

# Authentic Encountering of Others and Learning through Media-Based Public Discussion: A Phenomenological Analysis

## Abstract

Functioning pluralistic democracies require their citizens to confront different views in public discussion in such a way that they can both learn about and learn from one another. Today, the forum for everyday public discussion is frequently the participatory digital media, such as social media, video sites, electronic newspapers and various kinds of blogs. However, despite its educational potential, it would seem that rather than resulting in learning and social development, public discussion often produces aggression, antagonistic behaviour and polarisation in our societies.

Several philosophers and educational theorists have stated that the problem of incivility in the digital participatory media results from the nature of the media as a form of interaction: the media-pessimistic phenomenologists argue that, due to the lack of other's physical presence, our interactions remain superficial, derivative and inauthentic. The implication of this argument is that without the physical presence of the other, no advanced learning is possible through media-based discussion.

In challenging this conclusion, I argue that these analyses have misinterpreted phenomenological theory and have resulted in fallacious arguments. I show that phenomenological theory, as it relates to what constitutes our social experiences, indicates that the core of encountering others is the same in both physical presence and through the media. It is the other's *expressions* and not the presence of their *physical bodies* that is central. Based on the phenomenological analyses of Husserl and Stein, I conclude that there is no reason for why even advanced learning should not be possible via media-based public discussion.

Keywords: public discussion, media, learning through discussion, expression, the body, authenticity

## 1. Introduction

Functioning pluralistic democracies require citizens who are able to confront different views in public discussion in such a way that they may both learn about and learn from one another's views in the course of that discussion (Biesta, 2014; Burbules, 2008; Bridges, 1979; Dewey, 1927; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). By encountering views that differ from our own, we are able to form new ideas or at least understand a range of views on a particular topic (Bridges, 1979; Hand & Levinson, 2012). Today, the forum for everyday public discussion is frequently the participatory digital media, such as social media forums (e.g. Twitter), video sites (e.g. YouTube and Instagram), electronic newspapers and different types of blogs (Burbules, 2008). However, despite the educational potential, it would seem that rather than resulting in learning and social development, media-based public discussion often produces aggression, antagonistic behaviour and ever-greater polarisation (Ben-Porath & Dishon, 2018; Mutz, 2015; Shelby, 2014).

Several philosophers and theorists of education building their arguments on phenomenological theory have stated that the problem of incivility in the digital participatory media is caused by the nature of the media as a form of interaction. For these authors, the reason for the aggression expressed through the media and in public discussion is caused neither by the so-called 'attention economy', marketing approach that concentrates on attracting attention (Marwick, 2015; Fairchild, 2007) nor by intentional incivility in the commercial media, such as on commercial TV (Mutz, 2015). Rather, the media-pessimistic authors argue that, due to the lack of the other's physical presence, our interactions remain superficial, derivative and inauthentic (Dreyfus, 2008; Maiese, 2017; Staehler, 2014; Turkle, 2017). As Hubert Dreyfus (2008) states, the implication of this argument is that without the other's physical presence, any advanced learning through interaction is impossible. This advanced learning would include the acquiring of new values, new habits of thinking or an understanding of others' worldviews, in other words, the kind of learning that could lead to societal development (see also Dewey, 1991). Dreyfus concludes that, for this reason, public discussion remains superficial at best and often becomes aggressive and antagonistic. His argument does not explain how it is that we are able to create media-based communities and successful worldwide campaigns among the like-minded, such as the #MeToo or Avaaz movements.

The question I pose is whether the analysis provided by the media-pessimistic authors of the role of the other's physical presence and its implications for the possibility of learning through media-based public discussion is correct. Claims about the superficiality or derivative nature of media-based communication often are based on the assumption of the primacy of the bodily presence in interaction

(Dreyfus, 2008; Staehler, 2014; Maiese, 2017). This assumption is founded on the phenomenological theory of our bodily way of being in the world and in our encounters with others.

In contrast, I will argue that, this analysis has slightly misunderstood phenomenological theory and has therefore resulted in a fallacious conclusion. Rather, based on phenomenological theory regarding the constitution of our social experience, I argue that the core of encountering others is the same both in physical presence and in the so-called ‘telepresence’ (Steuer, 1992) through the media. This core, as I will argue, is the individual’s *expressions* and not their *physical bodies*. I will conclude that, based on the classical phenomenological analysis of the social experience, there is no reason why even advanced learning should not be possible via media-based public discussion.

My argument provides insights into the factors in our experience of others that enable us to encounter them in such a way that it does allow advanced learning through media-based public discussion. Indeed, there has been an on-going push to recognise that encountering others in physical presence and through the media should not be seen as entirely separate from one another (e.g. Baym 2015; Eklund 2015; Willson 2006, 2012). While not denying the role of the body in communication and in experience of the world, others and self, I will challenge the view that our communication in physical presence and through the media are essentially different. My position supports the argument for the authenticity of online interaction (e.g. Osler, 2019) and for the possibility of online learning (e.g. Ward, 2018), and grounds the idea of the modern democracy as a learning society (e.g. Dewey, 1927; Holma, Kontinkangas & Blanken-Webb, 2018).

In the following sections, I will first clarify the conceptual and theoretical framework within which I am operating. I will then provide a counter-argument to the media-pessimistic argument of Dreyfus and Tanja Staehler by investigating the possibility of encountering others authentically in telepresence versus physical presence. I will do so by analysing the accounts of classical phenomenologists Edmund Husserl and Edith Stein on how our experience of other persons is constituted. I will conclude that there is no essential difference between an authentic encounter with others in physical presence or in telepresence, and therefore, there is no inevitable hindrance to advanced learning through media-based public discussion.

## 2. The Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Learning through public discussion is informal and often incidental; in other words, such learning is a by-product of the intended action—in this context, the public discussion (Marton, 2014). As Nicholas Burbules (2009) and Sharan Merriam and Laura Bierema (2014), among others have

described, the informal and incidental learning that happens through discussion is integrated into the flow of the discussion. Action, reflection, and inquiry are not separated and at its best, such learning means continuous growth and the development of understanding (see also Dewey, 1991).

By ‘learning’, I mean the implicit or explicit widening and deepening of our understanding of something, whether at the level of thought or at the level of practice. Learning in this sense includes what John Dewey calls the ‘change of habits of thought’ (see Dewey, 1991) and what Jürgen Habermas defines as acquiring ideas, knowledge, values and practices (Habermas & McCarthy, 1979). That is, learned content may be anything from skills to values and to factual information, which are acquired as part of one’s own thoughts and actions through (an often implicit) understanding of the content. As Ference Marton describes it, in order to discern a certain feature and a certain aspect of something, the learner must experience a certain difference (or variation) against a background of sameness in other respects and thus come to view that thing in a more nuanced, reflected and multi-faceted way (Marton, 2014). In this context, the concept of learning must include an experience (often non-explicated) of personal or shared social development.

In contextualising the possibilities for distance-learning, Dreyfus divides the stages of learning into seven stages of development: 1) novice, 2) advanced beginner, 3) competence, 4) proficiency, 5) expertise, 6) mastery, and 7) practical wisdom (Dreyfus, 2008). According to Dreyfus, the four latter stages of development are those of advanced learning during which the actual acquisition of new values, habits of thought with their resultant actions, and finally, settled practices take place. For these stages, he argues, interaction with others is required. As many educational theorists would agree, learning is always social and requires some sort of social interaction (e.g. Biesta, 2011; Biesta, De Bie & Wildemeersch, 2014; Wildemeersch & Stroobants, 2009). For Dreyfus, learning on the advanced level can take place only through authentic interaction, and for him, that involves being in the other’s physical presence (Dreyfus, 2008).

Peter Dahlgren suggests that the term ‘public discussion’ refers to the wide societal phenomenon, that is, the participation of members of society in the public sphere through discursive interventions, arguments and struggles to generate public opinion. This happens through organised events and through spontaneous and sometimes highly emotional discussions in the journalistic media as well as in the social media (Dahlgren 2015; 2005). Participation in the public sphere communicates representations of the shared opinions, perspectives, values and standpoints of the wider social groups, rather than merely private personal information (Dahlgren, 2015). According to Habermas, whose work provides a source for Dahlgren’s analysis, by generating public opinion, public

discussion functions as a connection between society and the state and is a fundamental necessity for a democratic society (Habermas, Lennox, & Lennox, 1974; Habermas, 1991).

Today, public discussion as a debate among members of society mostly takes place in the digital and participatory media, which includes both the social media and electronic newspapers, which are often intertwined (Ben-Porath & Dishon, 2018; Wegerif, 2018; Mutz, 2015). These media offer new opportunities, affordances (e.g., greater accessibility), and new obstacles (e.g. hate speech or echo chambers) for open and informed public discussion (Dahlgren, 2005). The digital media have increased the speed of the discussions, provided possibilities for rapid and wide social movements, such as the #MeToo campaign (Remnick, 2018) and provoked spontaneous waves of outrage and aggression (Crockett, 2017). As Burbules (2016) states, the media allow the quick production and dissemination of text, which enables the sharing of both right and false information as well as both positive and destructive opinions. In other words, the participatory digital media provides platforms for public discussion among members of society, and can be seen as both a positive and a negative development.

Public discussion takes place as group discussions by wide social circles within the public sphere. Based on the characterizations of a group discussion as suggested by David Bridges (1979) and Michael Hand and Ralph Levinson (2012), a group discussion involves multiple points of view to which we can respond within a certain temporal and social framework (see Hand & Levinson, 2012). However, as Bridges, Hand and Levinson and also Dreyfus state, in order for the discussion to result in an understanding of others, and thereby in advanced learning, the interaction should not be derivative or superficial; but this is what media-pessimistic authors claim the media-based discussion to be.

To provide an insight into the thinking of media-pessimistic phenomenologists, I will refer to the later classical phenomenologist Alfred Schutz (1971, 1982), who shares the media-pessimistic views of Staehler and Dreyfus. Through my analysis, I will add to those phenomenological studies that are already critical of the media-pessimistic perspective. Recently, Dave Ward (2018) criticised Dreyfus' claim of the impossibility of advanced online learning, while Lucy Osler (2019) has provided an analysis of an authentic 'we-experience' in online communities that contrasts with the pessimistic inauthenticity-arguments regarding online sociality as provided by Staehler (2014) and Sherry Turkle (2017). The classical phenomenologists, such as Husserl and Stein, provide grounding analyses of the conditions and possibilities of encountering others both in physical presence and via the media. Staehler and Dreyfus base their arguments on these classical phenomenological analyses, and yet

these analyses appear to provide support for both the pessimistic and the positive interpretations of the possibility of genuine interaction and learning via the media.

Following the recent critiques provided by Ward and Osler, I aim to criticise the pessimistic arguments by using their own means, that is by utilizing the same phenomenological analyses as the media-pessimists. My focus is on the arguments of Dreyfus and Staehler due to their explicit and clear coverage of the central assumptions of the media-pessimistic perspective and their explication of the specific but wide-spread interpretations of the phenomenology of the body and sociality. I will respond to their arguments about the others' physical bodily presence by reinterpreting the works of Husserl, the very classical phenomenologist whose work provides the basis for both Dreyfus' and Staehler's arguments, and Stein, whose development of Husserl's work helps me to develop my own argument further. For this, I utilize recent precise commentaries on Husserl's and Stein's work, such as that by James Jardine (2014).

To contextualize the discussion, I have included recent educational-philosophical insights into encountering others and expressing oneself in the media, such as the work of Burbules (2016) and Sigal Ben-Porath and Gideon Dishon (2018), as well as the widely-known recent investigations of media-based encounters by Turkle (2017) and of public discussion by Diana Mutz (2015). To elaborate my argument, in my concluding remarks I utilize recent interesting results from empirical studies on media-based discussion. For examples relevant to my analysis, I compare the study conducted by Molly Crockett (2017) with the often-quoted study conducted by Zizi Papacharissi (2004). To elaborate on my contention that media-based public discussion has the potential to serve as a learning situation, I utilize a recent study conducted by Elizabeth Dubois and Grant Blank (2018) that provides even counter-intuitive results regarding the scope of the different persons we can encounter through media-based interactions.

In the following, I will first introduce the arguments provided by Dreyfus and Staehler together with that of Turkle. I will then respond to these arguments by presenting my own analysis of Husserl's and Stein's analyses, which contrasts with the analysis provided by Staehler and is implicit in Dreyfus' argument. In the concluding section, I will relate the conclusions drawn from my analysis to the question of the possibility of advanced learning being achieved through media-based public discussion.

### 3. Encountering Others in Physical Presence and in the Media

In his book *On the Internet* (2008), Dreyfus claims that in the digital media, we leave behind our embodied selves and thereby lose some of our crucial capacity to engage with others authentically and to learn from them on an advanced level. As Ward has argued in response, based on the phenomenological theory that Dreyfus himself utilizes, this argument does not hold. Ward says we simply cannot leave our bodies behind, because we are essentially embodied beings and therefore all our experiences are bodily conditioned (Ward, 2018). However, the solution is not so simple. Dreyfus' argument about the impossibility of authentically encountering others and thereby learning at an advanced level via the media is further elaborated on by Staehler (2017) and Turkle (2017). They argue that our connections to others through the media remain distant, even when we feel connected. That is, we do not cease to be embodied even when we go online or otherwise encounter others via the media. Precisely because of our embodied nature, we stay where we are and, for media-pessimistic authors such as Staehler and Turkle, we cannot really connect with others.

According to Turkle, actual, live, real-time social interactions are unpredictable and spontaneous, while in the media—and especially the social media—the action of ‘sharing’ is an illusion that creates feelings of connectedness and of our thoughts and experiences being important despite there being no real social interaction or effect. Following the same line of thought, Staehler argues that we do not encounter each other as we really are through the media but only as modified representations of ourselves. According to her, corporeality creates definite constraints on communication that the media appear to overcome (Staehler, 2014). She claims that the physical absence of the other takes away the possibility of encountering others as they really are, because for Staehler, the only authentic presentation of the other occurs when we encounter them in physical presence, that is, it is only in the body that the other really exists (Staehler, 2014). Therefore, for her, the social encounter with others through the media is always, and of necessity, inauthentic. She argues that when encountering others in the media, the ‘depth of encounters with others in flesh’—our original and true way of being—is absent (Staehler, 2014). Basing his argument on the same line of thought, Dreyfus concludes that advanced learning through any media-based activity is impossible, because we do not come into real contact with the other participants (Dreyfus, 2008).

Staehler relies on the Husserlian analysis of our experiences of others and of self, according to which we experience others based on their bodily presence (*leibhaftig*) (Husserl, 1952, 1973; cf. Staehler, 2014). She concludes that encountering others and grasping their perspectives requires us to perceive their bodies, and that it is only after we have encountered others in physical presence that we can really encounter them as opposed to detecting mere traces of their actions via the media (Staehler,

2014). For Staehler, the media can function only as a derivative means of communication, and if there is no initial body-to-body meeting, it is insufficient for true communication.

Following the classic phenomenological concept of authentic social encounters, which is most clearly and explicitly provided by the Husserlian philosopher, Schutz, Staehler conceives the authentic encounter with others to be encountering them in what Schutz calls their ‘individual uniqueness’ or their pure ‘being-there’ (Schutz, 1971). That is, when encountering others as unique individuals, we meet them without assuming they possess any particular presupposed identity. In contrast, Schutz suggests that when meeting others through the media, we must, to a certain degree, imagine some of their personal properties (Schutz, 1982). This argument explains why, for Staehler and other media-pessimistic phenomenologists, encountering others in a media-based environment of necessity prevents us from encountering them as they truly are in their original uniqueness. As she explains it, in the media we cannot view others in real time or in action, and therefore, when communicating via the media, others can make us perceive them however they want to be perceived rather than as they really are (Staehler, 2014). She goes on to say that on the media others lack the possibility of spontaneously ‘surprising’ us.

However, I claim that even if Husserl analyses our experience of other persons as based on their corporeal manifestations and if he assigns to embodiment a crucial role in the constitution of our experiences of others, his analyses do not limit our social relations to body-to-body interactions or to physical presence. As Jardine (2014) points out, for Husserl, the comprehension of the other’s subjectivity, in its own concrete and intentional directedness, can be allowed a certain priority over the sensory experience of the other’s body. For Husserl, our experience of others includes, as an essential component, a comprehension of what cannot be sensuously provided—namely the other’s subjective life (Jardine, 2014). This manifests in the other’s *expression*—or something we interpret as an act of expression, such as speech, recognition, and expression of feelings. It is the *manner* of our perception and not the physical *object* of that perception that makes us experience the other. In other words, what is decisive in our experience of others is not that we perceive their bodies, but rather that we perceive them as expressing their subjective lives. When perceiving others’ bodies, we perceive their bodily expressions, such as gestures, faces and directions of interest, and this is how they become constituted in our experience. The other is not experienced and encountered as a body, but rather as an expression of actions, intentions, and of lived experience.

Roughly, the term ‘expression’ refers to the acts by which another person tells us something, whether on purpose or by accident. Husserl clarifies the concept of ‘expression’ as follows:



I ‘say’ something to him, I ‘express myself’, I accomplish an expressive movement or a verbal externalisation or I accomplish an outwardly visible, noticeable deed, that is appropriate to awaken, in the other, the consciousness that I have the intention to make something known to him’. (Husserl, 1973, p. 167)

In other words, by experiencing another’s expression, we can grasp some aspects of what the other is going through. For example, we can perceive (experience) the other’s expression of their feelings through their smile, their voice or their words.

I am not claiming that embodiment does not contribute to our experience of the world and of others, but I merely state that perceiving others’ bodies is not a necessity for encountering them in such a way that it allows discussion. Others’ embodiment is constitutive of our experience of them at a rather ‘primitive’ level. The constitutionally simplest and most basic way to experience another person is to see them in the world, in physical presence as a ‘living body’ (*Leib*), which is distinguished from a mere physical body (*Körper*). There are, however, additional and more complex ways to experience others. The body is an expressive organ, but that expression can be extended to other means (Merleau-Ponty, 2012).

For an experience of others without a physical encounter—that is, perceiving others’ expressions in some way other than through their bodies—Stein developed the concept of the ‘lived word body’ (*Wortleib*). This concept suggests that we always experience others by sensing something material about them, even when it is not directly through the other’s body (e.g. words in an audio or emojis). This means, when encountering others via media, we are not imagining, remembering, or hallucinating about them. A ‘lived word body’ is analogous to a ‘lived body’ and is distinguished from the concept of a mere ‘body of words’ (*Wortkörper*). According to Stein, in addition to direct perception, we can contact others through their communicative work, such as through letters and photos (Stein, 1917, p. 131). In this sense, a letter, a vlog post or a posted emoji are all ‘lived word bodies’ in that we do not experience them as mere texts, videos, or pictures but as the other’s expression. The comprehension of another’s subjectivity is so fundamental that the sensuously given is immediately encountered as that which expresses a subjective life, whether it is the other’s physical body or something else through which we encounter them. In other words, in our experience, the *lived word body* of the other becomes a substitute for the other’s real *physical lived body*.

According to Husserl, as we experience others, we are directed to their lives as presented to us through their expressions and not to a psychophysical reality (e.g. to a body) (Husserl, 1952, p. 347). For example, when listening to, reading, or watching someone’s experiences and ideas, we are not

directed at the means of communication—the other’s body or mediator, such as a newspaper—but rather at the other’s experience as revealed to us by their expression. That is, we encounter others through grasping their intentional directedness at the world as we perceive their expressions in some way. The body of the other becomes, in our eyes, ‘lived’ as it expresses the life of the other. The same holds for alternative means of communication, such as the media: the words we read or listen to become ‘lived’ for us as we perceive another person behind those words and as we perceive the words as expressions of their producer. For example, when my friend sends me a link to an interesting article, I do not see the article on my screen as I might see just any article, but I see *her action* in showing me the article, together with *her words telling me* why she sent me the link. In return, I will respond to her, and we might start a longer discussion about the article. Similarly, in the public sphere, we encounter posts, longer texts and mediated speeches as expressions of particular persons who represent a viewpoint shared by a group of people. We respond to these in some way, even if it is by choosing to ignore the point expressed.

It is only when we perceive others’ expressions that we can encounter them as ‘living’ rather than as mere physical things; this idea holds in relation to our perceiving others whether in physical presence and in the media. Their expressions illustrate their will and refer to their world experience. Merely coming across others’ bodies is not sufficient to enable us to perceive them as other persons because we need to perceive them as intending to do something in order to experience them as subjects. For example, when we listen to another person’s story, as in an audio clip posted on social media, the decisive element in our encountering and understanding that person is their expression, through which we come to perceive them as a living, personal being. As we experience a voice as ‘lived’—in other words, as belonging to someone and expressing their thoughts and experiences—we view them as another person and are able to grasp their ideas as theirs; physically seeing that person’s physical body is not necessary for this process.

Only the expression of another can tell us something about them that we cannot know on our own. As they express themselves, others are able to create a ‘rupture’ in our habitual ways of viewing things by providing us with their own perspective. That is, in understanding another’s perspective, we experience another way of viewing the world, and we are thereby torn away from our own limited and singular way of viewing things.

It is the other’s expression rather than our perception of the other’s body that is the constitutive factor in encountering others, and this has crucial implications for the possibility of encountering others through the media. If the decisive constituent for the possibility of encountering another is not their bodily presence but rather their expression, then the absence of the other’s body in the media does

not change the possibility of encountering them; rather, it is enough that we have possibilities for expressing ourselves and for perceiving the expressions of others.

Through the media, instead of directly seeing the faces of others, we can encounter them, as Husserl has put it, by ‘spiritually stretching a hand over a stretch of time [and space]’ (Husserl, 1973, p. 168);. That is, we can encounter others through their expressive works, whether they are stories, opinion letters or vlog posts, that they have produced to communicate something to us. Because we encounter others in all situations in which we can grasp their expressions, in every social situation—whether in physical presence or in the media—others can enable us to grasp their perspectives and can provoke certain responses to them (i.e., engage in discussion with us) (Ward, 2018).

Regarding the authenticity of our social encounters, in concrete social situations we rely on multiple assumptions about others, ourselves, and the situational contexts. That is, it is impossible to understand others in their ‘pure individuality’ without any pre-acquired assumptions about them. In social situations, we always possess a conceptual, cultural, or life-historical ‘filter’ or framework from which we view others and are able to understand them. Even if we were somehow able to get rid of those ‘filters’, we would still need some kind of pre-set context and pre-set language through which to communicate. Without being in the world together or tending towards each other or towards a common object in a certain contextual situation, no social situation can exist. Based on the ever-present context and ‘filter’ in our view of others, Burbules (2016) argues that all understanding is, to some degree, a guess based on what we know and believe in that moment. As Burbules explains, a major part of our social life consists of interpreting the meaning of one another’s actions. It is always possible to either understand or misunderstand others in every social situation, regardless of the setting, which is why there is no reason to prioritise face-to-face encounters over encountering others via the media in terms of ‘authenticity’. An authentic encounter with another always implies presuppositions and the possibility of misunderstanding. As the constitutive core of our experience of others is their expression and not their body as such, these possibilities do not vanish whether we encounter others only in their physical presence or in the media. Rather, the same social risks are present in all communications.

#### 4. Conclusion: Promoting the Possibility of Learning through Media-Based Public Discussion

Coming back to the possibility of conceiving media-based public discussion as a shared advanced learning situation, we can state that based on the phenomenological analyses of encountering others,

there is no reason to exclude the possibility of such learning taking place through media-based public discussion, if such learning is possible in the physical presence of others. I have argued that we are able to encounter others authentically both in physical presence and through the media, as the decisive constituent in experiencing others is the other's *expression* and not the other's *body*—that is, the *manner* and not the *object* of our perception. Despite the arguments of many sceptical theorists (e.g. Dreyfus, 2008; Staehler, 2014; Turkle, 2017), we encounter others through their expressions for which their actions in physical presence are merely one of several means, and no fundamental hindrance exists to the authenticity of a media-based discussion. If we are able to engage in public discussion that allows advanced learning through physical presence, we are also able to do so through the media.<sup>1</sup> In the following, I will elaborate on this point in some concluding remarks.

My interpretation of Stein and Husserl's analyses is compatible with contemporary communication theory as provided, inter alia, by Mutz (2015) and Nancy Baym (2015). In Mutz' analysis of today's digital and audio-visual media, she argues that embodied expressions, such as facial cues or tone of voice, are crucial for expressing and perceiving emotions and that these are not easily communicated through other means. For example, it is difficult to express a slight confusion or loving concern clearly in words or emojis. However, similar to the views of Stein and Husserl, in Mutz' view, embodied expressions can be communicated via the media through video and audio material (Mutz, 2015). According to Baym, 'even text-based media afford many ways to express emotion. We use emoticons to signal friendliness, we use punctuation and capitalization to insert feeling, we use informal language and talk-like phonetics spellings to create an air of conversationality' (Baym, 2015, p. 103). That is, while embodied expressions are important in our communication, there is no reason why such embodied expressions cannot be communicated via the media.

In order to visualise the similarities between public discussion in the media and a face-to-face group discussion, let us perform a thought experiment. Think of a seminar room full of participants. Everyone is part of the discussion, and even if everyone does not comment on the topic, they are actively listening to the others. The participants' comments are often directed to the group in general rather than to other individual participants. Because the seminar is large, those on the sides of the room may not even be aware of one another's existence, but they are still part of the same discussion. In some large seminar sessions, electronic discussion devices are used so that participants may write their comments onto a common chat. If we leave the seminar room and think of a seminar session

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<sup>1</sup> Contingent situations may nonetheless provide different possibilities for discussions. It is at times easier to communicate one's thoughts in the media, while it is often easier to grasp someone's ideas when meeting her face to face. However, in public discussion, the participants are often physically far away from one another, even in face-to-face situations (e.g., at public events).

that can be followed through a live stream, we see that physical presence is not required for participants to engage in discussion. If we expand the seminar's temporal setting and make it a course that can be followed from a distance, we already have a situation similar to a media-based public discussion. A public discussion is the largest possible group discussion because it potentially includes everyone.

If we compare the analogy of the seminar room to a public discussion, we observe that the latter does not essentially differ from a large discussion. As is the case with a large seminar, media-based public discussion requires appropriate civic behaviour and good organisation. In absence of these, as Ben-Porath and Dishon (2018) say, 'online platforms are generally oblivious to substance and thus permit organising around hate just as much as they permit organising around democratic civic goals'. Therefore, we must explore how educators could support the development of functioning public discussions in today's society. As our discussion behaviour can be influenced by education, one step towards actualising the educational potential of media-based public discussion is to present group discussions both face-to-face and in the media as variations of the same learning situation, as the work of Biesta (2014, 2011) and Wildemeersch (2014, 2009), among others, has suggested. This implies that the same educational methods and aims can be applied in citizenship education, whether in face-to-face or media discussions. For example, learners could be helped to understand views different from their own and to tolerate dissension in physical presence and in the media. In addition, as Burbules has argued, the architecture of media platforms can provide both better and worse possibilities for engaging in a reciprocal exchange of views (Burbules, 2016). This suggests that educators could engage in the design and building of participatory media platforms that would best allow citizens to engage in media-based public discussion.

Certainly, as Ward (2018) argues, depending upon the current social-cultural-historical situation, the media might present challenges in certain social situations for which face-to-face communication would be optimal and vice versa. However, the media generally enables encounters with others to take place in a manner that facilitates learning activities such as discussions. In cases where there are heated societal topics, it might be useful to have the discussion take place in a mediated form, allowing more temporal and spatial distance between the discussants. In other words, our encounters with others in the media and in physical presence are not essentially different, even if there are contingent positive and negative aspects to both. In both forms of presence, our assumptions, opinions and attitudes towards others remain.

This means that the problems arising in media-based discussions may rather be similar to the problems encountered in face-to-face discussions, although those occurring in mediated discussions

may be more difficult to handle due to the extent of the phenomenon. For example, as empirical studies conducted by Crockett (2017) suggest, the aggressive manners in discussion is not especially media-related phenomenon, but these manners are based on more general human behaviour patterns. As she states, the moral outrage that often occurs in the social media is not directly related to the media itself but to anger and to a feeling of moral superiority and to the social expression of this superiority (Crockett, 2017). According to her, the outrageous comments one finds in the social and other media are often not targeted at those with whom one is angry but at a wider audience. At the same time, as Papacharissi has shown in her seminal study, there is no remarkable difference in the politeness and productive discussion that happens in the physical presence of others and in telepresence (Papacharissi, 2004).

As Hand and Levinson (2012) argue, engaging in an educational discussion is never an easy task, especially when difficult topics are discussed. When the group engaging in the discussion—whether more or less actively—is the whole of society, reaching a mode of ‘appreciative understanding’ among the discussants is even more challenging than in a closed classroom (Hand & Levinson, 2012, p. 616). The aggression that occurs in media-based discussions, especially in the social media, might relate to the fact that, as an empirical study by Dubois and Blank (2018) suggests, in a media-based public discussion, we encounter people from various backgrounds whom we might never meet in our social circles face-to-face. However, as Hand and Levinson argue on the basis of an empirical study they conducted, strong and diverse views tend to aid a discussion. As Dubois and Blank state, based on their study, the internet and other media technologies have expanded our communication possibilities in a meaningful way (Dubois & Blank, 2018). This means that media-based public discussion has the potential to provide more fruitful learning and societal development possibilities than formal learning situations, provided the discussion can be organised around democratic goals rather than antagonism.

To summarise, based on the phenomenological analyses provided by Husserl and Stein, we can say that, in terms of authenticity, there is no reason to claim that a hierarchy exists between encountering others in their physical bodily presence and in the media. Of course, in some situations, it is not quite the same to encounter another person via the media or in their physical presence. The differences are, however, non-essential, which means that no strong implications can be drawn from the differences in encountering others through the media or in their physical presence. Therefore, the possibility of advanced learning and social development through media-based public discussion cannot be excluded, at least not based on the constitution of our encounters with others. Rather, further educational–philosophical discussion is required to work out future possibilities for promoting advanced learning through media-based public discussion.

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