Reflecting on Digital *Umgang*: Pushing *Against* Binaries and *for* Practicalities

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In their article "Digital Umgang and The Loss of a Common World" Vlieghe and Zamoskji make an insightful argument about the benefits of acting against digital *umgang* and e-democracy by viewing these problems through an ontological lens rather than an epistemological lens. However, there are two "wonderings" I'd like to raise *viz* their work. First, I wonder why they reify the binary between the digitized world and the physical world. Second, I wonder about the practical implications for an education that uses an ontological lens *vs* an epistemological lens. I invite further reflection on these two points.

PUSHING AGAINST THE BINARY

Vlieghe and Zamoskji present a version of experience that pits a digitized reality that we cannot escape against a physical space that exists apart from our digitized world. They write that "the digital defines our relation with the world, with others and with ourselves. It structures what we can think, feel and do (and cannot)."[1] In their view, the digitized world both subsumes everything, and yet, must also be fought against so that we can build another world together "a world that is out there, a world that can be very adversary, but also a world with which we have to and want to co-exist." In this way, they set up a binary between digital *umgang* and this other world. One might ask: If digital *umgang* shapes what can be thought and desired, *how* are we going to build something that escapes this reality? However, a better question is: Why must we imagine that digital dealings are always in tension with dealings in this "other world"? The authors focus on education and politics, arguing that digital *umgang* is always "destructive for both politics and education." This view does not account for the ways these spaces co-mingle.

On the political sphere, they argue "digital Umgang excludes the very possibility of democratic politics, … E-democracy is a contradiction in terms." They set up a binary between political action online *vs* in physical space arguing

that digital *umgang* creates barriers to political action and activism in physical spaces. They write that political action "can only materialize under conditions of meeting each other physically." They further argue digital *umgang* is a "not insignificant threat to the very possibility of political gathering." Thus, in their view, "real" political activism is thwarted by our dealings online. However, data do not support this view.

Numerous studies show that participation in online communities increases political action and activism in physical spaces.[2] In multiple different countries, and across different demographic groups, there is strong evidence to show that participating in online communities translates to attending rallies in the physical world, writing to and phoning legislative representative, boycotting companies, registering to vote, voting in elections, and myriad other political activities. Some studies show a statistically significant *positive* effect between being involved in political communities online and being politically active in physical spaces. Other studies show *no* significant link between being in online communities and participating in politics in the physical sphere. However, I could not find any studies that showed that online political talk created a statistically significant *negative* effect for political action in physical spaces. Digital *umgang* does not necessarily create barriers to political action in our physical *umwelt*.

One study is worth highlighting. Boulianne conducted a meta-analysis of over 20 years of data, with participants from over 50 countries, with over 300,000 research participants.[3] Not only did they find a positive correlation between being online and engaging in political action in physical spaces, they found that over the last 20 years the positive effect has *grown stronger*. The data simply do not back up the claims of Vlieghe and Zamoskji that the digitalization of our experience thwarts the possibility of political activity. Political action is happening *across* the digital and physical spaces. They are melding together.

Unfortunately, Vlieghe and Zamoskji advocate the same binary in the educational sphere. They argue that "digital technologies lock us up in our own world and stimulate us to regard learning and teaching as parts of a project aimed at intensifying the sphere of the self"." The authors' complaint is that digital technologies make it so we cannot have a shared view of the world,

and that without this shared view, we cannot engage in democratic education. Education "is about joining people around a course of common concern and allowing them to study it together…. This, however, will only take place if we want to put an end to the digitization of our Umgang." Once again, we have a binary of the digitized sphere which dis-enables us from sharing a common world, and the physical space where, by the sheer act of being together, we understand our shared reality. Again, data do not support this view.

Across myriad experiences of going to physical schools, we do not share the same reality or "world." Research shows that in the US context, schools are both more racially and socio-economically segregated than they were before *Brown V. Board of Education*,[4] and that this segregation has been accelerating since the 1980's long before the ubiquity of digitalization.[5] This is not just a US-based phenomenon. Similar patterns of school segregation exist across the globe, particularly in North America, Latin America, and Europe.[6] Students have fundamentally different experiences of schooling, of learning, and of coming of age, and these differences would exist even if these students had fewer online "dealings." Digi-fication, or the lack thereof, does not automatically result in a shared world experience.

Furthermore, there are many examples of using digital technologies in the classroom that lead to greater sharing in our physical world. Digitalization in education does not have to mean that we no longer care for our physical environment. There are many examples of place-based education—where education is founded on spending time outside and learning about one's physical community and ecology as part of teaching across content areas—that rely on digital technology to enhance learning.[7] Students digitally connect to climate scientists as they study the ecology of their local river. Students use apps to document stories from elders in their communities and then use mapping software to tie these stories to specific places. Teachers use embedded readings and exit tickets in an online platform for students to become more educated about a certain place before their field trip. Technology does not have to be counter to experiencing the physical world together.

PUSHING FOR PRACTICALITIES

My second "wondering" is focused on practicalities. Let's say we all agree that the ontological view of digital *umgang* is more accurate than an epistemological view. How does this change what happens in both formal and informal learning spaces? In these spaces, teachers are given a curriculum. How would the ontological view change the curriculum? For example, if I am a museum learning specialist for an exhibit that focuses on political action, how does an ontological view of our digital dealings (rather than an epistemological view) change what I do with the people who come to the museum? Teachers also use different instructional strategies. If I am a teacher, how does the ontological view (rather than the epistemological view) shape my instructional strategies? For example, many school communities support the teaching of digital literacy skills and knowledge. Students reflect on what they do online, become aware of fraud online, and even practice setting limits on how much time they spend online. How would this be changed with the ontological view?

Vlieghe and Zamoskji argue that the ontological lens promotes a certain kind of debate or process for "investigating the world" that leads to a shared community understanding of a phenomenon. If the goal is to have different points of view, then what happens if all students agree about something? If the point is to come to an understanding of a phenomenon through conversation—when "we have had a chance to let space for possible objections … to be formulated and to refute these"—then what happens if the conclusion the class reaches is verifiably false?

Vlieghe and Zamoskji advocate for the benefits of an ontological view of our digital dealings, and I agree that this view offers new insights when compared with an epistemological view. However, I invite the authors to think further about the complex interactions among digital and physical spaces, as well as the practicalities of how to teach the ontological view.

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