

(13) When Real Seems Mediated: Anti-Presence

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Abstract

As media scholars and pundits frequently note, our lives are increasingly dominated by mediated experiences - traditional media including the telephone, radio, television, film, newspapers and magazines have been joined by e-mail, instant messaging, chat rooms, cell phones, video games, HDTV, the web, simulator amusement rides and soon virtual reality. As presence scholars have noted, an increasing number of these mediated experiences evoke (tele)presence, perceptions that ignore or misconstrue the role of the medium in the experience.

But an interesting counter-trend seems to be occurring as well. In a variety of contexts, people are experiencing not an illusion that a mediated experience is in fact nonmediated, but the illusion that a nonmediated, "real" experience is mediated. Drawing on examples from newspapers, television and radio stories, we identify three categories of this "illusion of mediation": positive (when people experience natural beauty and equate it with a mediated experience), negative (when people experience a disaster, crime or other tragedy, such as the events of September 11, 2001, and equate it with a mediated experience), and unusual (when close connections between people's "real life" activities and mediated experiences lead them to confuse the two).

We label this phenomenon anti-presence and consider its place and value in a comprehensive theory of presence, its possible antecedents and consequences, and what it suggests about the nature of our lives in the 21st century.