieldwork, raising questions about data validity in this unique environment. Gabriel Stoiciu suggests using an 'a priori' intellectual lens to navigate potential distortions, incorporating both 'etic' and 'emic' perspectives.

In "Doing Presence. On the construction of relations and realities in online teaching settings", Marion Näser-Lather investigates digital co-presence in online university teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing from an interdisciplinary perspective, the author combines media theory, sociology, phenomenology

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3   I thank Eberhard Wolff very much for the co-organization of the panel—and for the great time we spent together in Belfast!

and actor-network theory, using personal observations, surveys at German universities and statements from academics.

Jung Yeon Kim examines how tools, both ancient ritual objects and modern Virtual Reality (VR) tools, expand our understanding of immaterial worlds in her article "Riding tools and spiritual excursion. Modes of human presence and tool usage". These tools serve as symbolic indicators, which transport the mind and body to new realms, shaping diverse belief systems and accommodating the post-human presence in our conceptual world map.

Barbara Čurda reflects on the concept of presence amid the COVID-19 pandemic, exploring differences in "Virtual and physical ways of being present in Odissi dance networks in Bhubaneswar in India". Drawing on her fieldwork in Bhubaneswar, India, she focuses on Odissi dance activity, emphasizing how pandemic constraints altered physical contact and highlighting the relational nature of presence within a network of entities.

The article "Forced and uncertain co-presence. Smart cameras and distant homework supervision in Eastern China" explores technology-mediated distant homework supervision in that part of China. Based on her fieldwork, Zhenwei Wang analyses the use of smart cameras by migrant parents, and reveals that the technology creates a sense of 'forced co-presence' and 'uncertain co-presence' for the children while closely monitoring their homework.

The anthology concludes with the paper "The Class Diary of the pandemic. Comics of the transformations of the 'presence' in Brazilian schools during the COVID-19 pandemic" by João Pedro Rangel Gomes da Silva and Matheus Fred Schulze. They deal with an anthropological diary, i.e. "the Class Diary" which captured the diverse experiences of a new sense of 'presence' during the pandemic, blending fear of the present with hope for future change. The study specifically examined transformations in online teacher-student relationships, resulting in a distinctive virtual and everyday 'presence'. In order to convey these experiences artistically, the Class Diary was transformed into a comic book, representing diverse perspectives amid the uncertainties of the pandemic.

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