Presence and absence in a digital age – are we in the midst of a fundamental shift?

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Abstract

The structural importance of absence for human development is considered crucial in psychoanalytic thinking. It is in the intersection of presence/absence, gratification/frustration, where we are confronted with the necessary conflict between the principles of pleasure and reality. The profound impact of digital technology on our daily existence today is evident and omnipresent and a central aspect of this is the displacement that has occurred in the dimension of presence / absence. Nowadays, a physical encounter with an-Other contains a tangible aspect of partial absence, when the person you are with, has one eye on the meeting and another directed towards a screen – in potential interaction with someone else.

A relationship between two people has certainly always contained a third, and in that sense you are always subject to the others divided attention. However, I propose that we are now facing something qualitatively different. The partially absent other is not only passively engaged in thought or fantasy, but (potentially) actively engaged in response to another’s directed desire. On the other hand, digital technology and the internet-in-hand-devices provide a constant source of presence of that which is physically absent. If your Other goes away, you can still be in constant contact. Thus, we are never completely alone and we are never completely together – and this in a structurally different way than before.

(Short abstract alt last paragraph!)
In our digital age presence / absence is partial phenomenon rather than absolute. Psychoanalytic theory implies changes of this nature would have structural implications and lead to a fundamental shift in psychic development. The paper will discuss these qualitative changes in our living conditions, their possible theoretical and clinical implications, and explore, from a psychoanalytical perspective, the nature of absence and presence in the digital era.