Meeting in the Global Workplace: Air Travel, Telepresence and the Body

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ABSTRACT *In the highly connected and globalised corporate workplace, face-to-face communication is persisting and expanding, despite significant advances and investments in telecommunication. Drawing on interviews with 34 employees from an Australian company trying to reduce air travel associated with business meetings, this paper reveals how telepresence facilitates distinctly different practices of meeting and collaborating to those enabled by face-to-face encounters. The analysis draws attention to the essential role of the body in the practices of virtual and in-person business meetings. During in-person meetings the body's physical presence conveys meanings of respect and value, provides sensorial competency and gestures, and enables physical mobility as it carries people between and within different material environments. The paper concludes by identifying some possibilities for telepresence meetings to replicate and replace in-person meetings as a normal and effective way of collaborating in the global workplace.*

KEY WORDS: Air travel, Business meetings, Telepresence, Face-to-face communication, Body, Co-presence, Telecommunication

Introduction

Meeting people has always been at the heart of what it means to 'do business'. In the global workplace, this need to meet remains central to core business activity, where face-to-face – or 'copresent' (Boden and Molotch 1994) – interaction helps to manage geographically dispersed markets, global production chains, growing numbers of multi-unit companies and international trends in networking, outsourcing and project teams (Gustafson 2012, 2013b). Many global businesses are now investing heavily in telecommunication as a way of reducing both the costs and environmental impacts of business meetings enabled by air travel (Arnfalk and Kogg 2003). This has been driven by commitments to corporate social responsibility and increasing financial pressures, such as those produced during the Global Financial Crisis (Ogrizek 2002).

Investments in telecommunication systems such as videoconferencing and telepresence have achieved considerable success in reducing carbon dioxide (CO_2) emissions and costs associated with air travel in specific businesses (Roy and Filiatrault 1998; Forrester Consulting 2007; Davis and Kelly 2008). For example, British Telecom reported eliminating more than 860,000 face-to-face meetings and reducing 97,000 tonnes of CO_2 emissions after installing 20 of Cisco's telepresence suites globally (British Telecom 2008). Despite these efforts, face-to-face communication, enabled predominantly by air travel, remains the preferred way of meeting when doing business, and telecommunication technologies are only considered appropriate replacements for a limited number of meeting types (Harvard Business Review 2009; Räsänen et al. 2010).[1] Added to this, global CO_2 emissions from aviation are continuing to grow exponentially. Business air travel accounted for 33–40% of total aviation traffic in the past two decades, and flying currently contributes approximately 3% of global CO_2 emissions; a figure which is set to increase threefold by 2050 (Davies and Armsworth 2010). At a time when the impacts of air travel are growing alongside significant advancements in telecommunication, it is timely to pay attention to the different types of meetings both enable in the global workplace, and potential opportunities for virtual meetings to further replace, complement and/or expand those conducted in person.

The question of substitution between telecommunication and air travel is one that many mobility scholars have pondered (Mokhtarian 1990; Marvin 1994; Graham and Marvin 1996; Urry 2007; Haynes 2010). Bergström (2010) and Räsänen et al. (2010) conclude that physical travel and telecommunication technologies are increasingly being *combined* to deliver and complement business value, rather than removing the need for travel altogether: an interdependence that leads Haynes (2010, 547) to refer to telecommunication and physical travel as 'mobility allies … that modify each other and change the conditions in which working practices occur'. Bergström (2010, 371) suggests that the combination of virtual and physical mobility is expanding global social connections and may lead 'to an increased need … for various kinds of real-life meetings to foster and maintain the connections created' – a claim that is echoed by other mobility and urban researchers (Graham and Marvin 1996; Urry 2003, 2007; Haynes 2010). The implication is that telecommunication and air travel together enable an *increasing* number and more geographically distributed array of connections, collaborations and opportunities to meet (Urry 2004).

Despite these observations, understanding the 'contradictory effects' (Marvin 1997, 63) of telecommunication and transportation as a means of both substituting *and* stimulating air travel remains an area of enquiry that is significantly lacking. As Beaverstock et al. (2009, 199) note, there is a need for 'a more detailed analysis of the way travel co-operates with video-conference and other information communication technologies used before and after travel is needed'. This gap is part of a broader absence of literature on the dynamics of 'meetingness' (Urry 2003), or on the socially significant practices of meeting which relate to 'fundamental sociological ideas of social proximity, face-to-face contact and localness' (Faulconbridge and Beaverstock 2008, 94). In particular, there has been a lack of empirical social research that seeks to understand the *dynamics* of substitution, or more specifically, *what makes it possible* to replace meetings achieved by air travel with those conducted virtually.

One critical dynamic of co-present interaction which is thought to generate significant differences between in-person and virtual meetings is unfettered access to, and

'readings' of, the face. The face, or a visual representation of it, is needed to meet 'face-to-face', 'show face', 'save face', have 'face time' or do important 'facework' (Urry 2003; Jensen 2006; Denstadli and Gripsrud 2010). Indeed in-person or co-present interaction is commonly defined as involving physical, three-dimensional, real-time contact with one or more people where we 'both give and take impressions by means of our facial expressions' (Jensen 2006, 155, drawing on Urry 2004). The critical importance of the face in co-present interaction is the foundation for telecommunication technologies such as telepresence, which focuses on creating lifelike, omnipresent and high definition digital replicas of people's *faces*.

Telepresence describes a suite of advanced videoconferencing technologies that feature multiple high definition screens, matching eye levels from room to room, and immersive systems that make both sides of the room match environmentally, giving the illusion of a 'same room' experience (Lichtman 2006; Gewirtz Little 2008). Telepresence is characterised by high-quality audio and video, simple operation including a one-press connection system, high reliability and invisibility of technology. Companies manufacturing and supplying telepresence include Cisco, Polycom, Hewlett-Packard, Telanetix and Sony, who offer this technology as a product or a service, with services ranging 'from network and monitoring services to full "concierge" services that handle everything from call launching to ordering the coffee and doughnuts' (Davis and Kelly 2008, 4). In business environments, telepresence is most often permanently installed in discrete meeting rooms, 'suites' or senior executives' offices, where it is intended to recreate a premium meeting experience. Telepresence thus aims to replicate the ways in which people communicate and collaborate in person by creating 'a two-way immersive communications experience that simulates an in-person, interactive encounter' (Davis and Kelly 2008, 2).

The implicit (and sometimes explicit) assumption here is that visually and aurally representing real-time, real-life *faces* will improve opportunities for substitution with in-person meetings. Following this logic, it is understandable that teleconferencing and videoconferencing have not substantially reduced the need for face-to-face collaboration, being viewed as an 'uncomfortable' and 'unnatural' experience that does not fully replicate the intimacy of co-presence (Lichtman 2006, 4). However, the same criticisms are rarely levelled at telepresence technologies. While telepresence has achieved significant substitution in several companies such as Cisco, Vodafone and British Telecom, a key question remaining is why it has not achieved more significant substitution as a way of meeting in the global workplace. Why do employees of these companies still need to travel at all?

In answering this query we need a much more nuanced vocabulary for discussing the practices of meeting in the global workplace. Even at a cursory glance, it is obvious that the traditional meeting room is one among many ways of meeting (Urry 2007). Others include walking through the office to 'meet and greet'; sitting at a colleague's desk to 'work' on something; going out for coffee, lunch or dinner; presenting and workshopping ideas; talking on the phone or video; spontaneously meeting around the water cooler or coffee machine; or observing and exchanging work culture and practice (Haynes 2010). In this sense, the practice of meeting is best represented as a suite of practices through which observation, learning, communication, networking and collaboration takes place.

Focusing attention on the practices of meeting that air travel and telepresence, respectively, enable also directs attention away from the primary focus on the face.

Instead the human body becomes essential as the 'carrier of patterns of bodily behaviour' (Reckwitz 2002, 250) and as the 'performer' of various meeting practices. Understanding 'meetingness' therefore involves understanding the differences and dynamics in the make-up of in-person and virtual meetings, and their ongoing performance and reproduction by people, or more specifically, by human bodies (Reckwitz 2002; Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012).

Taking these observations further, the remainder of this paper examines the important work of the *body* in performing practices of virtual and in-person meetings. The paper presents an analysis of 34 interviews with frequent flyers and travel stakeholders from an anonymous global Australian company seeking to reduce business costs and emissions associated with air travel through investment in telepresence. The paper finds that the lifelike replication of the face via telepresence is not enough to substitute for in-person interactions in many instances, despite being a visually compelling alternative. Instead, the analysis points towards the importance of the human body and its materialities and mobilities in practices of meeting in the global workplace. The paper concludes by suggesting some ways in which this 'work' of the body could be replicated or enhanced in strategies designed to substitute in-person business meetings with virtual alternatives.

From the Face to the Body

As noted above, the face has received significant attention in studies and analyses of co-present interaction. More specifically, mobility scholars cite the importance of the *eyes* during physical co-presence: 'eye contact enables the establishment of intimacy and trust, as well as insincerity and fear, power and control' (Urry 2004, 29). Jensen (2006, 159) and Urry (2004) connect the importance of 'the interaction and meeting of the eyes' in face-to-face communication back to the work of social theorists Simmel and Goffman, who both argue that eye contact plays a pivotal role in the construction of trust and the establishment of connections between people. Boden and Molotch (1994, 260) similarly argue that 'copresence affords access to the body part that "never lies", the eyes – the "windows on the soul"'. Eyes are a 'truth detection mechanism', and contact with them 'signals a degree of intimacy and trust' (Boden and Molotch 1994, 260). Haynes' (2010, 559) study of ICTs and air travel with the Irish software industry also alludes to the significance of the eyes, with one interviewed Chief Executive Officer citing the importance of 'seeing the whites of their eyes' in face-to-face business meetings. Telepresence too, places great importance on eye contact. Eyes are life size, their reactions are displayed in real-time, and interactants are able to stare directly into the eyes of whom they wish to address. The work of the body in meetings is, however, replicated in a much more limited sense.

One aspect of the body which is largely replicated by telepresence is what Boden and Molotch (1994, 260) describe as 'body talk': 'body talk adds a visual vocabulary and social grammar that enables speakers to add nuance to language and even transform verbal meanings'. Further, '"sets of bodily movements" … bring speaker and hearer into deft alignment as interactants adjust to one another's vocal pitch and physical stance. Readiness to receive an utterance is displayed through gaze, gesture, and body orientation – for example, titling the head to one side' (Boden and Molotch 1994, 261). Telepresence replicates this body talk by focusing on virtually recreating 'the presentation of eye movements, facial expressions, gestures, and postures' (Nakanishi, Kato, and Ishiguro 2011, 1). However, other important work of

the body is not replicated in these virtual environments. One aspect of the body that telepresence has so far been unable to reproduce is touch. Boden and Molotch (1994, 261–262; emphasis in original) describe touching as a '*full vocabulary* of "deep significance" in which different meanings are provided by the degree of touch intensity, precise location of the body used … and exact spot where the touch is placed'.

Urry's concept of *corporeal* travel, which refers to the embodied nature of meeting and the ways in which people 'bodily encounter some particular landscape or town-scape, or are physically present at a particular live event' (Urry 2002, 258), is also unable to be imitated by telepresence. Further, Urry's (2003) discussion of the different types of (bodily) obligations that require physical proximity to particular peoples, places or events is missing from the telepresence meeting room. Social obligations 'involve seeing "the other" "face-to-face" and thus "body-to-body", which in turn involves reading "body language"' (Urry 2003, 162). Legal, economic and family obligations, as well as obligations to place and events, also entail specific types of bodily movement in order 'to sense a place or a certain kind of place "directly"', or 'experience a particular "live" event' (Urry 2003, 162–163).

Following Urry (2002, 258), we can think of the proximity provided by the body, to both other bodies and places, as 'obligatory, appropriate or desirable' in the practices of business meetings. Theories of social practice allow us to unpack this relationship further by considering the ways in which the body is implicated in enabling, performing and reproducing the necessary elements (e.g. materials, meanings and competencies) of meeting practices (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012). For example, the body can reproduce and convey *meanings* about the value of meeting, such as to demonstrate respect and build rapport, it provides *competency* in carrying out a meeting and the bodily gestures associated with it, and it is intimately involved in 'handling' or navigating a collection of *materials* and material environments in order to meet (including those involved in the practices of travelling by air (Gustafson 2013a)).

The remainder of this paper investigates the role of the body in performing practices of meeting in the global workplace, where these are enabled by air travel or telepresence. The analysis focuses on what role the body plays in these practices and how this is distinct from the role of the face. More specifically, it asks how the presence or absence of the body enables and constrains practices of meeting in person or virtually (via telepresence). Further, how might in-person bodily dynamics be replicated or substituted by emerging technologies such as telepresence in practices of meeting in the global workplace?

Meeting in the Global Workplace

The interviews discussed below were conducted with 34 employees of a rapidly expanding Australian company which provides global financial services, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region.[2] Interviews were conducted in mid-2011 by the author. Participants were selected in consultation with the company's Head of Corporate Environmental Sustainability across three participant groups: (i) frequent flyers (top 4% of all flyers based on highest air travel spend (AU\$37,000–AU\$106,000 individual travel spend per year)); (ii) less frequent flyers (e.g. a frequent flyer who had recently reduced their travel as identified by the Head of Corporate Environmental Sustainability); and (iii) important stakeholders regarding air travel (or technology

alternatives). Over half the interviews were conducted with frequent flyers. Participants worked across a range of institutional divisions and management levels, although most were senior or executive managers with large teams of people across multiple countries. Interviewees were based in five Asia-Pacific regional cities: Melbourne (18), Sydney (8), Hong Kong (4), Singapore (2) and Wellington (4). The gender mix of interviewees was well balanced with 16 women and 18 men. Most participants were aged 35–54 (28) and had been with the company for 1–5 years (20). Seven participants had been at the company for more than 10 years. Air travel spend for participants varied between AU\$862 and AU\$106,000 for the 2010–2011 financial year (data only available for 23 participants). The average annual spend for each participant with available data was AU\$51,867. Most participants travelled economy class for short-duration domestic travel, and business class for long-duration domestic and all international travel as per company policy.

The broader aim of the study was to investigate how the company's frequent flyers, or flyers that had recently reduced their air travel within the last 12 months, could further reduce their air travel and increase their use of telepresence and other telecommunication facilities available to them. The research was commissioned by the company, and was intended to inform their corporate environmental sustainability ambition of reducing CO_2 emissions. The interview schedule was formulated around a number of key themes relating to the practices of air travel, face-to-face meetings and virtual meetings. Questions also explored the impact of different meeting practices and air travel on participants' everyday lives; however, these findings are not discussed in this paper. The schedule was developed and pilot tested in consultation with several company employees. Interviews took between 45–75 min and were conducted in person or via telepresence where participants were located interstate or overseas. Interviews were voice recorded and professionally transcribed. Data were thematically coded in word processing software around the interview themes. For the purposes of this paper, data were analysed using a social practice lens to identify the different practices of meeting performed by interviewees (both virtual and in-person), and the role of the face and the body in performing these practices.

Practices of Meeting Face-to-face

Practices of meeting face-to-face were expanding and broadening in this company's global workplace, where informal encounters and ethnographic-like observations were thought to deliver significant business value, as were lunches and dinners to build rapport with clients, partners and staff. Interviewees confirmed broader findings regarding the 'essential' nature of face-to-face communication for meeting new clients and building relationships (Harvard Business Review 2009).

> So the board travels around to be able to interact with customers and see first-hand what's going on in those regions. You can't do that by telepresence; you can't sort of have a dinner by telepresence. So that's the other one which gets me going up there, is for board-type meetings where you're classically linking with customers.

> So travel is important, particularly in Asia, where it's a lot of relationship building. It's sitting across the room from someone that you can see and touch, and building a rapport.

This last quote also highlights the importance of sensory and bodily cues associated with face-to-face relationship-building meetings, which is cited by other mobility researchers (Urry 2004; Jensen 2006) and was discussed by interviewees when justifying the need for in-person meetings.

> In the end, we need to do business in the way that it works for our customers, not necessarily that works for us. So if we can convince them to use this [telepresence] because it's good, that would be great. Some customers want to see you; they want to have a debate; they want to shake your hand and if you're doing a deal that's worth several million dollars [to our] bottom line, that's fine.

The visual and *physical* dimensions of the body's involvement in face-to-face meetings are important to note here. Shaking hands and touching people alludes to the tactile and three-dimensional characteristics of the body's materiality which cannot (yet) be replicated in virtual meetings (although there are efforts to achieve this through the development of telepresence 'robots' (Tsui et al. 2012)). Touch is also very important in the global workplace, where it crosses cultural boundaries and provides what Bodon and Molotch (1994, 262) refer to as a 'universal … form of information'. Here the body provides an important form of competency involving bodily gestures. Importantly, expectations for this bodily contact are not necessarily coming from the employees interviewed, but rather are *perceived* expectations of their 'customers', whom these interviewees are trying to engage with and impress. This is interesting given that physical contact between bodies forms a small moment of an entire business meeting and is usually limited to the time spent shaking someone's hand. What is important here is not only actual physical contact, bringing with it 'a rich, complex and culturally variable vocabulary of touch' (Urry 2002, 259), but also the *possibility* for that contact to occur. The physical co-presence of bodies provides a latent capacity for physical touch which virtual meetings currently cannot.

The importance of meeting in person with clients was particularly heightened in cultures where face-to-face communication is commonly associated with demonstrations of respect. In particular, several interviewees discussed the importance of 'face time' in Asia, where meeting in person 'shows them face' and 'show[s] them respect'.

> Well in Asia, firstly, it's customary to go face-to-face. You'll hear a comment about 'face time'. Face time falls into two things, and I'm not using the American term here, face time in Asia actually means you go and meet someone and it shows them face, i.e. if I go and I fly to Beijing and I meet someone, that shows I show them respect.

> It's a face issue, especially in Asia, and it's a reputational issue: I think we are still a fairly newcomer into those markets in Asia. The way we treat staff in particular with the appropriate level of … human interaction is watched by the majority of the staff. So it's not only a preference but I think it also makes a good business sense.

It's also a thing about status in India, and they need to see 'The Boss' … if I
don't go and see them regularly [they think] I don't care about them, and there-
fore they are diminished from an organisational perspective.

Co-presence is used by these interviewees to demonstrate to employees that they are
valued and respected, and to 'connect' with people through 'face time'. As Boden
and Molotch (1994) and Urry (2002) have previously argued, in these examples co-
presence provides an opportunity to display attentiveness and commitment to staff
(and simultaneously to detect commitment and attentiveness in others). This role of
face-to-face communication was not specific to Asia, but associated with many meet-
ings conducted in person, whether that be with new clients, existing partners or
employees. The quotes below indicate that interviewees felt a strong expectation to
travel more frequently in order to demonstrate respect to others through the physical
co-presence of bodies:

At the moment, I get criticism that I don't travel enough. People feel that when
I do travel to them, that they get a lot out of my visits. … There's a leadership
value and a communication value to my travel.

I think within the company people will probably value the fact that I've gone
up and had a look and will send a firsthand report, far beyond the environmen-
tal carbon emissions impact of me flying. … It also helps to the extent that
they may feel that by actually going there, you're showing a measure of
respect for them and a desire to really understand the wider issues that they
face. So if you then replace that just with a conference call or video chat, then
I think you lose that … ability to place a wider importance on it. Essentially,
people, when you're in their office, are saying, 'well, you felt it was important
enough to actually put yourself to the trouble to getting on the plane to come
and see me.' So that sort of communicates a level of value that really is lost
when you're just speaking to somebody over the phone.

As this last quote indicates, it is not only the physical co-location of bodies that
demonstrates respect, but also the *physical effort* required to transport a body from
one physical location to another. Going 'to the trouble' of getting on a plane
involves significant inconvenience, time and stress (Espino et al. 2002; Gustafson
2013a), and it is precisely this 'trouble' that demonstrates to others that they are
worth bodily effort, and therefore highly valued by the person they are meeting with.
   Additionally, the body played a crucial role in experiencing the 'wider issues' and
reporting back 'firsthand' what was going on in different spaces and places relevant
to the company's activities, again reinforcing the visual, physical and corporeality of
meeting. One interviewee explained this as follows:

I look after about 65 people. I have responsibility for 14 countries in the Paci-
fic, 15 countries in Asia and another 16 in the Middle East, and I have people
spread across all of these countries, so … I have a commitment to not only
visit my people on the ground while I'm there but also I visit clients and I'm
involved with transactions when I visit these countries. I probably travel at
least once every … two weeks to ten days.

Other interviewees reported how they needed to be 'on the ground' when they were 'rolling out something, implementing something, transitioning something' [participant quote], thus demonstrating what Urry describes as an 'obligation to place' (Urry 2003, 162). This was particularly important for areas of the company where there was regional expansion and growth.

> The Asian business that we are growing into at the moment, so [there's] a lot of acquisitions and deals and learning how to meet and greet with the people over there. It can't be done over the phone. It probably needs that face-to-face interaction, so during that time of setup and setting up the business, we'll do quite a lot of flights into and out of the Asian region.

These findings also resonate with the Harvard Business Review (2009), which found that in-person communication was associated with finding out what was 'really going on' with clients, partners and employees. This again broadens the definition of 'meeting', which encompasses intuitive, sensory and observational cues that are 'picked up' by the body by being immersed 'on location'.

Similarly, being 'on the ground' enabled practices of cultural exchange that were not deemed possible on or through telecommunication. For example, one interviewee commented on the different work practices conducted in different countries. This required considerable cultural sensitivity and local knowledge to manage well which could be described (extending Urry's (2003) terminology) as an 'obligation to culture':

> Australians and Europeans are very, very similar. American, and to some degree, Asian work culture is quite different. They're very, very hierarchical. The boss says something and you just do it. And the Indians work like that, as well, because, obviously, the background is the caste system. Australians and New Zealanders don't operate that way. They have to build a trust and rapport for their leader before they'll actually do what they're told.

Other interviewees talked about needing to understand the cultural and situational 'context':

> Often what's important to a particular project is the surroundings, the context. And it occurs to me that I can talk to a client in Delhi over the phone, but often what's equally valuable is just getting to see the place firsthand, the surroundings, how does the city operate, the context. And if you stop travelling, you lose that.

> For example, just even things like traffic. … You get a sense of how the city moves and how the city operates. … So in Bangalore, for example, the traffic is just diabolical. So if somebody rings and says, 'the traffic was bad,' you go, 'I can absolutely believe that!' We have [a] transport system in India that provides buses [for staff] … and until you've been there it sounds as if, 'God, why don't we provide buses for our staff?' … [but] it's just an alternative to a public transport system. … It just helps to build the rapport.

As these quotes indicate, this form of 'meeting' involved immersion into a culture, understanding 'the issues', building 'trust and rapport' with employees who had culturally different work practices, and understanding 'the context' of the city and geographic location. These findings resonate with Boden and Molotch's (1994) depiction of 'thick' co-presence which goes beyond the exchange of words to include sensory inputs and subtle meanings conveyed through facial expressions, body language, pauses and silences, status cues, intonation and background sounds. According to Boden and Molotch (1994, 259), it is 'the richness of information' provided by co-presence that makes it the preferred mode of meeting when we want to find out 'what's really going on, including the degree to which others are providing us with reliable, reasonable accounts'. Additionally, Urry (2002, 261) suggests that the desire to know a place by being physically present in it is similar to the body's role in getting to know another person: 'Many places need to be seen "for oneself", to be experienced directly. … Thus there is a further sense of co-presence, physically walking or seeing or touching or hearing or smelling a place.' We can therefore understand these quotes as referring to a nuanced, culturally-sensitive and sensory definition of meeting in which the body plays an essential role.

These examples allude to another role of the body in face-to-face communication, where it provides a form of local mobility. The body enables movement of itself 'on the ground', where it can shift between a fluid flow of practices involving meeting, collaborating, observing and communicating. It also allows for what Urry (2004, 31) refers to as '"inadvertent" meetings', where people informally encounter one another in offices, cafes, conferences, restaurants, the kitchen and so on. Here the body not only acts as a form of competency that provides a barometer of the senses, but also as a type of mobility in its own right.

The co-location of the body in new sites and settings, its physical mobility and its three-dimensional sensorial competencies providing sight, sound and smell, constituted a form of pleasure for some interviewees. The ability to immerse oneself in a new culture and move around it was viewed as one of the few perks of air travel. This was where travel became 'exciting', enabling experiences that 'broaden the mind'.

> I like to travel and so I do like to experience different cultures and have different experiences and things like that and I guess there is, with plane travel there is that … sense of mystery and you are going somewhere new. … So yeah, I do enjoy it, it's good.

> … To go to a different place and see new people, it kind of shakes you up a bit, in a good way; [it] gets you out of your comfort zone.

However, there was a fine line between the clear value and possible pleasures of being on the ground, and participating in what some participants described as 'travel tourism' or 'sightseeing trips around the empire', which involved 'be[ing] seen, showing leadership'. It was unclear where the line between necessary and unnecessary travel was, or if indeed there was a clear line that could be drawn.

What these findings do demonstrate however, is that face-to-face meetings are becoming less focused on traditional (one-way) presentations or formal meetings, and more concerned with 'building and sustaining networks and exchanging social goods' (Urry 2007, 165). Air travel is being increasingly used to enable a more

diversified, informal and non-traditional variety of meeting practices in which the body, as opposed to the face, has maintained if not expanded its important role. In contrast, telepresence meetings are enabling a much more formalised suite of practices in which the body's movement, meanings and competencies are significantly limited.

Telepresence Meeting Practices

Telepresence was almost universally described by interviewees as an 'amazing', 'transformational', 'fantastic', 'wonderful', 'brilliant', 'awesome' and 'really effective' technology:

> For me it is a transformational technology because you do get an intimacy in the dialogue and the feel that you're in the same place with people.

> I think it's amazing. It's just fantastic. I don't know why people would get up really early in the morning and spend two hours extra flying up to Sydney when they could just go and chat to them on that.

> The telepresence facility is awesome, it's just fantastic. The crispness and the clarity of the person is just amazing, it's almost like they are in the room with you. So it is a wonderful, wonderful resource that we have available to us in [this company].

> You want people to be supporting it, just saying, 'Do you know what? This is great. Brilliant. I don't have to get up at 4:30 to catch a stupid plane to Sydney. I can sleep in and see my kids and talk to them. Talk to the guys for two hours on telepresence. Great.'

These quotes highlight two critical 'perks' of telepresence meetings. First, they confirm claims that this technology enables a realistic, lifelike meeting experience with highly advanced technology. Second, telepresence meetings avoid much of the bodily 'work' that is needed to conduct meetings enabled by air travel, including the arduous and unhealthy toll that air travel can take on the body (Ivancevich, Konopaske, and Defrank 2003; Gustafson 2013a), and the impact of the body's physical absence on family life (Espino et al. 2002). By participating in virtual meetings, the body is free in both time and space to participate in other co-present practices, such as spending time with children.

While there were some issues raised regarding access to telepresence rooms, as well as a lack of competency in some instances regarding how to book or hold a telepresence meeting, of greater significance were the limited types of meeting practices that telepresence was deemed appropriate for. Most commonly, telepresence was being used as a replacement for other telecommunication meetings, such as teleconferencing and videoconferencing, particularly to conduct internal team meetings.

> We used to have telephone hook ups for [my manager's] …. management meetings. We've now moved to telepresence meetings, so that's actually working so much better than it was previously.

Telepresence was considered most appropriate for 'very formal' meetings, being described by interviewees as 'impersonal' and lacking 'a sense of the person' and the 'ability to interact with them'. Another interviewee described how the specific time period available for telepresence meetings and the need for an agenda didn't provide any opportunity to build an 'informal rapport':

> The problem with telepresence is you're limited to a time slot and you've usually got an agenda. You don't get to actually have the informal rapport. You don't get to go and sit down and have lunch with them and see the work environment they work in and see the challenges that they've got each day, particularly around things like the transport system and those types of things.

These findings resonate with Urry's (2004, 32) observation that 'communications that do not involve co-presence are more functional and task oriented, and less rich and multifaceted'. Adding to this sense of formality was a ban on food and drink in telepresence rooms and the tendency for rooms to be heavily booked, meaning that meetings had to finish on time. It was difficult to have an informal chat at the end of the meeting, or to follow up with lunch or a cup of coffee. The body, instead of providing mobility between spaces and places, was contained to the telepresence room and therefore limited by the room's physical materiality and the objects allowed within it. This presented a much more limited suite of possibilities for meeting than those enabled by in-person meetings.

Additionally, telepresence meetings were not generally deemed appropriate for managing sensitive staff issues, such as hiring, firing or even conducting performance reviews. In these situations the absence of the physical body, or rather its substitution with a large screen, was associated with meanings of disrespect and a lack of regard for staff welfare and well-being:

> You shouldn't ring someone up and say, 'Let's have a meeting', and then 'I'm going to let you go'. If you've got to that point then I think … you're the one that should be let go, to be honest. You need to … treat your staff in a respectful manner.

> I think there's … a moral and ethical obligation on you to handle all those sorts of situations [hiring and firing] face-to-face.

> Well I'll hire people [on telepresence], and if I have to, I'll fire them but I prefer not to do that. … I think there's an ethical issue, … if you're going to terminate someone you should probably actually face up to them … but I'd probably fire people if I had to that way.

These quotes resonate with the Hollywood movie and book *Up in the air* (first published by Kirn (2001)), which features the life of a man (Ryan Bingham, acted by George Clooney) who is contracted by different companies to fly to various locations in order to personally fire their employees face-to-face. In this example from popular culture, the respect demonstrated through the bodily effort of flying to another place to meet with someone is distributed or re-allocated to another human being – or another body. Importantly, it is not distributed to a form of technology (such as

telepresence), which while clearly convenient, is unable to demonstrate and convey the same degree of value and effort as the co-presence of bodies.

Interviewees confirmed these observations when they described how there was a need to 'face up' to someone when they were required to terminate their employment, referring to this as an 'ethical issue'. Further, interviewees described how it was difficult to pick up all the necessary sensory cues when they were hiring via telepresence, alluding again to the 'thickness' of co-present communication (Boden and Molotch 1994). However, there were signs that the meanings associated with telepresence meetings were beginning to shift as the interviewee below identified:

> We have a lot of people that when bonuses were announced and … individual performance results, which is obviously the most sensitive conversation you have each year, we had a lot of people flying back and forth … between Sydney and Melbourne … and they'd say, 'Oh, it has to be face-to-face' and I said, 'Well, you are face-to-face on telepresence.' 'Oh, but it's not the same.' 'Well, you're not going to touch them in real life. You're in a professional meeting, you're not going to actually touch a person, so what difference does it make?' … So that is one that I believe people consider to be inappropriate.

Despite some evidence of potential changes in the types of meetings that telepresence could and should be used for, this analysis supports other research which finds that telecommunication technologies are implicated in a synergistic rather than substitutive relationship with air travel (Graham and Marvin 1996; Urry 2007), each of which enable their own distinctive but mutually reinforcing suites of meeting practices. While some meeting practices are substitutable, many are not. What is missing in telepresence meetings is not the face, but rather the materiality and mobility of the body, the meanings associated with its physical co-presence and the competencies it can provide. I now return to these dynamics to consider how they might be replicated or reproduced in virtual environments.

Replicating the Materialities and Mobilities of the Body

This paper began by pointing out that the commonly assumed critical dynamic for a successful business meeting is realistic access to the eyes and face. However, the analysis presented above suggests that telepresence, which allows for the virtual co-presence of realistic faces including real-time, life-size eye contact with other people, is still unable to replicate much of the 'face work' made possible through physical co-presence. This is because the body plays a number of important roles that go beyond the provision of realistic visual eye contact, sound and the observation of facial features and bodily gestures.

Reckwitz's summation of social practice theories and the role of the body provides some useful clues to help unpack these findings further. Reckwitz (2002, 250) defines social practice as 'a routinized way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood'. If, as Reckwitz (2002, 251) argues, social practices are the product of 'training the body in a certain way' and if this includes 'routinized mental and emotional activities which are, on a certain level, bodily as well', then the distinctions between virtual and in person practises of meeting are quite profound. Despite telepresence's ability to replicate lifelike but undeniably virtual faces and eyes, what is missing from virtual meeting practices

is the materiality of the body itself. Following Reckwitz and the analysis presented above, we can understand the body as being 'trained' to meet, which involves specific competencies such as physical gestures (e.g. hand shaking), as well as sensory and emotional cues that the body is involved in 'picking up' as it physically interacts with other people, objects and places. In virtual meetings, bodies are substituted with technologies, implicating both parties in more formal and impersonal modes of communication that lack these important sensory cues and inputs.

'Showing face' or 'saving face' cannot, therefore, be easily replicated by a screen no matter how lifelike it might appear to be. This is because to show or save face one must demonstrate that they *value* the other, which is ideally demonstrated through the material co-presence of bodies. Indeed, the further one has travelled to meet with the other, the more effort, and therefore the more value they are demonstrating in this exchange. Urry (2004, 31) alludes to these dynamics when discussing the social obligations and 'very strong normative expectations of presence and attention' which involve being 'body-to-body'. The materiality of the body, and the meanings and competencies associated with the body's materiality (including the *physical effort* and significant inconveniences required to move it around) also convey particular meanings (of respect, value and care) to those people being met with.

A second crucial role of the body in face-to-face meetings evident from the above analysis is mobility. Unlike telepresence meetings where the body is contained and confined to a specific room, in face-to-face encounters the body not only carries co-present meeting practices (Reckwitz 2002), but literally carries people through time and space, enabling them to move seamlessly between different sites and spaces whenever and however they want. This is increasingly important in the global workplace, where practices of meeting are becoming increasingly fluid in time and space (Urry 2007), crossing a variety of physical environments including board rooms, offices, kitchens, city streets, restaurants, bars and hotels. While telepresence also virtually carries people to other places and times, it does so within a significantly more limited materiality restricted by the technology and the room in which it is situated. There are no kitchens, desks, cups of tea or dinners in the telepresence room; nor are the busy and bustling streets of an Asian city available for cultural observation.

Somewhat ironically then, this ability to rematerialise and replicate the mobility of the body was the original intention behind telepresence technology. Minsky (1980), who is often accredited with inventing the term in the 1980s, describes telepresence as a form of bodily mobility, paying particular attention to the human hand. Here, he describes how the technology might be used:

> You don a comfortable jacket lined with sensors and muscle-like motors. Each motion of your arm, hand, and fingers is reproduced at another place by mobile, mechanical hands. Light, dexterous, and strong, these hands have their own sensors through which you see and feel what is happening. Using this instrument, you can 'work' in another room, in another city, in another country, or on another planet. Your remote presence possesses the strength of a giant or the delicacy of a surgeon. Heat or pain is translated into informative but tolerable sensation. Your dangerous job becomes safe and pleasant.

There are some applications for these robotic-like traits of telepresence now in operation or in development (Tsui et al. 2012), although they have not yet made their way into business environments.

One interesting possibility to consider that might increase the legitimacy of telepresence as a replacement for in-person meetings are strategies that attempt to redistribute the bodily effort involved in face-to-face encounters to other bodies (much like George Clooney's character does in the movie *Up in the air*). There are several ways in which this could be done. One is to reposition managers and leaders in co-located sites with the people they manage or lead. Another is to provide and enhance telepresence concierge services that distribute the tasks of meeting and greeting colleagues and clients to a concierge employed by the company. A key role of the concierge would be to make people feel valued and respected by shaking their hands, providing them with a beverage, personally taking them to their telepresence meeting room, and ensuring that the technology works seamlessly, thereby distributing the bodily effort normally undertaken by those being met with to another person or body.

Another possible route for expanding the body's mobility in relation to virtual meetings is to extend and enrich the environments and materialities of telepresence rooms and spaces. In addition to providing formally attired telepresence rooms (which enable formal meetings), there are opportunities to (re)create spaces for the expanding array of meeting practices involved in face-to-face communication. Telepresence morning teas, lunches and dinners are one possibility. Telepresence 'windows' into other company offices, tea rooms or city streets are another, although there may be privacy ramifications associated with these sorts of ideas.

Conclusion

Telepresence is a rapidly changing technology which is being integrated into a constantly expanding suite of meeting practices, such as enabling medical students to watch live brain surgery, fashion designers to approve fashion samples (Engerbretson 2010) and opera singers to receive virtual lessons from their tutors (Penalba et al. 2011). These examples represent a much more fluid range of possibilities for this technology that extend beyond its current role in replicating the formal business meeting. However, even in these new domains, telepresence remains unable to reproduce the sensorial competency enabled through the physical co-presence of the body, such as the smells, sounds and tactile feel of a live brain, a new dress or an operatic song. It is also unable to convey the same meanings of respect and rapport associated with a brain surgeon, fashion designer or opera tutor attending to their students and colleagues *in person*.

Nonetheless, it seems plausible that the increasing normalisation and robotic capabilities of telecommunication technologies will involve the transformation of meanings and the sensorial simulation of real-life sounds, smells and feel in the future. Like all practices (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012), the meanings and competencies associated with the physical and virtual co-presence of bodies are likely to continue to change in a climate-constrained and an increasingly connected world. These transformations could allow for more substitution of face-to-face meetings and the continuing diversification and expansion of telepresence meeting practices. Similarly, other ways of replicating the work of the body in business meetings discussed in this paper, such as through a concierge service or through simulating a diverse range of meeting environments, may expand opportunities to meet virtually in the global workplace.

However, it remains unlikely that telepresence or any virtual communication technologies will ever completely replace face-to-face encounters. As mobility researchers continually point out, expanding the opportunities for people to meet and

collaborate, whether that be in person or virtually, has so far only served to expand global mobility on the whole, allowing for an increasing diversity of international connections, rather than a simple substitution of the physical by the virtual (Marvin 1997; Urry 2004). Attempting to virtually replicate or replace the mobility and materiality of the body, and the meanings and competencies associated with it, may simply continue to reproduce this trend. Such considerations are worthy of mobility scholars' continued attention as we seek to find ways of reducing the significant carbon costs of aviation associated with business meetings.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Despite the significant emergence and use of virtual communication technologies for business, a Harvard Business Review (2009, 1) survey of 2300 subscribers found that 'travel to meet in person with key customers, partners and employees remains essential for selling new business as well as building long-term relationships'. The review found that 79% of respondents viewed in-person meetings as the most effective way to meet clients and sell business, and 89% agreed that face-to-face meetings are essential for 'sealing the deal'.
2. Due to confidentiality requirements, further information about this company cannot be disclosed.

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