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# MEDIATISED HOME: USING SEMIOTIC REPERTOIRES IN ONLINE WORKPLACE COMMUNICATIONS

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## ABSTRACT:

Since 2020, people have faced the challenge of constructing new visual modes of online workplace meetings, because we had to use our home for working communications purposes and as a new medium. Mediatization of home involves redefining semiotic resources and communicational norms concerning the appearance of participants, the background, the use of camera and microphone. The results of the poll demonstrate that this redefining has two aspects: 1) the use of semiotic repertoire to transmit meaningful information about the self and own positions, attitudes, and roles in the communication; and 2) normalisation of own and others' actions during online meetings from home. The results of the survey contribute to awareness of how the issue of private and working/corporate places is being debated. The author claims that technical aspects of online meetings are at the beginning of their ethical reconstruction, which would provide online workplace communications with new traditions and rules of use of camera and microphone as meaningful parts of the semiotic repertoire.

## KEY WORDS:

COVID-19, mediatization, online communication, semiotic repertoires, work from home, workplace communication

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## 1 Introduction: Unexpected Mediatization of Home in 2020

The pandemic period has provided us with immense troubles but also with new views and attitudes towards the principles and tools of online communication. It made us re-appreciate many valuable things which determine and shape communicational processes and situations. Among them is the conception of the home and the workplace. Because of the epidemiologically determined need to stay home in isolation, since 2020 we have had to use our home locations as workplaces; moreover, in online communications with our colleagues, counteragents, students, teachers and business partners, etc.

However, the means of online interaction with work purposes are not new. They have been widely used in marketing, scholarly spheres, administration and public policies and many other fields to facilitate and accelerate the procedures of negotiations, business meetings, several education practices and making quick decisions, etc. Web technologies have been contributing to maintain relations between individuals and organisations from different time zones, without obligation to spend time and other resources on offline activities. These web interactional patterns have predominately been a part of office or working time communication. Moreover, many professionals, such as scholars, writers, IT-specialists, etc. have recently got used to a mixed format of working, without strict obligations to stay at the office during the working day. The meaning of home is changing itself in new contexts of digitalisation<sup>1</sup> and loss of strict distinctions between private and public.<sup>2</sup> In a certain sense, it may be regarded as a sort of revival of a pre-industrial conception of the combination of home and workplace, as it might be observed in craftspeople or farmworkers' lodgings.

What has become new about the use of online workplace communications since the 'COVID-19 era', is the use of our homes and our non-working time as part of organisational (corporate or business) interactions. That is, our homes become mediatised, converting into a sort of medium. Before the pandemic, we had not obviously planned for our homes to be a part of organisational or business communicational infrastructures. But under modern conditions, we act like media persons being potentially online all the time despite staying at home.

The obligatory and inevitable character of videoconference means usage changes; crucially the expectations and conceptions of communicants of what is acceptable and unacceptable, obvious and doubtful, normal and rejectable in terms of online corporate communication. Home spaces become part of business and corporate communications, and thus they are expected to be 'normalised'. Communicants have to decide about the place and appearance, background and technical aspects of video meetings with colleagues and partners. These conditions challenged us to evaluate various aspects and elements of our homes as mediatised objects, and from the corporate point of view. How should we look during online meetings whilst staying at home? Which home location would be most appropriate? Is using a camera necessary during online meetings? Should the background be casual or professional? What should we expect from other communicants in this regard? What is normal and what is not in online corporate communications from home locations? Are there any more or less general semiotic resources to be equally shared by participants? People do not have the complete answers to these questions but when searching for them, individuals are constructing new standards of various parameters and elements of workplace communication.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

The issue of our research has several aspects that have been widely elaborated by scholars during recent decades. Firstly, these are issues concerning the communicational efficiency of remote workplace communication and work from home. In these terms, scholars discuss the ways and means that individuals use to keep the highest level of efficiency of corporate interactions while communicants do not meet physically but rather stay at home.<sup>3</sup> The communication is normally regarded as part of production or corporate relations and is in the field of achieving the goals and aims of an organisation.<sup>4</sup> The issues are mainly discussed in the managerial mode.

<sup>1</sup> See: PEIL, C., RÖSER, J.: The Meaning of Home in the Context of Digitization, Mobilization and Mediatization. In HEPP, A., KROTZ, F. (eds.): *Mediatized Worlds. Culture and Society in a Media Age*. London : Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 233-249; KENNEDY, J., ARNOLD, M.: *Digital Domesticity: Media, Materiality, and Home Life*. New York : Oxford University Press, 2020; ARGANDOÑA, A. et al.: *The Home in the Digital Age*. London : Routledge, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> For more information, see: REIßMANN, W.: Vom "home mode" zum "image stream"? Domestizierungstheoretische Überlegungen zum Wandel privater Bildpraxis. In *Studies in Communication Sciences*, 2014, Vol. 14, No. 2, p. 121-128.

<sup>3</sup> Compare to: HARPAZ, I.: Advantages and Disadvantages of Telecommuting for the Individual, Organization and Society. In *Work Study*, 2002, Vol. 51, No. 2, p. 74-80; PATTON, E. A.: *Easy Living: The Rise of the Home Office*. New Jersey : Rutgers University Press, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> See: ROSS, P., RESSIA, S.: Neither Office nor Home: Coworking as an Emerging Workplace Choice. In *Employment Relations Record*, 2015, Vol. 15, No. 1, p. 42-57; BEHRENS, K., KICHKO, S., THISSE, J. F.: Working from Home: Too Much of a Good Thing? In *CESifo Working Paper*, 2021, No. 8831, p. 1-46. [online]. [2021-04-09]. Available at: <<https://ssrn.com/abstract=3768910>>.

Secondly, the problem is observed from the interactionist point of view, whether it be discursive and communication psychology<sup>5</sup> or interactional sociolinguistics.<sup>6</sup> The computer-mediated communicational processes of organisational and business interactions are interpreted by means of categories of perception, interpretations, language, and discursive exchanges. The scholars' interest lays in the procedures around how individuals can reach mutual understandings, cooperate, and exchange meanings with the aid of linguistic and non-linguistic resources.<sup>7</sup>

The special direction of these studies is semiotics with their focus on sign systems used for communication at workplace, including work from home. Corporate or business communication is regarded as a complex sign system with immanent and specifying sets of means, or semiotic repertoires, engaged in meaning-making.<sup>8</sup> Professional lexicodes, a way of dressing, decoration and interior elements, special gestures and postures, furniture, etc. are used by individuals in communicational procedures to construct and reconstruct the meanings and values shared by members of an organisation.<sup>9</sup>

Thirdly, there is an influential amount of workings in the informational studies, with discussions of technical aspects and informational aspects of remote workplace communications. The issues of interface of software used in communication, affordance, and design features of tools for informational exchange and many other specific questions are important for the technical maintenance and material framework of corporate/business communications.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, there is a rapidly emerging body of research on various transformations concerning workplace communications during the COVID-19 period and the pandemic's impacts on the ways and means of organisational interactions. These workings ordinarily refer to one of the mentioned groups, thus the issues are discussed from the managerial,<sup>11</sup> interactionist,<sup>12</sup> or technical aspects;<sup>13</sup> however, they embrace a much larger scale of problems (e.g., geographic and communicational inequalities<sup>14</sup> or new challenges for education).<sup>15</sup> In this study, we tend to view the issue of working from home in the COVID-19 era from a rather interactionist (semiotic) point. We find the problem of (re)constructing communicational standards, especially material/semiotic repertoires, to be crucial when individuals find themselves in uncertain and new situations of exchange.

5 See: ALLEN, T. D., GOLDEN, T. D., SHOCKLEY, K. M.: How Effective Is Telecommuting? Assessing the Status of Our Scientific Findings. In *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 2015, Vol. 16, No. 2, p. 40-68.

6 For more information, see: MONDADA, L.: Challenges of Multimodality: Language and the Body in Social Interaction. In *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 2016, Vol. 20, No. 3, p. 336-366.

7 NGUYEN, M. H. et al.: Staying Connected while Physically Apart: Digital Communication When Face-to-Face Interactions Are Limited. In *New Media & Society* Released on 10<sup>th</sup> February 2021. [online]. [2021-04-02]. Available at: <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1461444820985442>>.

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10 See: KLEIFGEN, J. A.: *Communicative Practices at Work: Multimodality and Learning in a High-Tech Firm*. Bristol, Buffalo, Toronto : Multilingual Matters, 2013; WAIZENEGGER, L. et al.: An Affordance Perspective of Team Collaboration and Enforced Working from Home during COVID-19. In *European Journal of Information Systems*, 2020, Vol. 29, No. 4, p. 429-442.

11 Compare to: BOLISANI, E. et al.: Working from Home during COVID-19 Pandemic: Lessons Learned and Issues. In *Management & Marketing. Challenges for the Knowledge Society*, 2020, Vol. 15, No. 1, p. 458-476; GREEN, N., TAPPIN, D., BENTLEY, T.: Working from Home before, during and after the COVID-19 Pandemic: Implications for Workers and Organisations. In *New Zealand Journal of Employment Relations*, 2020, Vol. 45, No. 2, p. 5-16.

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14 REUSCHKE, D., FELSTEAD, A.: Changing Workplace Geographies in the COVID-19 Crisis. In *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 2020, Vol. 10, No. 2, p. 208-212.

15 KNIGHT M.: Pandemic Communication: A New Challenge for Higher Education. In *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*, 2020, Vol. 83, No. 2, p. 131-132.

## 3 Methods and Materials

To contribute to understanding how this construction is done, we conducted two-step research. The focus of our interest is on the subjective representations of online meeting communicants about the key aspects and spheres of video-mediated exchanges under normalisation. We found it important to discover how people regard the accessible semiotic resources (appearance and background as parts of video representation) and material/technical aspects (use of sound and video during online meetings), and how individuals ‘semiotise’ their participation in workplace communications from home. This attention determined the choice of methods, i.e., interview and questionnaire survey, which contributed to the evaluation of cognitive facts (views, opinions, stereotypes, expectancies, attitudes, etc.).

The in-depth interview was applied as a preparative stage of the research to select general information about the features that respondents find the most important and crucial for interpreting the process of online video interaction. Fifteen interviewed individuals were participants of online workplace communications from various segments: students, professors, scholars, online-event managers and businesspersons. The criteria for selection of respondents included awareness of video meetings, intensiveness of online communication assistance and period of affiliation with a social group.

The results of the preparative interview were conceptualised, categorised, and contributed to operationalising the central notions, i.e., communication actions and interactions, background, appearance, location, technical and visual aspects of videoconference. At the next stage of research, we operationalised these notions in empirical indicators and relevant questions for the questionnaire. The poll covered 165 people and aimed at gathering information about individual opinions on the nature and characteristics of online communications, expectations towards communicational actions of other participants of online meetings, and evaluations of various aspects of remote workplace interactions. The sampling selection embraced 61 men and 104 women aged from 18 to 60 years old; 84.4% among them are students, 13.3% are professors and scholars, 4.8% are online event managers and 12.7% are business workers and managers. All the respondents are active participants in online workplace communications, which resulted from the necessity to shift towards the remote way of work in 2020. The processing of the survey results has been conducted using the direct data distribution method and qualitative-quantitative interpretation of data. The main results of the poll are as follows. The issues concerning self-representation of participants of workplace communications from home, and ethical aspects of their interaction are discussed in a separate paper made with my assistance and under my scholarly supervision.<sup>16</sup>

## 4 Mediatised Home: What Matters?

According to answers of the respondents, among the elements of online workplace communications which matter for people are background, appearance, microphone and camera use. However, the subjective value of them differs significantly. Furthermore, we will observe the distribution of opinions regarding how individuals declare they behave themselves, on the one hand, and what they expect from partners and how they perceive others during online meetings on the other. We suppose that if the declarations about their own behaviour and their expectations from others coincide, it would be the marker of rather established communicational standards for this kind of interactional situations and processes.

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## *Appearance: Neither Home nor Office*

The appearance of people working remotely from home is a sort of balanced exterior look to combine home and office standards: it is generally neither based on the strict corporate dress code nor it is freely domestic. It avoids extraordinary hairdos, accessories and make-ups, but it also not as homelike casual as usually. There are two main tendencies revealed from the amount of respondents' expressions: 47.2% always prepare their appearance for online meetings (majority of them only choose clothes, while the least number do their hairdo and makeup); 46.6% do not make any special preparations with their appearance since they do not usually use cameras (a major part of those are communication event attendants).

Concerning the expectations of the appearance of speakers and other participants, the key tendency, likewise during direct communication, is a restrained topically relevant dress code or a simple neat look. However, only 12.1% of the respondents pay attention to the appearance of speakers, while 39.1% expect them to be neat and not too informal. For 77%, rather the mood and non-verbal feedback of communicants matter more than their appearance. According to the respondents' opinion, non-formal appearance and home dressing is rather inappropriate for participating in online working events, even if individuals are presently at home. It helps people organise their workplace situation and express respect towards exchange partners.

## *Background: Neutral or Professional?*

The respondents claim choosing both virtual and natural backgrounds for online working meetings. The communicants tend to use rather neutral or intentionally or unintentionally marked with objects to indicate their professional position or interests in speakers. The neutral background may contain a monochrome wall, furniture elements, houseplants or decoration elements. The professionally marked backgrounds often include bookshelves, certificates and photos representing professional activities on walls, corporate symbols and signs. For instance, 28.3% of the respondents, mainly scholars, claimed they have bookshelves in the background. Evidently a smaller number of people (13.3% against 81%) say they use constantly virtual backgrounds. However, many of them claim that colourful or even animated virtual backgrounds could be perceived by partners as disturbing, which do not contribute to a more attentive and focused conversation in terms of conferences, workshops and lectures, and thus should be used only in several special cases. For the same goal, as several respondents asserted, the background is often intentionally blurred not to distract the attention of communicants.

One fact which could be of a special interest is the use of various professional signs indicating their position or working sphere. While scholars tend to use bookshelves in the background, business workers and managers normally use monochromatic backgrounds or reputation markers such as diplomas and certificates on the wall or table behind themselves. As for the respondents' expectations, they express paradoxically, as to compare with the decisions for their own participation, more loyalty for the use of background by other participants: whether they are suited to any kind of background (27.9%), indifferent towards it (24.8%), or in expectation to see a neutral background (26.1%). Only 14.5% of respondents pay special attention to the background of speakers.

Generally, the answers show that respondents choose various ways to 'hide' the home markers and prefer rather focusing on neutral or even 'extra-home' features (as in cases with virtual elements) to construct a more working-like background using home semiotic resources. However, attitude towards others' use of background is more loyal, and almost half of all individuals find it normal if partners use home components in the background. It may indicate that 'work-from-home' meetings participants normalise their own background, while the decoration of others' video streams may seem more 'normal' to individuals.

## *Use of Microphones*

The use of microphones is under special control on the part of organisers, and it is also the simplest tool to take part in discussions. Both organisers and speakers decide when and how to use microphones depending on the sort of meeting and the type of company or corporation. 83% of respondents claim the quality of sound to be a crucial factor in efficient online meetings. In general, many aspects of social control for sound use are the subject of special attention of communicants. For instance, 81.2% believe it to be a strict norm not to make noise while others are speaking; 84% find it acceptable to turn the microphone on only if it is their turn to speak or during question-and-answer sessions; for 88.5% the forced shutdown of others' microphones is acceptable in *force-majeure* situations or in case of uncontrolled noise. The results of the survey show less dispersion of opinions among respondents than as to questions about appearance and background, which could mean that there is a more stable and common idea about usage of microphones during online workplace communication from home.

Operating with microphones reflects many features that impact the 'mood' of participants. Let us say the microphone is one of the key pragmatic tools of online workplace communication and it comprises a meaningful part of the semiotic repertoire of communication. The way individuals work with microphones indicates their role and position in the process and it represents their attitude towards the whole situation. For instance, unimportant or accidental sounds, from the part of communicants who do not turn the microphone off, could both disturb speakers and interfere with the session timing. Home locations are less controlled concerning sounds; therefore, the issue of sound controlling obtains a special significance for communicants. To protect communicants from situations when sounds are out of user's control, respondents permit that the moderator could have the right to turn the participants' microphones off if there are unintended disturbing noises and sounds. 88.5% of respondents agreed that the coercive shutdown of microphones during online workplace meetings is admissible if it directly damages the communicational process.

## *Use of Cameras*

The practices of camera use are apparently more diverse than those of microphone use, as the poll results demonstrate. The respondents are divided strictly into two segments: those who always keep the camera on (53.3%) and those who usually do not (46.7%). Only 11.5% find it necessary to turn the camera on only when they are speaking or asking questions. The respondents specify their opinions about the possibility to have the camera off as follows: camera-off mode is acceptable if organisers permit it in advance (54.7%), if the rules of meetings allow it (70.8%), while other speakers use cameras or presentations (40.4%), if the place is not appropriate (36.6%) and in the case of passive listening (58.4%). The fact that people give arguments about the reasons and circumstances of using cameras during workplace communication from home is significant, since it shows the certain degree of importance of the camera as a semiotic resource.

The angle of the camera also varies from front to side shot; however, the front shot appears to be the most preferable among the respondents. Moreover, for 83% of respondents the quality of camera view is very important. Like sound and noise control, home locations might include accidental actions which are unintended for visual representation for others in workplace communication settings. This could be the main reason that individuals pay special attention to the conditions of using different camera modes. Keeping cameras on or off is, as well as microphone use, a part of semiotic repertoire and a meaningful action which indicates the communicational position, purposes and attitudes of communicants. Thus, communicants find it important to normalise the use of cameras.

## 5 Conclusion

The idea of remote workplace communications, as well as the idea of home, has been changing considerably since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and obligatory working from home. The results of the poll demonstrate that people are trying to redefine the conception of home in terms of its mediatization. The redefinition concerns two aspects: 1) the use of semiotic repertoire to transmit meaningful information about the self and own position, attitudes and roles in the communication; and 2) normalisation of own and others' actions during online meetings from home.

We mediatize our appearance and background, thus we normalise it, as well as camera and microphone use. The avoidance of markers of a typically 'home look' or specific home elements in the background is a kind of communicational act that aims to redefine semiotically the home location for purposes of online workplace communication. However, the respondents show uncertainty when trying to define an appropriate mode of appearance and background used for work-from-home mediatization.

Technical aspects of remote workplace communications are more important for participants than appearance or background: operating with camera and microphone means more for communicants than their appearance and objects in the background. The divergence of users from those who prefer to have their cameras off to those who insist on keeping cameras on is a remarkable fact. The respondents generally used arguments to claim their position which shows their unusual interest toward the decision on camera use. It indicates that this issue is under ethical consideration. While some find the off-mode ethically approved because of the specificity of the private home location, others stand for the ethical nature of on-mode due to the pragmatics of workplace communications. We can suppose that there are emerging ethical norms for both participants in online meetings and organisers controlling camera and microphone use.

The participants claim that they mainly follow the same rules of verbal behaviour during online conferences as in offline situations, i.e., they do not interrupt speakers, they try not to distract other listeners or exchangers, and they regard each other respectfully. Many respondents admitted the need for the visual (ocular) contact with other participants, which makes them always keep cameras on and ask others to do the same, unless they are passive listeners during lectures. This helps respondents estimate the real number of attending people, evaluate the natural interest or build appropriate feedback or manage the communication process. This communicational mode is rather like that of offline lectures, workshops, webinars, meetings or forums. Seeing other people and appreciating their readiness for activity and their feedback contribute to more efficient communication.

Normalisation of online workplace communications from home is at its beginning, since people represent different demands towards themselves and other communicants: individuals can keep their cameras off but claiming non-verbal reaction from others; they can be indifferent towards others' backgrounds but use professional markers of their owns, etc. To conclude, the survey does not reveal all the semiotically and pragmatically important elements of workplace communication from home; however, we may claim that home is 're-invented' or 're-semiotised' for purposes of workplace communications; the issue of private and working/corporate places is to be the object of debates. Technical aspects of online meetings are at the dawn of their ethical reconstruction and evidently will face new traditions and rules of use of cameras and microphones as meaningful parts of the semiotic repertoire of online workplace communications.

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