See You Online

Lucy Osler considers how we perceive others in a digitally-mediated world

As I am writing this, as far as I know (due to the lack of clarity regarding the rules in the UK), I am still in lockdown thanks to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. I am not meant to meet with more than one other household; not meant to unnecessarily catch public transport to visit friends and relatives; not allowed in my office at the university. Opportunities for face-to-face social interaction have been seriously restricted in the last few months. Instead, I have been seeking social interaction with my friends, family, and colleagues on Zoom, Skype, HouseParty, WhatsApp, Messenger, Signal, Facebook, and Instagram.

In the last decade, we have seen increased concern about taking more and more of our lives online. Sherry Turkle, for one, in her best-selling book *Alone Together*, has warned us of the dangers of replacing our face-to-face interactions with virtual connections. She claims that while the quantity of social connections we can make has sky-rocketed with the birth of the internet and social media, the quality of those connections is leaving us lonely and isolated.

Connecting with others online is not a new practice, of course. However, with lockdown measures in place across much of the globe, our social lives have been forced to migrate online to an even greater degree and intensity than ever before. Working from home, happy hour on Zoom, family games on Steam, movie watch-alongs co-ordinated on WhatsApp, idly scrolling through Instagram – for many of us, these are now our *dominant* forms of social interaction. Having been forced to allow employees to work from home because of the Covid-19 pandemic, many employers are now implementing working-from-home schemes that extend beyond lockdown measures. Even as we slowly start to come out of lockdown, then, the percentage of our interpersonal encounters that happen online is on the up.

Even when we are mediated by digital platforms we can directly perceive the experiences and emotions of others

While many decry the poverty of online social encounters, what underlies this debate is a philosophical question about how it is we encounter one another online. Perhaps somewhat counterintuitively, I explore how, in many cases, we *directly perceive* others and

their experiences online, despite the fact that we are mediated by technology. When we go online we do not merely encounter pictures, symbols, or signs of other subjects; even when we are mediated by cameras, microphones, and digital platforms – or when we interact via text and chat apps – I suggest we can directly perceive some of the experiences and emotions of others. Considering how we encounter one another in the online sphere has important implications for how we assess both the quality and possibility of social interactions online more generally.

Direct social perception

In recent years, there has been revitalised interest in understanding humans not as minds concealed by flesh and skull but as embodied beings. This conceptualisation of humans as *embodied subjects* – beings whose capacities for thought and feeling are intimately bound up with the kinds of bodies we have and the things these bodies can do – has influenced how philosophers approach a perennial philosophical problem: the so-called "problem of other minds". Simply put, the problem is this: since I cannot see the thoughts and feelings of others – they are hidden behind layers of skin and skull – how do I know that other experiencing subjects *exist at all*?

The recent "embodied turn" in philosophy offers a possible solution to this problem. It urges us to move away from talking about how the experiences of others are hidden away from us inside their heads and instead focus on the way that we often see minds in action – that is, the way we can have direct perceptual access to (at least part of) others' thoughts, feelings, and intentions in their embodied and expressive behaviour. The key idea here is that, when I see you smile, I do not need to imagine or infer that you are happy. Rather, I can see your happiness directly in your smile, just as I can see your sadness directly in your tears or your pain directly in your wincing. Your happiness, sorrow, and pain are out there in the world for me to observe.

In my pandemic-enforced online social world, do I no longer have direct perceptual access to others and their experiences?

This account rests on the claim that our expressive behaviour is not just a *sign* of some hidden inner experience but is instead a constitutive *part* of that experience itself – a part that I and others can directly perceive. Accordingly, there is no problem of other minds insofar as we can sometimes perceive parts of other minds directly, embodied in the expressive actions of the people we interact with.

That our expressive gestures are *part* of our experience is supported by various empirical findings. For instance, there is evidence that those who suffer from both congenital or acquired facial paralysis (e.g., Moebius Syndrome, Bell's Palsy), or who have undergone Botox injections that intentionally diminish facial expressivity, report feeling their happiness less intensely as a result of their inability to smile. Without the expressive world-facing profile, it seems

that part of the emotion is somehow missing. People also seem to find it significantly harder to do "mental maths" or to give directions if they are prevented from using bodily gestures. All this points to the idea that our gestures are not simply a decorative flair but are a part of our experience; we think through embodied action, we feel through our expressive behaviour, and all of this is perceptually available to others.

Given the emphasis on perceiving the expressive body of the other, these "direct social perception" views have typically been thought to apply only to face-to-face social interactions. "Face-to-face", though, is somewhat of a misnomer. I take it to capture both more and less than this phrase might suggest. When talking about a face-to-face interaction, this not only refers to my being able to see your *face*; it is not only smiles and tears that I perceive but also your bodily posture, your gestures, the way you manipulate the shared space between us, and so on. It might, then, be best to talk of a body-to-body interaction. Also, we are also not limited to *seeing* someone's expressivity but can also *hear* their tone of voice, their sobs, and laughs, *feel* their intention in the way that they hold our hand or caress our cheek.

Thus "face-to-face" is used to imply a rich array of perceptual experiences that

I might have of the other's expressivity that may involve not only vision but other perceptual modalities, too. In fact, I do not even need to be strictly face-to-face or body-to-body with you at all to directly perceive some of your experiences. Imagine that you are yelling down to me with excitement from upstairs. Even though I cannot see your body, I can still hear the excitement in your voice.

A crucial point often overlooked in these debates is the way that perceiving another's experience not only involves perceiving discrete embodied gestures such as clenched fists and smiles, etc. We can also perceive another's *bodily style* more generally. Merleau-Ponty describes how we perceive others as having a certain style of being-in-the-world. Think, for instance, of the difference between someone who is confidently chatting away, interacting with their environment, using large gestures, taking up a lot of space, versus someone who is timid, making small movements, using a quiet voice and so on. We can directly perceive distinct bodily styles in the way that someone acts, perceiving not just *what* they are doing but *how* they are doing it.

Going online

What, though, does direct social perception have to do with our online social encounters? On the face of it, not very much. If we wanted to craft a paradigm form of *disembodied* social interaction, online encounters seem a perfect example. Our online interactions, rather than taking place *in the flesh*, are mediated by our screens. I can sit in my home in Exeter and use technology to *indirectly* encounter others.

Does this mean that in my pandemic-enforced online social world, I no longer have direct perceptual access to others and their experiences? What is the implication of this conclusion? One might be forced to say that when we encounter others online, rather than directly perceiving others, I must infer or imagine what their experiences are like from the signs and symbols available to me. This might mean that we no longer can be properly speaking said to encounter the other and their experience, that they are rendered disembodied minds hidden behind a wall, not of flesh but of screens. Indeed, we might even be led to conclude that we only encounter *constructs* of others online, pieced together from our own inferences, imaginings, and projections. It is not a great leap from here to conclude that, at best, our online social interactions are seriously impaired in contrast to face-to-face interactions and, at worst, throw us into a world of imagined sociality.

We can directly perceive others and their experience not only IRL but in the online sphere

I want to present a rosier picture of our social encounters online and defend the idea that we can directly perceive others and their experience not only IRL but in the online sphere. Note, though, that while I undoubtedly present a more optimistic view of online sociality than is currently in vogue, I am not suggesting that our online interactions are identical to, as good as, or should replace our face-to-face encounters.

I do not make a claim about the *quality* of our online social encounters but consider the *structure* of these interactions. I explore this potentially contentious claim by assessing two forms of online social encounter: first, video chat on Zoom, and second, instant messaging on WhatsApp.

Zoom

When I enter a Zoom meeting, there is your face on my screen. My face is also on your screen. Video technology has made it possible for me to see and hear you online even though we are not physically together. Although I am not face-to-face with your physical body, I am able to perceive your body, mediated as it is by screens and microphones. Your smiles, your laughter, your excited tone of voice, all of these are there on Zoom for me to perceive.

When I read your messages, I am not simply seeing signs of your experience but rather an expressive part of it

Aren't I just seeing a picture of you, a representation of your face, a reconstruction of your voice? Technically, yes. I certainly am not seeing your physical body in quite the same way that I do when we are face-to-face. But is seeing your *physical* body what is necessary for me to see your happiness in your smile? I think not. It seems odd to say that just because your smile is represented on a pixelated screen that now I see your smile as a *sign* of your happiness rather than a part of it. I still experience your mediated smiles, your mediated laughs, as an expressive part of your happiness.

When we are talking about direct social perception, what is *direct* is our experience of the other's expressivity, of the other's experience, i.e. that it does not involve inference or imagination. As such, it is perfectly possible for me to directly perceive your happiness in your smile, the excitement in your voice, even when your smile and voice are mediated by our screens and speakers.

WhatsApp

What, though, about other forms of online communication? While video chats are becoming increasingly common, particularly for those in lockdown, much of our online sociality is conducted via text, often on instant messaging platforms like WhatsApp, Messenger, and Signal. This seems like a far cry from a face-to-face interaction. Here, what I perceive might be described as mere signs and symbols, in the form of typed words and emoticons.

There are two arguments I want to present in defence of the idea that even when restricted to instant messaging, we can directly perceive aspects of the other's experience. First, remember that what makes our expressive bodily behaviour available for direct social perception is that it is an intersubjectively available *part* of the other's experience. I think a similar claim can be made in relation to the words that we express ourselves with.

Merleau-Ponty famously states that spoken words are not merely a sign of our inner experience but are an expressive part of our

experience. We do not simply have a wealth of experience swirling around in our skulls which we then externalise through words. Rather, it is through speaking, through words, that our experience arises.

This is supported by the common experience of needing to talk out our thoughts and feelings. Sometimes it is through speaking that we come to know our own emotions. When talking to my friend about my new love interest, my excitable chatter does not simply convey my crush but can help me realise my own infatuation; it is part of the experience of developing and enriching my infatuation. Tellingly, Merleau-Ponty makes a direct analogy between speech and gesture. If our bodily expressions can be part of my experience, so, I think, can my words.

While Merleau-Ponty focuses predominantly upon spoken words, it seems reasonable to suppose that this can also apply to written words. Imagine that to help you cope with the stress of lockdown, you start keeping a journal. Through writing this journal you might discover how anxious you are feeling. Moreover, it might be through writing that you can come to regulate and shape your emotional well-being, allowing you to exorcise some of your pent-up frustration through the act of writing. Just as my smile is part of my happiness, then, so too might my writing be an expressive action that is part of other emotions.

For this discussion, the important point is that when I read your messages, I am not simply seeing (indirect) signs of your experience but rather an expressive part of it. I do not need to infer your anger from the text you send me in all caps. I directly perceive it in your expressive act of typing in all caps. Remember that what is direct here is how I experience you, that I experience your anger without needing to infer or imagine that you are angry.

However, this is only half of the story. Not only are the *words* you send an expressive part of your experience, but the *style* of your texting is also directly perceivable by me. Instant messaging platforms do not

simply deliver messages between people; they are not merely channels for transferring information. They also allow us to show a range of other expressive features that help to develop our own experiences. For instance, on WhatsApp, I not only see the message that you have sent, I can see if you are online, when you were last online, whether my message has delivered, whether my message has been read, and that you are typing. Why are these features important for our consideration of direct social perception online? Because these features are all expressive of the other's "style".

If we are in the middle of an argument over WhatsApp and I can see that you have read my message, that you start typing, stop, start typing again, I perceive your frustration in the dynamic rhythm of your messaging. Thus, not only do we have directly perceivable bodily styles (gestures, facial expressions, etc.) but texting styles too. Again, I do not need to infer or imagine your frustrated state. Your expressivity is there for me to see on my screen. In other words, the way in which you text is also an expressive part of your experience and is directly available to me, even when we are sitting in different houses, different cities, or even different countries.

Final thoughts

All of this to say that, despite fears that technology will destroy our social lives, we can (sometimes at least) still be said to directly perceive others and their experiences even when we are in a mediated, online world. Perhaps, then, it should be no surprise that many of us have found a certain amount of solace in our online socialising in these days of social distancing – online platforms have allowed us to see one another without flouting lockdown rules.

While there are many valid concerns about online interactions replacing all our face-to-face interactions, this is not necessarily because we do not, properly speaking, encounter others and their experiences online. A healthy diet requires that we eat a variety of foods and a healthy social diet might be thought to require the same thing. For many of us, if we were only allowed to have social interactions in the form of one-to-one face-to-face conversations, that might be experienced as overwhelming and exhausting. Too much of one style of social interaction may well be a bad thing; for many of us, having most of our social interactions take place online is too much. I, for one, am looking forward to being with more of my people IRL. But that does not mean that online interactions themselves must be bad or inferior, or that they do not really put us in direct contact with one another. They might, on my account, not even be as different to our face-to-face interactions as many suppose.

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