

5 Zooming in on a frame: collectively focusing on a co-participant's person or surroundings in video-mediated interaction

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Abstract

The chapter examines social breaks from work taken on a virtual platform. Virtual platforms offer a different framework for social interaction than in-person meetings: where they provide a possibility to interact over distances, they also require the use of varying resources to create and maintain a sense of co-presence and social intimacy. By drawing on recordings of video-mediated breaks among members of relatively long-standing work communities in Finland, the study explores ways in which participants zoom in and bring depth to the two-dimensional rendering of the virtual platform. The study highlights the complex multimodal and spatial dimensions of virtual breaks and the characteristics related to sensorial experiences and intermediality as these appear in interaction. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of informal interaction in work communities, with a special focus on the role of social curiosity in being mindful of others, displaying closeness and strengthening existing ties.

Keywords: social curiosity, video-mediated interaction, virtual breaks, work community

Workplace breaks have a long tradition in Finland, and depending on the length of the working day, employees are legally granted a certain number of breaks (The Finnish Working Time Act TAL 872/2019:24 §). Finns are also known for their enthusiasm for coffee, and Finnish workplaces often feature break rooms of varied proportions and sizes that are also equipped to varying degrees but that, at the bare minimum, provide facilities for preparing a cup of hot beverage (e.g. Clausnitzer, 2021; “Coffee culture in Finland”, 2021). In many workplaces, regular coffee breaks seem to be a fixed practice with contacts and communities formed around it, and they may aid in setting the pace for a routine working day. Indeed, much in the way of the Swedish ‘fika’, which refers to a custom of taking a break from an activity to drink coffee, eat sweet or savoury snacks and chat with others, Finnish coffee breaks have developed into highly ritualized ways of spending time together. Shared coffee breaks provide an opportunity of getting to know one's workmates and maintaining social relationships as well as sharing knowledge and information at the workplace.

With the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent exile to home offices in Finland and around the globe in early 2020, members of work communities needed to find new ways of connecting with each other when break-taking at the office was no longer possible. Some adopted video-mediated break-taking and began to meet on virtual platforms, such as Zoom, Skype and Teams. Virtual breaks enable social interaction from afar, as well as a certain kind of intermission from work activities, even though they may not allow leaving the computer and physically moving away from a workstation to a separate break room. During virtual breaks, even if filters or background images are applied, the video connection grants participants partial visual and auditory access to others and their respective environments. Because these environments are often personal, in addition to views of others' (upper) bodies, participants are privy to a view of various self-extensions, like homes and others that participants are responsible for, such as pets and kids (Pillet-Shore, 2017, 2018). This constitutes a new kind of a break experience that might somewhat paradoxically be perceived in some respects more personal but at the same time more distanced due to the lack of physical co-presence and the essentially two-dimensional rendering of the virtual platform.

Bearing this general context in mind, we study recordings of virtual breaks held among members of relatively long-standing work communities in Finland, which have established shared practices of break-taking in person already before the pandemic. We focus on interactional sequences in which a participant registers or notices (see e.g. Kesselheim et al., 2021; Pillet-Shore, 2020) something about another's person, background, or activity, and verbally topicalizes it, making it relevant for the ongoing interaction, and thus in a way *zooms in on a frame*. In examining these sequences, we begin with the notion of 'social curiosity' (Hartung, 2010; Renner, 2006) that refers to the way in which people actively take steps to acquire social information and knowledge of others to form interpersonal relations and manage their social environment. That is, such sequences are seen as situated instances of creating and maintaining social intimacy and co-presence, a sense of 'being there' for and with others in a shared virtual space. While the video-mediated nature of the interactions can require the use of additional resources and practices, the participants nevertheless draw on recognizable verbal and embodied means.

We adopt a multimodal approach which allows us to take into consideration the "diversity of resources that participants mobilize to produce and understand social interaction as publicly intelligible actions" (Mondada, 2019a, p. 1). That is, we look into the ways in which participants interact with each other through language, gaze, gestures, body posture and

movement, and manipulation of artefacts and objects in their immediate environment, among others. At the same time, we explore the data from an intermedial point of view, considering the role of the virtual medium, and how meanings and social actions are produced through and across the different resources at the participants' disposal (see Elleström, 2021; Rippl, 2015). Further, we take note of the participants' displays of their sensory experiences (Mondada, 2021), and how these may be established, in a way, as a common focus of attention in interaction.

Data and methods

In this study, we draw on approximately 10 hours of recorded virtual breaks, collected between April 2020 and April 2021 in two work communities in Finland. In both communities, shared break-taking is a routinized practice that, at least among some members, was established before the period of distance working. Most of the participants are familiar with each other and have, over time, accumulated knowledge about others and their personal lives.

The participants used video-conferencing software for their shared breaks, and the breaks were recorded using the software's built-in function to capture both video and audio. Most of the breaks were recorded by one participant. Due to the use of the recording function, no general assumptions can be made about what kind of views the participants have (e.g. speaker view, gallery view), how the frames are arranged in their respective views, or indeed if they are looking at a view of other participants at all. It also appears that participants use various devices for attending breaks, such as phones, laptops or the combination of a laptop and a screen. Some inferences can be made by examining participants' gaze (for example, do they appear to be focused on something else than the ongoing break), but it is not possible to make any claims about what exactly they may be looking at. However, participants can interact during virtual breaks even if they do not have access to the exact gaze direction of others. From a conversation-analytic perspective, then, these kinds of data are not considered problematic as the participants and analysts equally have access to a screen view and audio.

In the data, we found 27 sequences of social curiosity in which participants direct joint attention to the person, background, or activity of another participant. We have transcribed the selected examples multimodally, to allow for a holistic view on interaction and an examination of the various vocal, embodied, material, semiotic and spatial resources drawn on by participants to carry out social actions (see e.g. Goodwin, 2000; Mondada, 2013, 2016).

We examine the means employed by participants to create and maintain co-presence and social intimacy by referring to and thus bringing aspects of life from beyond the screen to virtual breaks. To this end, we adopt a perspective that allows us to produce a rich description of the phenomenon and to show how it unfolds in interaction. We apply the multimodal conversation-analytic method in discussing the data examples and analysing them on a turn-by-turn basis. Furthermore, we explore the complex multimodal and spatial dimensions of virtual breaks and the characteristics related to sensorial experiences and intermediality as they appear and are made salient in video-mediated encounters.

Studying shared, lived experiences in virtual environments

While break-taking may centre around consuming beverages and having a moment of rest away from one's workstation, it facilitates recovery (Hunter & Wu, 2016; Kim et al., 2017) and aids in establishing and maintaining social relationships in the workplace (see Siitonen & Siromaa, 2021), which can be beneficial for work as well (Barmeyer et al., 2019; Liberati et al., 2019). Indeed, in a Danish workplace setting, for instance, coffee break encounters were connected to the formation of 'coping communities' at work (Stroeback, 2013; see also Korczynski, 2003). For work communities that regularly take breaks together, and to whom the break rooms as places themselves had become significant (see, e.g. Relph, 1976; Seamon & Sowers, 2008), the move to distance working in the spring of 2020 due to the global COVID-19 pandemic brought about a new kind of reliance on video-mediated interaction, moving break-taking online as well.

Video-mediated interaction relies on specific technology, which has the potential to restrict and facilitate interaction in various ways (Due & Licoppe, 2021, p. 6; see also contributions to the special issue). For example, when engaging in interaction on a video-mediated platform, participants have asymmetrical access to others and their visible surroundings (for a comprehensive overview, see Mlynář et al., 2018), and additional multimodal and semiotic resources may be needed to deal with technical challenges. In a video-mediated setting, the 'perceptual range' (see Hutchby, 2001; 2014) is limited, as participants see only a portion of their co-participants and their surroundings, and auditory cues might be more difficult to locate. Indeed, a video-mediated setting can be characterized as comprising of a compilation of 'talking heads' (see Licoppe & Morel, 2012) and presenting 'fractured ecologies' (see Luff et al., 2003). It offers users a two-dimensional view, and depending on their settings and preferences, they see a certain constellation of participants. Furthermore, in video-mediated

interaction, participants may see themselves participating in interaction, which is usually not the case in in-person interaction.

What is more, because participants of video-mediated interaction have some form of access not to one, but potentially several spaces, they may orient to something in any of those spaces as relevant for interaction (see Licoppe, 2015; Licoppe & Veyrier, 2017). Instead of focusing on technology as a certain kind of context, studies on interaction on virtual platforms have focused on what participants themselves make salient during mediated interaction (see, e.g. Arminen et al., 2016; Fornel, 1996; Oittinen, 2020). Further, technologies have been shown to provide participants with affordances (Hutchby, 2001, 2014; Oittinen, 2020; on 'affordances', see Gibson, 1982, as cited in Hutchby, 2014): depending on what participants want to accomplish (see Rintel, 2015), they can employ, for example, virtual backgrounds, mute audio or disable the camera. That is, participants can shape the content of their individual frames and, for instance, to block sensorial access or to enhance it. Virtual backgrounds are an additional means of creating and enhancing an online presence; for example, they can be used to hide personal spaces behind the screen, or to add an extra, perhaps humorous, layer to the meeting.

Oittinen (2020, p. 23) discusses three, intertwined and multi-layered, interactional spaces that participants in video-mediated interaction orient to: the *local space* of individual parties or participants, the *overall meeting space* in which the participants come together, and possible *adjoining spaces* which the participants may evoke, for example, through the use of additional digital devices. This chapter illustrates how, in virtual break-taking, the participants make relevant both the overall meeting space, as well as their personal local spaces. They also have access to additional adjoining spaces (such as mobile phones) that sometimes occupy their attention. Through the overall meeting space, participants have partial access to others' local spaces, and they have the opportunity to topicalize their sensorial (here, visual and aural) experiences of others' spaces and direct shared attention to those. Nevertheless, among participants, interaction still unfolds on a turn-by-turn basis, and participants configure their embodied and verbal actions in situ. Even though visual or auditory access to others might be limited, blocked, or delayed, participants appear to pay attention to others' use of such cues anyway.

In short, virtual breaks provide a possibility to be social with one's co-workers, and members of a community can maintain a sense of togetherness and social intimacy. What is more, in

times of a global pandemic, virtual platforms offer a chance for ‘caring from afar’ (Ibnelkaïd, 2021). They allow individuals to create co-presence that is built on shared histories and ‘technobodily literacies’, defined as “technical, cognitive, sensory, socio-affective and bodily skills” that are moulded over time and that enable participants to interact on the multiple levels that are possible in the socio-digital world (Ibnelkaïd, 2022, p. 33). As the examples analyzed in the following sections illustrate, participants draw both on their previous knowledge of each other and on their current sensorial experiences to display closeness and strengthen existing social ties in video-mediated interaction.

Responding to visual and auditory cues in participants’ local spaces

The following analyses support the view that when participants comment on a co-participant’s person, extensions of self or dependent others, those comments can be interpreted not as preambles to lengthier conversations but rather as displays of social curiosity that act as social glue, and as tools to involve people in interaction and co-construct the lived break-taking experience. Putting these sensorial experiences into words could also be a way of bringing the group together. The analyses also reveal embodied interactional practices through which participants respond to instances of social curiosity. More specifically, participants may orient to the concrete aspect that is brought to focus in an embodied way, for example, by looking elsewhere away from the screen. The participants may also display openness to and invite others’ social curiosity by orienting to something in their own immediate environment.

In our data, participants’ orientation to “signs of life” shows us that people do reach beyond the talking heads and the screens, as they orient to activities in others’ backgrounds. As people orient to others in virtual environments, they also open the floor for other participants to join in, even as the virtual platform may support only one conversation at a time. In example 1, a dog has previously been seen in the background of one participant, and when a previous topic comes to a close and participants’ local spaces become topicalized, another participant inquires about the whereabouts of the dog. There are ten participants in the conversation, and they may have their microphones muted when they are not talking.

Example 1: A dog’s business

<Insert Figure 5.1.>

At the beginning of the excerpt, just after a lapse in the conversation, there is a background noise that could be coming from Riitta's local space. Indeed, Riitta seems to comment on the noise jokingly, topicalizing the presence of others in her house (line 2). Linnea responds by stating that it is nice to hear signs of life, showing sympathy over the situation (line 9). The shared sensorial experience highlights the intermedial nature of the background noise and complex spatial dimensions of the virtual break: the noise originates in one local, physical space but is sensed and also topicalized in another.

In what follows, Ulla comments on the disappearance of the dog, Joonas, that has been seen in Linnea's background a few times during the break. Following the observation of the dog's disappearance, Linnea comments that *he went away on some business* (line 24), a humorous answer to which several people respond by laughing, perhaps because dogs are not usually associated with "going away on business". After her answer, Linnea also shifts her body and gaze away from the screen, as if looking for the dog (Fig. 5.1), and thus potentially attempting to display a connection and engage with the referent, which in this case is a dog, a sentient being that moves around in Linnea's immediate surroundings. The participant whose local space is made relevant in the overall meeting space is seen to be 'looking elsewhere', away from the screen, and shifting focus into the local environment in response to a display of social curiosity by another participant. Later (data not shown), Linnea mentions "the other one", referring to another dog in the house, and recounts his whereabouts and sleeping preferences to the other participants, while looking away from her screen to her left. Linnea thus, in a manner of speaking, volunteers further personal information by extending her orientation to her immediate local space.

In sum, the participants in example 1 are able to experience signs of life and others' personal environments through both audible and visual cues, and even though Linnea mentions *hearing* signs of life, in this example, other participants can also *see* them. At least some people on this break are aware, based on previous interactions, that Linnea indeed has two dogs. Example 2 further illustrates how participants may orient to auditory cues from one local space and others respond to it. Just before the excerpt, Ulla has been telling a story, towards the end of which Anisha has entered the virtual break space. Some of the other participants say hello and wave to Anisha, while Ulla is still telling her story. After the telling comes to an end, Ulla orients to Anisha.

Example 2: There's a bit of an echo there

<Insert Figure 5.2.>

Ulla delivers a greeting, *hi*, and identifies Anisha by her name accompanied by a finger-wiggle wave (line 1). Anisha responds with a small wave and a greeting, *hei* (line 2), and as she speaks for the first time, an echo in her voice is clearly detectable. After the initial exchange of pleasantries (lines 1–9), Riitta orients to the echo and directs the group’s attention to her own sensorial experience of it, for which she seems to seek validation by asking whether Anisha is in a new apartment (lines 9–10). Anisha indeed provides an affirmation, *yes yes I’m at my new place now in ((suburb))* (line 13), which confirms, on one hand, Riitta’s sensorial experience and, on the other hand, the assumption that Anisha is in a new apartment. Riitta’s display of social curiosity in a form of an inquiry not only taps into an everyday experience that there often is an echo in a relatively empty room but also to her prior knowledge of Anisha’s current living arrangements. Riitta is seen actively taking steps to acquire social information and knowledge about Anisha to promote interpersonal relations within this group of colleagues.

In this example, it is Anisha whose local space is made relevant in the overall meeting space. In the multimodal unfolding of interaction, Riitta’s inquiry not only prompts a verbal confirmation of the sensorial experience from Anisha: *it sounds a bit empty* (line 18) but also an embodied response in that Anisha simultaneously looks away from her screen (Fig. 5.2), possibly orienting to her surroundings and connecting with the referent, namely the empty apartment. In much the same way as Linnea in example 1, Anisha is here seen to be ‘looking elsewhere’, away from the screen, and shifting focus into the local space in response to another participant’s inquiry that functions as a display of social curiosity. The examples suggest that such shift in orientation by looking elsewhere may be a recurrent interactional practice in sequences of social curiosity in virtual encounters.

Unlike in the two previous examples, in example 3, a participant responds to an auditory cue in her own local space by looking away and smiling, and this response tips one of the co-participants off to draw attention to the referent in question.

Example 3: *Is it Mimmi coming over*

<Insert Figure 5.3.>

In this example, five participants are on a break, and some of them are actively discussing a TV show and whether it can be watched for free. Noora and Ulla are the primary participants

talking about the matter; however, Taru is also listening in and nodding to Ulla's remark (line 1). The topic seems to be coming to an end or moving to a new direction. During this sequence, something can be heard clicking on a participant's background, and shortly after, Noora looks to her right and smiles (Fig. 5.3). Unlike in examples 1 and 2, the participant whose local space is brought to focus is first seen 'looking elsewhere', away from the screen, and shifting attention into her local space in response to an auditory cue. A display of social curiosity by another participant follows immediately after on line 10 then, with the current conversation still ongoing, Taru briefly directs attention to the auditory cue and asks in a smiley voice whether it is Mimmi that is coming. By doing this, Taru also makes it known that the noise originating from one local space simultaneously occupies the overall meeting space. It is noteworthy that Taru uses a proper noun to refer to the assumed source of the noise, Mimmi being the name of Noora's dog (as we have learnt from other recordings). Noora smiles, confirms that this is the case, partly in overlap with Ulla's turn, and Ulla continues to talk about what to watch and listen to.

In contrast with examples 1 and 2, here the participant whose local space is made the focus of attention displays being open to social curiosity through orienting to her immediate environment – possibly a specific referent such as the dog in this case – by looking away from the screen and smiling (line 7, Fig. 5.3). And while there is only an auditory cue in the overall meeting space, Taru displays knowledge of Noora's personal life by seeking confirmation to having identified the clicking noise to originate from Noora's dog, Mimmi. Like in example 2, participants here orient to complex spatial dimensions when a noise is heard in the overall meeting space: potentially due to Noora's initial orientation to her local space, Taru is able to locate the noise. Further, Taru is then able to topicalize the issue in the overall meeting space, by verbally proffering a candidate identification of the source of the noise.

The short interlude to an ongoing talk topic in example 3 is a response to an auditory cue, but rather than introducing a lengthier discussion on the whereabouts of Mimmi, it merely directs attention to Noora's local space. It displays social curiosity and a sense of familiarity between Taru and Noora. Noora's embodied orientation to Mimmi walking past could be considered an opening for others to comment or make note of the audible cue. It seems that only Taru orients to Mimmi; of the five participants, Matthew and Sonja appear to be focused elsewhere and Ulla is in the middle of a turn. Taru's turn (line 10) is formulated as an interrogative, implying Mimmi is not visible, yet Taru possesses the kind of personal knowledge that

indicates Mimmi is the most likely option. This fleeting moment in the middle of another conversation shows that participants' local spaces can, in a way, act as extensions to the overall meeting space: depending on their pre-existing knowledge about co-participants, they can make assumptions or further inquiries into what is currently available to them.

Responding to cues visible on screen

The next two examples will further explore how participants in one overall meeting space orient to individual local spaces, responding to cues visible on screen and in this way initiating commentary that nurtures social curiosity. Example 4 displays a situation where five participants (Riitta, Noora, Ulla, Matthew and Martti) are taking a virtual break together, when Ulla directs attention to Martti's appearance. Prior to distance working, these participants had seen each other on a regular basis at the office, and some of them have a long history of working in the same unit. Martti has joined the others a moment earlier and has just turned on the microphone.

Example 4: Do I have a moustache

<Insert Figure 5.4.>

After the participants have laughingly addressed Martti's evident problems with unmuting his microphone, Ulla enquires about Martti's facial hair: *onko sulla ennen ollu viiksiä* 'have you earlier had a moustache' (line 6). The turn is designed so that it implies, firstly, that Martti currently has a moustache and, secondly, that Ulla knows that Martti has not always had a moustache. Here Ulla's display of social curiosity takes the form of an inquiry concerning Martti's appearance. While Ulla's turn is still ongoing, Martti brings his right hand up to his face and begins to scratch his upper lip and the side of his nose (Fig. 5.4). He continues the scratching through the 2.1-second gap and until he has initiated his response. In the previous examples, the participants oriented to referents that were brought to focus by looking elsewhere in their local spaces but here Martti orients and physically connects to the suggested referent, his own face, by touching it.

Martti's response is a partial repeat of Ulla's question, with a deictic change from second person to first person, and it seeks confirmation of the implications of the question (*onko mulla viikset* 'do I have a moustache', line 8). In lieu of a verbal confirmation or disconfirmation, Ulla brings her laptop closer, so as to be able to scrutinize Martti's appearance, and Matthew also leans forward towards the camera and assumably the computer

screen. That is, the participants now treat Martti's suggested moustache as not entirely apparent but in need of further inspection. When Martti finally provides an answer, it is hesitant and ambiguous: *tota ei mulla varmaan* 'erm no I probably don't/haven't' (line 10) can be heard to negate both the suggestion that he may earlier have had a moustache and the implication that he currently has one.

Apart from scratching his upper lip and the side of his nose, Martti holds still while the others in an increasingly exaggerated manner lean forward to get a better view. After Ulla and Matthew, Riitta also leans forward closer to the camera and screen and, finally, Noora does the same, while commenting on how 'everyone's just looking' (line 12). Indeed, laughter is evoked not only by the general unfolding of the sequence (i.e. Ulla asking about Martti's facial hair in the first place and Martti's hesitant responses), but also by the participants' visible embodied conduct, which towards the end is produced mainly to a comical effect. Social curiosity here takes the form of close scrutiny of a co-participant's person, which is made possible and salient by the video-mediated nature of the break and the 'distant proximity' that it entails: participants may inspect others from close range, and have themselves inspected by others, in the comfort of the overall meeting space while remaining in the safety of their respective local, personal and private spaces.

Example 4 also highlights the challenges of the intermedial dimensions of the virtual break: while the platform provides, depending on the settings of individual users, a view of all co-participants, the video images are not life-sized and issues of audio and video quality as well as camera angle and lighting, for instance, may occur. Due to changes in light and shade, or indeed poor video, the participants may think that they are seeing a moustache on Martti. At the same time, however, the virtual platform provides participants, and here especially Martti, continuous access to their own video image, a mirror of a kind, which they typically would not have in in-person interaction (see, e.g. McIlvenny, 2002). Moreover, posing a question that reflects one's current visual access to a co-participant's person and displays social curiosity toward their physical appearance here leads to a sequence of interaction in which familiarity and social intimacy are maintained. That is, in bringing the growth of a workmate's facial hair to joint focus of attention and discussion, the participants also orient to the overall phenomenon of being apart for a long time and people having taken a more relaxed stance to their appearance.

In the following example, eleven participants are discussing the various virtual background images that people have selected for themselves, and Ulla directs her attention to the image displayed behind Noora and then Matthew. At the beginning of the excerpt, five participants are displaying virtual images that represent, for example, a deck of a sailing boat, a nightly sky with Northern lights and a wrecked room.

Example 5. Working from Detroit

<Insert Figure 5.5.>

The interaction flows multimodally in that Ulla begins to lean closer to the camera and appears to be carefully inspecting something. Such embodied craning motion is potentially visible to all participants and may be interpreted as foreshadowing a comment on some detail on her screen. Ulla indeed goes on to ask Noora *but where is Noora working from* (line 1), making a reference to her virtual background that illustrates the insides of the time machine Tardis from Dr Who. During the discussion, Matthew starts showing a background image of a destroyed building, and the graffiti on its wall reads *God has left Detroit* (Fig. 5.5). By doing so, Matthew signs up for the ongoing merriment of showing virtual images but treating them jokingly as actual working environments. This can be treated as a display of being open, perhaps, to a specific form of social curiosity, the playful commentary concerning one's virtual background image. No one immediately reacts to the change but less than two minutes on in the conversation, Ulla directs attention to Matthew's virtual background, *is Matthew also working from Detroit* (line 13). Matthew responds to Ulla's inquiry by confirming that he is in an abandoned mental facility (lines 15 and 17), which is followed by shared laughter and further joking. Unlike in all previous examples, Matthew does not physically orient to anything off-screen, or in his local space, likely because his background image is virtual. He does, however, verbally orient to his new virtual environment and play into the narrative of it being 'real'.

Virtual backgrounds are one semiotic resource that the participants can make use of in modern video-mediated interactions, and as example 5 shows, they may be used as a playful feature that not only enables but in effect invites social curiosity. What is more, the fictitious Tardis and the abandoned mental facility in Detroit are jokingly oriented to and treated as participants' local workspaces, which is telling of the complex multimodal and spatial

dimension and intermedial nature of video-mediated interactions. People can participate from almost anywhere as long as they have the appropriate technology at their disposal.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the complex multimodal and spatial dimensions of virtual breaks and the characteristics related to sensorial experiences and intermediality as these appear and are made salient in interaction. We have shed light on how participants zoom in and bring depth to the two-dimensional video-mediated break-taking and how participants create co-presence and inclusion on a virtual platform during a global pandemic. We have examined instances in which participants' sensorial experiences prompt them to comment on others' looks, living arrangements, happenings in their homes as well as their virtual background images. Through such comments, the participants are seen tapping into life beyond the screen to bring depth into their encounters, as they move beyond the two-dimensional 'face wall' (Hochuli, 2021), and orient to those spatial extensions that others' local environments grant access to. We have analyzed these sequences as displays of social curiosity through which people actively take steps to acquire social information and knowledge of others to promote interpersonal relations and manage their social connections among members of the work community. In our data, the participants may know each other from before, and so it could be argued that the displays of social curiosity play a part in strengthening existing social ties. That is, such sequences are seen as situated instances of creating and maintaining social intimacy and co-presence, a sense of 'being there' for and with others on a virtual platform. Furthermore, during these sequences, participants show interest in others, display their knowledge of others' personal lives, and in the case of virtual background images, jokingly treat them as real.

The notion of North permeates the study as the data were collected in Finland and as taking breaks and having coffee together at the workplace is a common practice not only in Finland but throughout the Nordic region. During a time of a pandemic, work communities are seen to use the medium of their choice to meet the need of being social and to continue taking breaks and drinking coffee together, which for many has meant the maintenance of a longstanding tradition. Although this tradition may have lost some of its material dimensions in the process of being transferred online, the affordances provided by the virtual medium offer new kinds of resources for enjoying breaks together and building shared lived experiences in different ways. This can be seen, among other things, in how the participants

orient to the overall meeting space, and both their own and others' local spaces. Access to workmates' homes is seen to provide a novel dimension to breaks, as people are able to witness 'in the flesh' those from home who have been talked about during breaks.

Participants can choose to display parts of their personal lives to others, but sometimes for example family members or pets can make an appearance on their own, too. Sometimes they are not even visible, but other participants can hear them. By showing that participants are familiar with different aspects of each other's lives, togetherness and social intimacy can be created on shared breaks.

Some of the data collection for this study took place during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic (in spring 2020), and some were collected later, in the spring of 2021. The uncertain situation with COVID-19 also manifested in the recorded interactions, as people discussed new working arrangements, what to do to pass the time in physical distancing and speculated how long the situation might last. The notion of "signs of life" came up in the data, a befitting description for the pandemic times as well as orientations to what goes on beyond the screen. First, when during the pandemic many people started working from home and it was highly recommended that people reduce the number of social contacts, depending on personal circumstances, the amount of interaction in people's lives was possibly reduced. Furthermore, because dealing with the pandemic and the so-called new normal may at times have felt surreal, seeing and hearing "signs of life" may have been reassuring, proof that life does indeed happen and go on.

Due to the fluctuating nature of the pandemic, we cannot tell what the situation will be when the book "Multimodality and Intermediality in the North" is published. Perhaps we have returned to a situation where people spend most of their time at the office again and take breaks together in a break room. Perhaps we have adopted a hybrid strategy where people do take in-person breaks at the office, and sometimes participate in virtual breaks. Time will tell. The data presented here, then, reflects the time when people were working remotely for the most part, and the unusual state of the world is reflected in the interaction as well.

Appendix 1: Transcription conventions

The transcription conventions in this chapter have been adopted from Jefferson (2004) regarding talk, and Mondada (2019b) for the multimodal representation of interaction. The following is not an exhaustive list of all possible symbols but presents those utilized in this

chapter. Talk is presented in regular black font, possible English translations in italics and descriptions of embodied conduct in regular grey font.

[word]	Overlapping talk
(0.5)	Numbers in parentheses indicate silence, represented in tenths of a second.
(.)	“Micropause”, ordinarily less than 0.2 of a second
.	Falling intonation
,	Level intonation
?	Rising intonation
wo::rd	A colon indicates prolongation or stretching of the preceding sound. The number of colons indicates the length of the prolongation.
<u>word</u>	Underlining indicates emphasis.
°word°	The degree signs indicate that talk between them is markedly quiet or soft.
>word<	Increased speaking rate
wo-	A hyphen after a word or part of a word indicates a cut-off.
(word)	Uncertain hearing, in case of empty parentheses there is no likely candidate
£word£	Smiley voice
hhh	Outbreath
.hhh	Inbreath
(())	Transcriber’s descriptions of events, rather than representations of them
**	Descriptions of embodied actions are delimited between two
++	identical symbols (one symbol per participant and per type of action)
&&	that are synchronized with correspondent stretches of talk or time indications.
*-->	The action described continues across subsequent lines
-->*	until the same symbol is reached.
>>	The action described begins before the excerpt’s beginning.
-->>	The action described continues after the excerpt’s end.
noo	Participant doing the embodied action is identified in small caps in the

participant column, unless the same as current speaker.

fig The exact moment at which a screen shot has been taken
is indicated with a sign (#) showing its position within the turn/a time measure.

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Working Time Act (Työaikalaki) 5.7.2019/872.

Fig. 1

01 (4.0) ((children's voices in the background;
Continue intermittently throughout))
02 RII: (mm other people on the line)
03 (0.9)
04 RII: that- (.) eh he he he
05 ULL: mhe mhe
06 (0.8)
07 RII?: mhe
08 (2.4)
09 LIN: it's nice to hear:, (.) signs of life.
10 (0.6)
11 RII: (ye[ah])
12 ULL: [mm.] mhm,
13 (0.6)
14 RII?: .hh
15 (0.9)
16 ????: hmh,
17 ULL: the dog uh (.) disappeared.
18 RII: .nff yeah?
19 (0.4)
20 LIN: yeah, h[e went somewhere.]
21 ULL: [joo- Joona disapp]eared. he he he
22 LIN: yeah.
23 RII: mmh,
24 LIN: he went away on, (.) on *some business.#
*gazes to r.-->>
fig #1
25 ((audible laughter by some participants; smiles by others))



Fig. 2

01 ULL: hi *Anisha he he* he he
finger-wiggle wave
02 ANI: Shei\$ he he he
\$lifts hand, small wave\$
03 RII: how are you:..
04 (.)
05 ANI: goo:d and you:..
06 RII: (yeah) >good good<.
07 ????: hmh
08 ANI: +yeah?+
+nod+
09 RII: (I would<) there's a bit of an echo there.
10 is this your new apartment? or: are you,
11 (0.3)

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12 RII: [()]
 13 ANI: [>yes yes<] (.) I'm: at my new place now, in ((suburb)),
 14 (0.4)
 15 ANI: bu[t uh::,]
 16 RII: [alright.]
 17 (.)
 18 ANI: it &#sounds& a ¶bit empty:?
 &glances to l.&
 ¶moves r. hand in circular motion-->
 fig #2



19 (.)
 20 ANI: because I'm [still] he he
 21 RII: [(al)right.]
 22 ANI: [moving in,]¶ (.) slowly,
 -->¶
 23 RII: [yeah, yeah.]

Fig. 3

01 ULL: näyttäs että se olis täsä.&
 seems like it's here
 tar &nodding-->
 02 (0.9)
 03 NOO: &jo*o.
 yeah
 tar -->&
 mim *nails clicking-->
 04 (0.9)
 05 ULL: kat[sotta]vissa.
 viewable
 06 NOO: [noni.]
 alright
 07 (1.0)%#(1.0)%
 noo %looks to r. and smiles%
 fig #3



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08 ULL: pittääpä katt*oa,
 I'll have a look
 mim -->*

09 (.)

10 TAR: ɛhm hm Mimmikö sieltä tuli,ɛ
 is it Mimmi coming over

11 ULL: saa [jotain] muuta muuta tämän vastapainoksi
 I could get something to counterbalance this

12 NOO: [ɛjooɛɛ]
 yeah

13 ULL: %minun tämän lenkki-% lenkillä kuuntelemani,
 one that I listen to on my walks
 noo %looks to r. and smiles%

Fig. 4

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01 MAR: itekseni puhelen täälä ko mikki on pois päältä.
 I'm talking to myself here 'cause the mic is off

02 RII: ai(j)h)aah. [hah hah] [nii justiin.]
 I see that's right

03 ULL: [heh heh]

04 NOO: [heh heh heh heh]

05 RII: heh heh he [h.hhhhh]

06 ULL: [onko sulla] ennen ollu v*iiksiä.#
 have you earlier had a moustache
 mar *scratches lip/side of nose-
 ->



fig

#4

07 (2.1)

08 MAR: onko mulla* viikset. Hh
 do I have a moustache
 mar -->*

09 (0.8)+(0.5)&(0.2)
 ull +brings laptop closer-->
 mat &leans fwd-->

10 MAR: tota, ei: mulla varmtaan.
 erm no I probably don't/haven't

rii +leans fwd-->
 11 RII: mheh HEH HEH HEH heh& heh [hhh .hh]
 mat -->&
 12 NOO: [hehʌ ɛkaik]#[ki vaan] [kattʌoo+(-),ɛ]
 everyone's just looking (-)
 noo ʌleans fwd-----ʌ
 rii -->+
 ull -->+
 13 ULL: [kHEh]
 14 RII: [he::h heh]
 15 ULL: heh [heh]
 16 NOO: [heh] heh heh

Fig. 5

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01 ULL: but where is Noora (.) working from.
 >>leans fwd-->
 02 NOO: ehm the Tar[dis].
 03 ULL: [public] is it a public toilet or a pub.\$
 -->\$
 04 NOO: it's a: it's a:: a police box (0.3) it's the it's the Tardis.
 05 SAI: +mhm
 +nodding head-->
 06 NOO: erh[m:] (.) from Dr Who?
 07 SAI: [nice].+
 -->+
 08 OLI: ye[ah so] you've just come back from saving the world again
 09 SAI: [oh].
 10 OLI: haven't you.
 11 ULL: yeah [right].
 12 NOO: [yeah] yeah (.) you know the usual,
 mat background image of destroyed building appears#
 fig #5



(1 min 45 sec omitted)

-

13 ULL: is m- is Matthew also working from Detroit(h)?

14 LOT: °he he [he he he°]

15 MAT: [.h ye:ah] I'm in a- [I'm in an- in an] abandoned ehm

16 ULL: [eh heh heh heh]

17 MAT: [mental] facility.

18 LOT: [.h °nice°].

19 ULL: eh heh heh heh

20 ((joint audible laughter by most participants))