UC SANTA BARBARA

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Mapping Hell

By now, 12 months into America's coronavirus lockdown, we're all familiar with "Zoom fatigue," the feeling of dull dread and disconnect in a medium meant to substitute for meeting face to face. But while most scholarship has set about determining what it *is*, less work has been done on *why* it happens.

Robby Nadler, who directs UC Santa Barbara's Academic, Professional and Technical Graduate Writing Development Program, has proposed a theoretical framework for understanding what he calls "computer-mediated communication (CMC) exhaustion."

In an article in the journal Computers & Composition, Nadler argues that Zoom and similar technologies distort our sense of space. Humans, he says, depend on spatial cues in our conversations — but that space is warped or missing in virtual exchanges.

"Because many people use platforms such as Zoom trying to replicate physical spatial interactions," he said, "they ultimately exhaust themselves because, try as we might to create physical interactions, virtual space plays by different rules."

Nadler's research is deeply informed by his experience in composition studies, specifically in the subfield of writer center studies. Remote learning in writing centers, which help students with a wide range of services, has been a fixture on campuses for years.

His theory on Zoom fatigue focuses on what Nadler calls “third skins” — his framework for how we engage spaces in a virtual setting. In a virtual context, he said, a person gets “flattened” into the space that others are experiencing.

As an example, he said that if you’re in a coffee shop chatting with people and the coffee grinder goes off, they’ll know the sound and you are separate. But if you’re in the coffee shop for a Zoom meeting and the grinder roars, everyone will associate the disruption with you. It’s the same phenomenon when a dog barks or a baby cries.

“So even though we like to think when we’re in a Zoom meeting that we’re engaging another person and all the rules of physical interactions hold,” Nadler said, “what we’re actually doing is engaging a particular representation that has all these gnarly spatial differences — and that’s where CMC exhaustion can come in because our minds want to do something that reality won’t permit.”

Nadler notes the paper is not a prescription for dealing with Zoom fatigue but an attempt — perhaps the first of its kind — to theorize the mechanics of the phenomenon.

“Ultimately,” he said, “my goal was to start conversations about CMC exhaustion by helping people see what’s there to explore. When I started this, there was no peer-reviewed literature on it, and there still is maybe only a handful of academic articles since then. The whole world is experiencing something academia is just starting to respond to, so I just wanted to be a part of that conversation.”

Reactions to the paper have reflected the perspectives of the people who’ve read it, he said. Some from the medical and technology communities, he noted, “have appreciated the way the work theorizes space because those strategies aren’t always in their perspectives. Others from the composition field have appreciated how the paper uses a humanities field to tackle a problem that many people think the humanities don’t have a role to play in. And then there are those who have said they stumbled across the article just by googling Zoom fatigue and it provided them with a deeper understanding of what they have been experiencing.”

One of the gratifying aspects of the paper, Nadler said, is that it highlights the contributions of the humanities to our lives. His theories on Zoom fatigue are based on the work he and others have done in writing center studies — a little-known field that most people wouldn’t associate with a theory for the onset of Zoom fatigue.

But it shows that the humanities are a vibrant field that’s relevant in all aspects of our lives, he said.

“So even when we think something like Zoom fatigue is a matter for computer scientists, the medical field, and psychologists,” Nadler said, “the humanities show us that so much of our world is about how we as people engage it (and in the case of CMC exhaustion, literally engage it). Many people in non-humanities fields aren’t trained to think of interactions in these ways, so as technology becomes more and more ingrained in our lives, I think the humanities has a more pressing call than ever to understand who we become in these spaces.”

Looking ahead, Nadler said the next step would be to test the paper’s theories. He’s confident spatial cues are part of the Zoom fatigue, but the extent has yet to be determined.

On the practical side, he thinks it’s important to start having conversations about the reality of virtual experiences and how they differ from physical ones. Zoom and virtual learning aren’t bad, he said, just different. The way we’ve built and used the technologies, however, often assumes there’s little difference.

“My work with space is just one way I posit key differences emerge — but it’s just one, and there are likely more,” Nadler said. “So what I think CMC exhaustion ultimately has taught us is that there’s so much we don’t know about how we as humans function, so many invisible things we take for granted; as we move more and more into further digitized worlds, it’s essential that we remember we aren’t just learning about new technologies but how our own lives take on novel experiences with these technologies. And doing so, we will ultimately discover more about ourselves.”

About UC Santa Barbara

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