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Original Article

# TMI in the transference LOL: Psychoanalytic reflections on Google, social networking, and 'virtual impingement'

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**Abstract** Within the past decade, engagement with the internet has expanded in ways previously unimagined; internet use is virtually ubiquitous. While a great deal of research has gone into the psychological nature of this use (internet addiction, adolescent engagement, and the like), little of it has taken a psychoanalytic angle or sought to address perspectives on the human motivation to relate and the meanings made from early and contemporary relations within the context of 'Web 2.0'. This article suggests that the arguably arcane setting of the consultation room provides a unique space in which questions about online engagement can be explored. The contemporary state of affairs with regard to social networking and Google is examined in relation to a clinical example that serves as a reference point from which to open broader questions about our culture's relationship to the internet. A relational psychoanalytic approach is utilised to theorise online relations with reference to the 'analytic third' and the developing concept of 'virtual impingement'.

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Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral.

Kranzberg's First Law of Technology

Technology proposes itself as the architect of our intimacies.

Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together*

Self-revelation is not an option; it is an inevitability.

Lewis Aron, *Relational Psychoanalysis*

## Introduction

In May 2011, Amnesty International reported on the contribution of WikiLeaks to the development of the Arab Spring uprisings. By titling the prologue of their annual report, 'Activists use new tools to challenge repression' (Shetty, 2011, p. xi), Amnesty drew particular attention to the technology that it argued was a catalyst in these events. With reference to Wikileaks' role in provoking revolution throughout the Arab world, Shetty notes that WikiLeaks

created an easily accessible dumping ground for whistleblowers around the world and showed the power of this platform by disseminating and publishing classified and confidential government documents. Early on, Amnesty International recognised WikiLeaks' contribution to human rights activism. (p. xii)

WikiLeaks no doubt courted its own share of criticism as well as praise, yet it also provoked a series of questions that were already being asked of its antecedents (social networking, Google searching, Twitter, and the like): are they changing us, or are they simply a repetition of the same sorts of social dynamics through a different medium? Though there are strong arguments against hyperbolising 'cyber-utopianism' (Morozov, 2011), in this case it does seem clear that the accessibility of WikiLeaks, abetted by the speed of communication on Twitter, at least *contributed* to what became the Arab Spring; and it is no coincidence that internet access was disrupted in Libya when things started to erupt there (*The Economist*, 2011). These events are a dramatic exemplar of the questions that I would like to ask at a more local level. What are the consequences that these same online systems have on the more everyday interpersonal level for those people who can be described as 'connected up', that is, those who have access to the internet and use it regularly in their everyday lives? Despite seeming mundane, for such a question does not enquire about political revolution, it is nonetheless profound in that it addresses the way people are navigating their relational styles and interpersonal lives through online systems.

Relational psychoanalysis may help us to answer those questions. Relational theory is not a single psychoanalytic 'school'. Rather, it is a collection of theories that take a few things as axiomatic, namely, that the motivation to relate is central to human experience (following on from object relations, self psychology, interpersonal psychoanalysis and attachment theory) and a move away from a 'one-person psychology' lodged in drive theory towards a 'two-person psychology' broadly based in the intersubjective tradition (Greenberg and Mitchell, 1983; Mitchell, 1988; Benjamin, 1990; Aron, 1996) For relational psychotherapists,<sup>1</sup> one of the primary goals of the therapeutic relationship is to understand relational dynamics *in vivo*; and this aim involves not only the

therapist's desire to understand the patient, but also the need for the patient to gain insight into the therapist (Benjamin 1988, 1995, 1998; Aron, 1996). I argue that our engagement in the virtual world is fundamentally tied to both our motivation to relate and our desire to discover and be discovered. The nature of the ease of access to the virtual world both enables and obstructs a variety of ways of relating.

Social networking sites (SNSs) developed out of smaller projects that were explicitly aimed at connecting people in new ways, and it is no accident that the same telephone lines that connected people for the previous century became the conduit for the next generation of technological connection. Expansion of internet use has been exceptional, resulting in the development of what has been termed 'Web 2.0' (Creeber and Martin, 2009), where internet use becomes more interactive and explicitly social. Palfrey and Gasser (2008) define two cultural groupings based on those born either before or after 1980 in relation to the different generational uses made of the internet. Those born roughly after 1980 and having grown up in a digital environment are termed 'digital natives' (inclusive of those born earlier but digitally precocious), and those born after this benchmark and who adopted these technologies somewhat later in life are termed 'digital immigrants'. Relating online offers similar opportunities and problems for natives and immigrants alike, particularly around social networking, which is 'first nature' to many natives, while still 'second nature' to many immigrants.

Social networking emerged from previous less formal and less 'user friendly' forebears and developed explicitly for connecting people. SNSs had a few incarnations before becoming mainstream, including 'the first recognizable social networking site' (boyd and Ellison, 2007) Six Degrees, as early as 1997. Growth became exponential with the development of Myspace, launched in 2004, which started to attract large numbers of participants and gained a million subscribers in its first month of operation, February, growing to 5 million by November the same year; by 2005 the BBC reported that it was the most viewed internet domain in the US (Stenovec, 2011). Facebook opened up to the wider public in 2006, and its popularity soared, taking over Myspace's 75.9 million subscribers in a mere two years (Stenovec, 2011). Just four years later, Facebook's online population reached half a billion and at the time of writing is at 800 million and growing (Facebook Newsroom, 2011). These statistics are important to note as they indicate the vast number of individuals motivated to visit these sites. Further, they indicate that moving towards online social networking is 'catchy' – once a critical mass of individuals comes on board, they attract more and more, making this form of relating mainstream.

While these changes have vastly affected digital natives and digital immigrants alike, for the natives they have had an effect on language, making 'TMI',<sup>2</sup> 'OMG' and 'LOL' as colloquial as 'cool' is to the digital immigrants. There is some emerging evidence indicating that consistent online engagement is

having an effect on the brain (Carr, 2010), and further research demonstrates the profound way that social networking is implicated in contemporary relationships (Future Foundation, 2008). I extrapolate from this early research that we can expect some effect on relational styles as well; for young adolescents, digital social networking is 'deeply embedded in the social context of their lives' (Clarke, 2009, p. 55). Digital natives learn to communicate virtually from the very start, many of them spending more time communicating with each other through virtual systems (internet messaging, Facebook chat, text messages, and so on) than they do face-to-face in 'real life'.<sup>3</sup> According to Palfrey and Gasser (2008):

From the perspective of the Digital Native, identity is not broken up into online and offline identities, or personal and social identities. Because these forms of identity exist simultaneously and are so closely linked to one another, Digital Natives almost never distinguish between the online and offline versions of themselves. (p. 20)

Relational theory describes identity not only as a construct produced through early primary relationships, but also as a continuous process of coconstruction between self and other occurring throughout life.

Search engines like Google and social networks like Facebook go about the virtual business of organising our online identities with varying degrees of agency from the perspective of the subject. Google, for example, actively manages online identities; the subjects of those identities can only passively watch on. While social networks like Facebook may be unwieldy with regard to their privacy settings, there is nonetheless more than an illusion of control over what a person chooses to share and with whom to share it. It does not work this way on Google, where information about an individual from a single source can be radically disseminated quickly across the internet and collated in a Google search for anyone to find. Today there is nothing unusual about Googling a potential date, an employer or employee, a potential partner's ex-partner, or even one's potential psychotherapist. As each person has little control about what is collated, the Google search provides only a fragmented view of someone through the elements of his or her life that happen to have gone online, whether it is winning the custard contest at the village fete or having been accused of being a paedophile. In this sense, online identities are prepackaged and ready for quick consumption, creating an automatic, externally 'cobbled-together' identity,<sup>4</sup> an identity that can hang like a ghost between individuals, affecting their interpersonal relations to varying degrees.

How does this readily available picture of *an* identity, if not *our* identity, affect the sense of our own subjectivity? Is there a relational coconstruction of identity between what we feel to be ourselves, what we see represented

online, and the nature of other people's perspectives of us as embodied subjectivities *and* unbound virtual selves? How does the nature of this virtually constructed 'ghosted middle' affect people at various stages of their relationships, from first impressions to times when such information is acquired later in the relationship?

These questions are entertained here through the lens of a clinical vignette that sheds light on these dynamics operating at an unconscious level. While there has been a great deal of research into how people are using social networks (for example, Carr (2010) and Palfrey and Gasser (2008)), there has been less research into the subjective phenomenology of social networking or Google searching from a psychoanalytic point of view (noteworthy exceptions include Gorden (2010) and Turkle (2011)). Perspectives from psychoanalysis have much to offer, particularly its insights into intrapsychic and intersubjective processes. In the present-day world of connected-up culture, the practice of psychotherapy can seem downright anachronistic.

In the consultation room, the old rules still apply: the patient's time will not be interrupted by ringing phones and the psychotherapist will not be multitasking while half-listening to the patient's material. Importantly, confidential material from the patient's life will not be broadcast across the internet. If the therapeutic setting is about anything, it is about the therapist's being absolutely present for the patient, maintaining that traditional sense of 'evenly suspended attention' (Freud, 1912, p. 111) or whatever variation the contemporary psychotherapist chooses. In this sense, the therapeutic encounter appears to be safe from the intrusions of the virtual world that are becoming so central to contemporary life.

Though the hour itself is ideally free from intrusions, they are nonetheless psychically present. It is not only the stories that patients bring to their sessions that involve virtual-world *content*, but *process*, too, is impinging on the precious space. There is little doubt that potential patients will be Googling their potential therapists long before the first meeting and that this Googling will, in many unknown ways, affect the way the therapist is seen. In this case, there may very well be TMI in the transference, a situation that not only demands a thoughtful therapeutic response, but also, and perhaps more importantly, shows that the rarefied encounter in the consultation room, *where the unconscious relational dynamics occurring between therapist and patient are the very subject of enquiry*, can enable an understanding of these events outside it and inside culture and society.

### A Vignette

In the following case vignette, a therapeutic event is employed in an effort not only to extract meaning at the local level between me and my patient, but also to extrapolate how these meanings apply to the wider world with regard

to relational dynamics in response to what I call ‘virtual impingements’. I understand a virtual impingement to be any event that happens in relation to a person by way of the virtual world, which is experienced as an intrusion on the self. This idea broadly follows on from Winnicott’s (1956) idea of impingement as ‘something that interrupts the continuity of being’ (p. 387); Abram (2007), elaborating on Winnicott, indicates that ‘impingement relates to states of readiness and being prepared. It links with capacity to allow things to take their course’ (p. 174). Both Abram and Winnicott are referring to impingements in relation to the infant; however, the pattern of responding to impingement continues throughout life. I am positing that virtual impingements occur all the time and are a regular component in therapy, often described as events that have happened ‘out there’. The focus here is on how a virtual impingement that had a major effect in the consulting room provokes profound questions for clinicians *as well as* those researching the impact of the virtual world on society. This vignette illustrates the first time that I became aware of a virtual impingement that related directly to the relationship between a patient and me. While the events that I describe have a particular relevance to the clinical situation, they are also relevant to understanding how the unconscious nature of virtual impingements occur all the time between people outside the clinic.

### A Short Digression

This unusual story begins one evening in 2005 when I was up late, writing. In the quietness of the late hour, I heard a low-volume, preternatural clicking sound emanating from a pile of books and papers near the wall. I stopped working to listen closely; the disturbing clicking was followed by the sound of rustling papers. I got up from the table with mild trepidation. Expecting to find a mouse, I approached the pile of papers to investigate. On closer inspection, I discovered not the rodent I expected but, rather, a fiendish and prehistoric-looking, nine-inch centipede, undulating with scores of legs, talons and menacing pincers. It had a shockingly rapid gait. When the centipede made a dash up the wall, I went to find a container large enough to house it and managed to trap it inside (the sound of the thing’s legs on the thin plastic of the Tupperware doesn’t bear describing).

Realising that this was not a British beast, I arranged a meeting with the chief entomologist at the Natural History Museum the next morning. The entomologist quickly identified that the centipede was indeed an interloper to Britain: it was classified as a *Scolopendra Gigantea* – the largest species of venomous centipede in the world. Its monstrous visual impact accurately indicated that it was indeed both poisonous and dangerous. Its presence in the UK was unusual and was of great interest to the museum. I was relieved to hand it over and

obliged when the press secretary asked if she could use this story in the museum's monthly magazine. What I had not anticipated was the press release that went out later that day – a press release that within 24 hours became the most emailed story in the world.

All the British broadsheets and tabloids covered the story, and I was further able to trace the article across dozens of foreign national papers – including Taiwan's biggest daily, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and *USA Today*, to small dailies like *The Sacramento Bee*. Each newspaper mentioned 'psychologist, Aaron Balick' alongside information that included my age and location of my home. There was a flurry of interest over the coming days, but eventually the furore died down, and the centipede story was over – at least as far as I was aware. Throughout this period, well outside my control and unknown to me, each of these headlines and accompanying stories was being collected and collated by Google. The amount of information about the centipede and me, for a period at least, dwarfed any other information about me on the internet. All this would be a rather amusing anecdote if it not only had not irrevocably altered my online identity in a way I would not have chosen, but also had not resulted in an impingement that went right to the centre of an otherwise 'safe' yet vulnerable therapeutic relationship.

### Google on the Couch

Throughout this period I continued to see my patient, Thomas (whose name and details have been changed); I had chosen not to share this story with any of my patients. Thomas had been referred to me owing to anxiety attacks he had been experiencing in relation to allegations of his involvement in a scandal at work that threatened his career and his relationship with his partner. The potential for harm was amplified in that Thomas's was a public-facing job and this scandal continually threatened to be broken in the press. It involved a number of allegations that were shameful and embarrassing. Though Thomas was innocent of the charges, the allegations were naturally deeply distressing and threatened to soil his reputation irreversibly.<sup>5</sup>

The nature of these allegations resonated uncomfortably with deep centres of shame present from Thomas's early life. It was a harrowing time for him and, after a drawn-out and traumatic investigation, he reluctantly agreed to leave his job. This decision was followed by a serious depression accompanied by occasional suicidal thoughts; a long period of uncertainty and unemployment followed through which Thomas worked courageously in his therapy. The loss of his job triggered not only his previous shame, but also the way, as an adult, he used his professional persona as a defense against this underlying shame. Thomas came to depend on me during this period, and my relationship with him became a very important one.

It was during this period that Thomas and I, through our shared inter-subjectivity in the therapeutic encounter, generated what Ogden (1994) calls the ‘analytic third’, described as ‘a third subject, unconsciously cocreated by analyst and analysand, which seems to take on a life of its own in the interpersonal field between them’ (p. 487). This complex idea of the ‘third’ is elaborated by Slochower (1996), who notes how the third is developed through a holding process that ‘transforms the separate subjectivities of patient and analyst in the direction of increased synchrony. This leaves the analyst with the task of retaining, largely unexpressed, an image of the wider area created by their shared yet separate experience’ (p. 36). This idea, that the analytic sum equals more than its two parts, will become a crucial aspect of Thomas’s and my relationship in the context of what was to come.

Throughout the acute period of Thomas’s depression and anxiety we spent most of our therapeutic engagement managing the anxiety and adjusting to the challenging new situation. After some months passed, however, the therapy moved from managing extremes to the regular working through of the relational dynamics of Thomas’s life in the context of his depression. Of particular concern was that Thomas’s close relationships often seemed vulnerable. In relationships, Thomas was a ‘caretaker’ – a role he assumed after the sudden death of a parent when he was young. While this style of relating worked to maintain relationships in some way, they were naturally one-sided; and, when Thomas needed some caretaking himself, the other person could not or did not know how to respond to his needs, and the relationship threatened to fail. This pattern was explored several times during our work together and was obviously a dynamic in our own relationship. There were times, particularly at the start, where my reliance on more conservative interpersonal boundaries in psychotherapy provoked uncomfortable confrontations between us.

One example of this boundary-induced discomfort occurred early on. I was working from home at the time on the first floor of my building. I would welcome patients in and bring them up a flight of stairs to the consultation room to begin their session. When the session was over, I would show them out at the door of the consultation room and let them see themselves downstairs and out. Very early on, Thomas challenged me on this practice. He thought it impolite as it seemed to reinforce the ‘businesslike’ sensibility, which he experienced as cold and uncaring, particularly after a session in which he had shared intimate material and I had responded with obvious care and empathy. We worked through his discomfort around such boundaries – in short, we were both able to come to understand the meaning of this shutting of boundaries for Thomas. At the same time, I was also able to be more flexible and to meet Thomas more gingerly at these boundaries.

The quintessential meaning of relational work lies in just these sorts of enactments. They enable us to understand the relational dynamics activated between my patient and me, thus allowing us to work through them together.



The event at the top of the stairs provided both a context for meaning-making and the opportunity to renegotiate our work together, ultimately developing a therapeutic idiom that would be uniquely ours. Examples like this helped to show that Thomas's relationship with me would often resemble relationships with significant others outside the therapy, both historically and contemporaneously. It was the groundwork that we accomplished here that enabled us to endure the coming impingement that threatened to undo all our work.

During the second-year therapy, Thomas experienced another intense phase of anxiety stemming from a fast-approaching annual event in which he would have been crucially involved had he remained with his employer. The prospect of the event evoked not only the memories of the tragic end to his career, but also the regret and shame he had experienced the previous year; it also renewed his fear that it would be an opportunity, yet again, for the shameful allegations to be made public. One night, feeling anxious and unable to sleep, Thomas typed my name into Google and pressed 'search'. Disturbingly, the search results produced not the familiar psychotherapist that he thought he knew but, rather, an unfamiliar story about the psychotherapist's encounter with a venomous insect that had put him in danger. More than that, the story had been shared with tens of thousands of people, across national boundaries – but not shared with Thomas.

Though Thomas was alone, this was exactly the moment when the virtual impingement occurred *in relation to the two of us* – but not within the safety of the consultation room in the presence of our cocreated 'third',<sup>6</sup> a place where the feelings and fantasies that are provoked can be reality tested. Instead, this experience occurred outside the confines of the consulting room, at night, during a state of anxiety. Thus was created an impingement with the capacity to evoke under the surface the bad, abandoning object that was hauntingly familiar and always semiconsciously expected. Thomas, who had shared so much with me, had to find out this global story from a Google search; it was as if I had let thousands of others in, but kept him out. For this information about me to be revealed to Thomas by Google was an affront. It was an impingement so severe that he experienced it as an offense, an abandonment, a rupture. Thomas phoned me, furious and hurt, wanting to terminate the therapy.

There followed a long period during which our therapeutic relationship remained tenuous; it was certainly not safe enough for Thomas to return without great caution and equivocation. After I persuaded him to stick with me a bit longer, we had several difficult telephone conversations and Thomas regularly threatened to terminate therapy; a return to me as a consistently 'good enough' object seemed impossible. But we plugged away at it. Thomas expressed his hurt, disappointment and fury towards me. He later confided that he had been concerned that this monstrous thing could have hurt me, and this possibility caused him great concern – it also highlighted his reliance on me.

In Kleinian terms, this expression of concern indicated movement towards a depressive anxiety (fear of loss of me), which seemed to be a softening of the

paranoid/schizoid anxieties (his perception of my willful abandonment) from earlier on. In moments of clarity, Thomas was able to reflect that the events happening between us mirrored many of the letdowns and disappointments he had shared with me about his relationships ‘out there’. But when our therapeutic relationship had broken down ‘in here’ with the same feelings as those others, it was difficult to hold on to our centre firmly enough to work it through towards a different end – to take this event that was begging for old-habituated response and replace it with a new possibility, that is, to understand this event as an enactment. Cooper and Levit (1998) describe how enactments draw therapists into the patient’s drama:

Enactments often involve the ways we unconsciously participate in a repetition of an earlier failure that was close to the patient’s experience of an earlier trauma (Casement, 1985). The patient is sceptical to believe that the analyst can become a new object partly because the patient sees the ways in which the analyst is the same as the old object through repetition and enactment. (pp. 59–60)

In that situation, the Google search provoked an object relationship to the ‘old abandoning object’, which I then became for Thomas. When this relationship takes hold, it is difficult for the psychotherapist to inhabit fully a new object relationship for the patient, one that can sustain the current rupture. The result is that the enactment takes hold of both parties (both are identified with the old-object relational dynamic); it feels impossible in the heated moment to anchor oneself outside the induced relational tension. When in the grip of an enactment, it is easy for the therapist to lose his or her hold on the ‘third’ because everything becomes alive, electric even, and the ‘third’ seems to fall out of reach. The danger of such enactments is that the patient may not yet have enough trust in the therapist to work through the destructive elements to be able to have that new experience.

The revelation of the centipede story struck not only at the heart of Thomas’s intrapsychic object-relational dynamics, but also at the centre of our very own relational matrix. There were times in this period that Thomas’s hurt and anger were so prevalent that it had become too unsafe for us to work through the meaning of what was happening in the therapy. The intervention of a centipede, and the chaotic world in which news is collected and forever preserved, presented us with the challenge and the opportunity to work through an impingement that had been arrived at virtually.

## Discussion

Thomas’s anxious concerns were embedded in the possibility that Google would forever remember the scandal that had resulted in his losing his job, a public

virtual impingement that could limit the direction of his professional and personal future. A Google trail threatens to spread not who one *is* to the observing world, but, instead, a *representation* of what one is, in the clutches of whatever Google has acquired and attached to a name. In the therapeutic situation, this puts TMI in the transference by producing disclosure about the therapist that he or she may not have wished to share (see Gorden, 2010). In an important sense, this is nothing new. Aron (1991) distinguishes ‘self-disclosure’ from ‘self-revelation’, which, he argues, is a continuous process in any case. Psychotherapists reveal all the time, through action or inaction, or via their facial expressions, what they choose to respond to and what they do not, even how they choose to see their patients out.

Google’s disclosures, however, are different inasmuch as they occur outside the therapeutic setting and are experienced intrapsychically rather than intersubjectively; there is no ‘third’. This lack of the third intersubjective space can provoke primitive transferences and projections that operate as object-relational phantoms rather than intersubjective phenomena that can be worked through. The question of disclosure, and particularly the loss of power with regard to what a therapist may choose to disclose, is undoubtedly a crucial question for practicing clinicians. However, it is precisely because *clinicians are required to ask such questions within the therapeutic context that insights gained can help shed light on nontherapeutic contexts that are equally vulnerable to virtual impingements*. In other words, TMI in the transference is not a concern for psychotherapists only; it prompts consideration of how the virtual world promotes TMI in the transference of any interpersonal engagement.

The peculiar and specific conditions in which the virtual world impinges on our notions of others and ourselves operate through the same mechanisms I have identified. The therapeutic hour is sensitised not only to *what happens* or *the content or narrative* of events, but also to the potential *unconscious processes* involved in the event in the here-and-now. Thomas was having a reaction to *information about me*, the content of which provoked both his relational repetition (in the transference sort of way) *and* the dynamics of our unique relational patterning in response to the Google representation of me. In his search, Thomas may have been seeking confirmation of a good, consistent object; alternatively, perhaps he was unconsciously searching for the bad, withholding object. We found through the therapeutic work that both modes of searching were occurring concurrently. This ambivalence was enacted in our relationship; the consistent, good object was being exchanged for the withholding, bad one in quick succession.

The crucial point here is that this vacillation between the intrapsychic and the intersubjective registers was uncovered only through the therapeutic alliance, which contained just enough ‘third’ to see us through and help us to understand what was happening. Using material from my experience with Thomas as a

guide, we might ask what it is that people may be unconsciously seeking when they search Google for others already known to them. What, indeed, is the motivation? The presumption is that there is *psychic work* being done in the search – but outside the consulting room how well can this work be processed? Furthermore, is there sufficient ‘thirdness’ in the virtual world to contain virtual impingements like these?

Such impingements are not limited to Google searches – they extend to any kind of information-seeking for known or unknown others, or even ourselves, searches occurring outside an intersubjective setting. What is being sought when one is inspecting another’s Facebook profile or photo albums, or reading through old status updates? On the process-unconscious level, the motivations revolve around the desire to discover and to be discovered; they orbit around a pole of narcissistic/exhibitionistic and voyeuristic desires. As is clearly demonstrated by my experience with Thomas, this method of relating is fraught with difficulty when it occurs outside containing relational matrices.

For Thomas and me, understanding both the nature of his motivation *and* our enactment was explicitly part of the task. After many weeks of touch-and-go therapy, we were able to move out of the acute stage of this breakdown and start to build safety into the relationship again. In other words, Thomas, moving into what Klein (1935) described as the depressive position, began to be able to see me as a whole object again. Ultimately, he was also able to see me more fully in my subjectivity rather than just as an abandoning object. He was able to understand the choices I had made in keeping the story from him (though he continued to disagree that this was the right approach). In other words, he was able to see the differences between us and found that these differences were not insurmountable. To his ability to contain difference I credit the relational work we had done together that predated this event – work that gave us both the chance to develop an underlying trust in both the therapeutic process and each other. Ogden (2004), in his discussion of the analytic third, notes its capacity to limit thinking (as it did within our enactment), but also to be ‘generative and enriching’:

Experiences in and out of the analytic third often generate a quality of intimacy between patient and analyst that has ‘all the sense of the real’ (Winnicott, 1963, p. 184). Such experiences involve feelings of enlivening humour, camaraderie, playfulness, compassion, healthy flirtatiousness, charm, and so on ... *it is living these experiences as opposed to understanding them that is of primary importance to the analysis.* (p. 186, italics added)

I credit the previous occurrence of our idiosyncratic experience of the ‘third’ (the ‘third’ that preceded the enactment described here, like those moments of boundary balancing at the top of my staircase) as sustaining us through this

difficult time. Unfortunately in many nontherapeutic relationships equally vulnerable to such impingements there is no such third on which to rely. With more and more relationships initiated and coordinated within virtual spaces (particularly for ‘digital natives’), this is a grave concern. The good-enough therapeutic relationship is about understanding and working through ruptures like these. However, relationships ‘out there’ that are mediated through social media often do not have the foundation that Thomas and I created together to work through the impingement. Many online relationships have foundations that either predate or coincide with their online counterparts. However, many do not – such as young people who often elide on- and offline relating – and these relationships are particularly vulnerable to impingements.

Fortunately, Thomas and I were able to work through our virtual impingement. Indeed, eventually we were able to make sense of it and use the experience to deepen the therapy. In fact, the ‘centipede period’ in our relationship was something that we would often reflect on together to make sense of it. Of course, the experience could have caused Thomas to terminate the therapy, undermining all the work we had accomplished up to that point. He could have seen the news on Google, ruminated on it, and never told me – it would have gone on secretly to undermine our relationship implicitly. When knowledge of the other that is acquired outside the consulting room is shared and made explicit, there is an opportunity to explore its meaning. However, when knowledge is gained and not shared, the relational dynamic can be affected in profound ways that elude exploration. Gorden (2010) offers a vignette about a Google incursion into the therapeutic setting in which a patient kept the knowledge he acquired about his therapist in a search to himself for some time, creating a dynamic that underlay their relationship for *months* before the fact of the Google search was made known. The result was a sort of prolonged and uncomfortable enactment. She notes that

[o]ur notions regarding the possibility and achievement of analytic anonymity of our personhood are no longer valid; which of our patients know about us, what they know, how they know and whether and which parts they disclose to us that they know is no longer something we get to choose. (p. 322)

The way in which the game has changed in relation to our lack of choice with regard to the presence and acquisition of knowledge about us by others is directly applicable outside the analytic setting. What we all have lost is a particular kind of ‘anonymity’, and this loss introduces TMI into the transference of potentially any relationship. The therapeutic space is *ideally* constructed to allow the dyad to work through these kinds of events. However, the dynamics that are evoked in these situations, even if not ideal, can enable us to ask what happens outside the rarefied atmosphere of the consultation

room, where the information one obtains from online sources may remain implicit and continue to inform relationships. Object relations has taught us that we have relationships with imagined objects in our minds at least as much as we have them with 'real' others. Though the online world has not changed the general psychodynamic processes involved here, it does intervene in the process from quite a different angle. Having information on another, whether true or false, exaggerated or misrepresented, is nothing new. However, the ease with which this information is accessed and the nature by which it is acquired do have noteworthy consequences.

## Conclusion

It seems to me that questions are inevitably invited when material of this sort is presented. These questions revolve around the apparent 'newness' of the phenomena. How is information found online any different from information acquired through gossip or hearsay? What about information acquired by other means? I respond by noting that the issue here is not about the *content* of the information acquired, but, rather, that the *process* of seeking information about others is psychological work that is worthy of analysis. The ease of access to information in today's society *enables* this work to be done with simplicity and convenience and without the consequences of being caught snooping. The result is a palpable change.

Ease and convenience are important issues. The kind of information that can be acquired through a few keystrokes, using a search engine, is the same kind of information that previously may have been gained only through physical access to paper records, stalking, or hiring a private detective, a level of commitment that would be off-putting to most. Such informational acquisition certainly involves a mode of psychological work that may be defined as pathological. To be able to enquire without risking consequence (at least in fantasy), at any time of day or night, from any psychological/emotional position is also noteworthy. These virtual online encounters, outside the intersubjective space of thirdness, ironically create a less 'connected up' world, but instead forge one in which object relating takes precedence over subject relating, or what Turkle (2011) calls 'the new state of the self, itself':

When I speak of a new state of the self, itself, I use the word 'itself' with purpose. It captures, although with some hyperbole, my concern that the connected life encourages us to treat those we meet online in something of the same way we treat objects – with dispatch. (p. 168)

What makes the difference between a virtual impingement and one that occurs between two actual people is the very notion of interacting with objects 'with dispatch' – that is, quickly, easily, and in an uncontained way.

I opened this discussion with a headline that concisely demonstrates the nature and consequences of information disseminated virtually and easily across communities: ‘Activists use new tools to challenge repression’ (Shetty, 2011, p. xi). On the local, interpersonal level, we could make a different headline: ‘People use new tools to know each other and be known by others’. Both WikiLeaks and my story about Thomas show us that with the ease and convenience of these new tools comes the potential for consequences. Amnesty International argues that the easy access to information was a catalyst for massive change – the consequences of which we do not yet know. Morozov (2011) warns us that such tools can be used for bad as easily as they can for good (something indicated in my three epigraphs). How people use these new tools to negotiate and navigate their ways through their intrapsychic, interpersonal and social worlds merits further attention. The ease with which we can access information about each other is not without consequence. Seeking out such personal information is psychological work, the distinction being that this psychological work is likely to be operating in isolation. If this is the case, we need to develop an understanding of the processes at play in the context of our connected-up, yet potentially-unconnected culture.

### About the Author

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### Notes

- 1 I have chosen the term ‘psychotherapist’ throughout as an inclusive one. The distinction between ‘analyst’ and ‘therapist’ is less relevant than knowledge produced within a therapeutic process conducted with reference to psychoanalysis. Further, I have reluctantly settled on the term ‘patient’ throughout despite its medical-model derivations; analysand seems dated while ‘client’ simply replaces a medical model with a commercial one.
- 2 If you need this endnote to tell you that TMI means ‘too much information’, OMG ‘oh my god’, or LOL means ‘laugh out loud’, you are likely to be either a digital immigrant, or you have yet to immigrate.
- 3 Though I use the term ‘real life’ here, I stress that exposure to relational events (bullying, exclusion, rejection, and so on) can carry as strong an emotional impact when it happens online as when it happens face-to-face. In some instances, the emotional response is mitigated by its being online; in others it is amplified (Juvonen and Gross, 2008).

- 4 Elsewhere (Balick, 2011), I have written about how ‘cobbled together’ identities are constructed at the level of personal narrative. The notion of an identity that is cobbled together from virtual sources is a development of this idea.
- 5 Already, Google was a player in the therapy as a looming threat (a potential virtual impingement), which Thomas feared would forever locate his name with the false allegations.
- 6 As Slochower (1996) shows, it is generally the analyst’s task to ‘hold’ the third, even though it exists ‘in between’ the two subjects. With many people, especially those nearer the relational ‘borderline’, the third is difficult or impossible to sustain.

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