



CAN YOU HEAR ME?

HOW TO CONNECT
WITH PEOPLE IN
A VIRTUAL WORLD

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INTRODUCTION

WE'RE MORE CONNECTED THAN EVER, SO WHY DO I FEEL SO ALONE?

“It’s state of the art.” I was being ushered into half a conference room in Boston. The other half was in Denmark, at another branch office of the company I was consulting with. My assignment was to coach a half-dozen executives preparing for an important meeting at which they would all be speaking. These executives were spread around the world, some in the United States, some in Europe, and some in Asia.

This day, I was coaching one executive. She wouldn’t be back in the United States for a week or two, and it was important that she start rehearsing sooner than that. The solution was to put her in one-half of a conference room that showed up virtually in the US office where I was seated.

“It’s as good as being in the same room,” was the considered opinion of her administrative assistant, who was leading me into the windowless room that promised to deliver Denmark to me. “It’s state of the art.”

I sat down, as instructed, in a chair in front of a curved table that looked like part of an expensive business school auditorium.

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In front of me, instead of a stage and lectern, was a screen. On the screen was the mirror image of the room I was in—the same curved table, with chairs, and microphones in front of each chair.

It was like looking into a huge mirror. Only the half of the room inside the mirror was empty.

I glanced around the room and waited. The assistant whispered a few instructions. “Speak into the microphone. It’s voice activated. Tap it. Don’t stand up. And you don’t have to shout.”

I wondered why she had told me not to stand. She left. In a minute or two, I walked the torso of what I presumed was my executive.

Her head was cut off. I learned later that “state of the art” only allowed for a picture that covered people sitting in chairs. People of average height. Very tall people had to slump slightly in their chairs.

When she sat down, I could see her face.

“—you?” she said.

After a moment’s confusion, I realized that she must have asked me how I was. The voice-activated microphone had cut off the first words of her response.

I tapped the microphone and said, “(*tap*) I’m fine, thanks. How are you?”

The coaching conversation proceeded in a strange series of percussive sounds and overlapping comments. By the end of the session, we were shouting at each other. I wasn’t sure why. We could see each other well enough unless we stood up. We could hear each other, as long as we kept tapping the mic before speaking. Why did it feel like such hard work, and why did we end up shouting at each other? Why was an hour or two all we could sustain? What was so hard about something that looked almost like we were in the same room? (I’ll answer those immediate questions at the end of this introduction and take up a more

in-depth discussion of the problems and opportunities of videoconferencing in chapter 9.)

For most people, moving into the digital world to communicate means experiencing significant loss of clarity, ease, and depth. You struggle to convey the lightness of tone you want in an email, and you risk offending your colleague because the smile doesn't come through. You tune out during an audioconference because some connection is missing and you can't stay focused virtually for ninety minutes. You flounder to find the right sense of engagement on a Skype call. It's a job interview, but the interviewer is calling in from her home office (as you are), and how does that change the dynamics of the interview? Are you at home or at work? Is the right tone more or less open, more or less formal, more or less sincere?

You can't find good emotional footing in the virtual world today

Over and over again, people find that they struggle when trying to communicate virtually. Something—a lot—is missing. It's harder to get the nuances, the emotions, and the details right. Does that mean that the digital world makes us stupider? Less able to concentrate? Less desirous of an emotional connection?

No, but it demands that we learn to behave differently. We need to learn a new set of rules—like learning to communicate in a new language. The virtual pushes us to invest in multiple different worlds, often simultaneously. These new worlds come with new, vague codes of conduct and create new needs. A lot of work we used to take for granted, because it was done automatically by our unconscious minds in face-to-face communications, now has to be done consciously and intentionally. The digital world forces us to rewire our unconscious communication habits for conscious success.

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And clearly, we urgently need to learn to avoid the traps of the digital world and its new forms of communications. For example, psychologists have identified a new phobia: nomophobia, the fear of trying to live without your cell phone.¹ And yet, much research shows that as our digital engagement goes up, our personal sense of loneliness increases just as fast.² Why this perverse attachment to tools that are actually increasing our sense of detachment? We develop Facebook FOMO, Twitter envy, and LinkedIn loss. And we respond by diving more deeply into the very digital means of our discontent. The virtual water we drink simply makes us thirstier.

We're more connected than ever, and more alone

We need help.

In-person communication is incredibly rich, loaded with information about how the person we're talking to is feeling at every second of the conversation. It's satisfying in a way that virtual communication can't be. Virtual communication is much flatter—online conversation requires us to deliberately engage our own and other people's emotions.

We need a new rule book for conscious communication in the digital age. Our unconscious minds fail us at the doorway to the digital world. We have to learn how to put as much of the missing emotion, pattern recognition, and memory back into the digital world that those well-intentioned engineers have stripped out.

That's what the book you're holding in your hands (or reading on a Kindle, or listening to with earbuds, or having directly implanted into your brain by some technology waiting to be invented) will show you how to do. This book offers a Fodor's guide for the unknown digital country we find ourselves in,

because how can we leave it? We need the digital realm, and yet the cost of living in it is far too high, psychologically speaking.

The opportunity cost of free, fast information is surprisingly high

Now you know the grim truth about this brave new digital world. What specific problems does it raise for us inhabitants of the world of work—those of us who have to get stuff done? And what can we do to make things better? The rest of this chapter will sketch out the main ideas this book covers on the digital-communications conundrum.

Sadly, the more we learn, the worse this world we've created looks. Study after study documents the impoverishing effect of life in the digital era: the absurd collation of unlimited data, supercomputers in our pockets, and endlessly trite, recycled, bite-sized information fed to us in ways that make sense for machines to broadcast but not for humans to receive.³

And even worse, although we can't easily see how the digital world makes some work harder, the difficulty is no less crippling. Let's take a quick tour of the research on what happens to good communicators in the virtual world.

With email, recipients are less cooperative—and feel more justified in not cooperating.⁴ They feel more entitled to lie.⁵ They evaluate each other more harshly because of reduced feelings of social obligation.⁶ It turns out, for example, that if you have even a brief conversation over the phone before trying to negotiate via email, it goes better.⁷ Or, if you use a webcam to make eye contact with someone you're about to debate with, the conversation goes better, with less hostility.⁸ Eye contact enables us to determine, in the long run, who's dominant and, in the short run, who's talking.⁹ In general,

workplaces that make an effort to put back in the workplace some of the absent human emotions—the emotions so easily conveyed in face-to-face conversations, the “I care” kind of feelings—reduce absenteeism and burnout and increase employee engagement.¹⁰

Virtual communication sabotages us in unexpected ways

People who use social words in their communications, words like *coffee* or *football*, are less likely to get fired.¹¹

By now, you won't be surprised to learn that no one except you pays attention on conference calls.¹² Of course you do. Those hilarious anecdotes you've heard about people doing silly, random, and disgusting things while muted on a conference call? They're doing those things because they're completely disengaged from that important call you scheduled for Monday morning to kick the week off right at each of your crucial centers around the globe.

True confession: I started casting—if that's the right word—tarot cards while on innumerable conference calls. And I'm not a believer. Just to pass the time. Until I discovered pacing and lifting free weights. Now I'm trying to get in shape while half-listening to all those calls.

Strangely, doodling helps you pay attention.¹³ Maybe that's because doodling engages your unconscious mind.

Maybe you should doodle while texting. Researchers recently found that the more you rely on texting to sustain your romantic relationships, the less satisfying those relationships are.¹⁴ But don't be texting while in a meeting—three-quarters of your coworkers find it annoying, no matter how cleverly you try to disguise what you're doing.¹⁵ We can tell.

Of course, people think they communicate more clearly over email than they actually do.¹⁶ Tone is very hard to communicate; there's emotion rearing its pesky head again. As John Medina, a molecular biologist with a PhD and the author of *Brain Rules*, notes, we don't pay attention to boring things. Vision trumps the other senses. But even video calls are sensory-poor experiences compared with face-to-face encounters, because of the air pressure, the smells, the ambient sound in the room. All the sensory input of all five senses and a few more that we're only just beginning to learn about are condensed or eliminated on video.¹⁷

We were meant to communicate face-to-face, outdoors, in constant motion

As Medina says, “the human brain appears to have been designed to solve problems related to surviving in an outdoor setting, in unstable meteorological conditions, and to do so in near-constant motion.” That's what fully engages our senses and our unconscious minds. None of those conditions are usually present or optimal in the digital world. And, he continues, people “ought to really understand that the brain processes meaning before it processes detail. It wants the meaning of what it is that you're talking about before it wants the detail of what it is you're talking about.”¹⁸ In other words, we want to know why first and then how or what.

According to neuroscientists, when the brain encounters something new, which is a good deal of our waking life, it starts to ask questions. It immediately queries the inputs it receives from the outside world with six essential concerns—all to do, not surprisingly, with survival. Will it eat me? Can I eat it? Can I have sex with it? Can it have sex with me? Have I seen it before? Have I never seen it before? Can you imagine how the

third-quarter financial numbers compete on a conference call with those other questions running around subconsciously in the participants' minds?

Finally, the unconscious mind craves the big picture—the sort of overview you might have gotten in caveperson days from an outcropping a hundred yards above the savanna—and, at the same time, refuge. The safety of the cave. The virtual world, by putting us into our heads, gives us neither overview nor refuge.¹⁹

Virtual communication engenders five big problems seldom encountered in person

The first big problem with virtual communication is the lack of feedback. This is the problem from which all the rest of the problems in the virtual world flow. Humans (in an evolutionary sense) are relatively feeble creatures. We run the risk of falling victim to lots of bigger animals with paws and teeth that can reduce us to dinner with a swipe or a bite. So, we evolved to be prediction junkies and became adept at scouting out patterns. We want to know, always, what's going to happen next, and we want to know, does that shadow mean a tiger is lurking over there?

Our brains constantly scan the spaces around us, looking for danger patterns and making predictions. We use the five senses that we're aware of, and others that only our unconscious minds keep track of, like sensing the way the air changes around us when other humans or animals are drawing near.

The virtual world usually deprives us of most of those sources of sensory information. We simply don't get the feedback we're used to getting constantly and analyzing continuously. Our brains respond by filling up the sensory data with memories,

made-up stuff, and anxiety. And thus we find the virtual world repetitive, confusing, and tension-filled. We suffer in the virtual world primarily because of the lack of sensory feedback.

The second big problem is related to the first: the lack of empathy. Because we get little information in virtual communication, we learn little about how other people are feeling. The mirror neurons that normally send us constant data about other people's emotions are deprived of the sensory feed, and so they once again make it up. You start to imagine that the person on the other end of that email is angry at you, because you don't really know what the person is thinking.

This lack of information, and the resulting misinformation filling the pipeline, lead us to poor or incorrect analyses of other people's emotional states. Our normal high levels of empathy are reduced or rendered inaccurate.

A side issue of the lack of empathy is that the virtual world is less interesting, since a big part of what engages our time and attention in the real world is figuring out what other people are feeling. And so, in the virtual world, attention spans are shorter, maybe as short as ten minutes.²⁰ But habit dictates that meetings are usually scheduled in hour-long segments, some even longer. Our meetings, especially virtual ones, are outstripping our attention spans.

The third big problem is the lack of control over your own persona. This problem develops in the virtual emotional desert. Because the virtual world is arranged largely by and for machines, it can remember everything. This capacity means that you leave endless digital footprints everywhere you go. In the real world, people forget and forgive. In the virtual world, as many job applicants have found, all those embarrassing photos from your wild college parties are still out there, ripe for the harvesting.

As we'll see, you can manage your virtual persona to a certain extent, but on the whole, it's as if every step you ever took were memorialized in wet cement as you ventured forth. The virtual world is the wet cement for every digital step you take.

The fourth big problem is the lack of emotion. The human mind is constantly assessing its surroundings and the intent of all the people within its ken. Take away the emotional subtext, and an odd thing happens: we have a hard time making decisions. Most of us believe we made decisions as Mr. Spock did. That is, we think consciously and logically and make decisions accordingly. But a good deal of neuroscience has clearly established that we make decisions in our unconscious minds, basing them on memories and on emotions.²¹ As a result, our ability to decide things in the virtual world is severely constricted. We have a hard time deciding, we make faulty decisions on scanty or misinterpreted data, and we end up tuning out altogether.

For example, we've all experienced the mess we can make with one misinterpreted email, where somebody imagines a tone that we didn't intend. The same thing can happen in an audioconference. Does the silence in response to what you've just said mean that everyone is in rapt agreement or that everyone is tuned out—or that people are on mute so that they can have a party? You don't know, you can't decide, and it's all too much hard work.

And the last big problem is the lack of connection—and commitment. Humans crave connection, and the virtual world seems endlessly social. But real connection, like decision making, is based on emotions. Take the emotions out, and we feel alone more often than makes sense. The bonding that naturally happens when people meet face-to-face and size each other up, fall in love, find mutual interests, and so on, is lacking. And thus with thousands of Twitter followers, oodles of Instagram and

Facebook friends, and a huge LinkedIn community, we're still left endlessly chasing the junk food of connection online—likes, clicks, and links that give us a passing thrill but no real sense of connection like a hug.

As a result, a formidable issue for us humans is that online commitment—trust—is fragile. Trolling (nasty, unproductive baiting and name-calling) is rampant. The whole emotional life of the online world is, in short, a train wreck for the way the human mind actually works.

I'll address these five problems in more detail in the next five chapters and then offer some commonsense solutions in the concluding chapters, which look at various methods of virtual communication. First, a couple of caveats. These five problems overlap, of course. Because they concern human psychology, they're messy and not cleanly divided. The lack of feedback and the resultant decrease in empathy; the loss of control over virtual information; diminished emotion, which hurts decision making; and the fragile commitments and trust from a lack of connection are all, well, interconnected. But they are distinct and important enough to warrant separate discussions in subsequent chapters.

And finally, we are in the early days of research. Writing this book, I was constantly encountering new studies that might affect what I would say. I've been frustrated by the lack of strong research in other areas. We have thousands more questions than answers about virtual communications. And I've been struck by how one study may undercut another because there is no definitive position on a particular issue. Our present knowledge about the brain and communications may not be what we know later. Indeed, one neuroscientist said to me in an off-the-record comment as I was conducting the interview, "We know nothing about the brain."

Of course, he meant “nothing for certain,” yet his observation is a healthy reminder to proceed with caution. But that doesn’t mean that we can’t make some essential, enduring observations about the main—and glaring—problems with virtual communications and begin to suggest what to do about them.

Now back to that videoconference. Why did it feel like such hard work? A brief analysis of how face-to-face communication works will help answer those questions I asked at the beginning. If you want to get right to the five problems, then this would be a good time to jump to chapter 1.

Emotional truth is as important in communications as intellectual truth

We humans learned to communicate when we dressed in skins, fought with clubs, and talked in grunts. The human community was a frail group arrayed against monsters like woolly mammoths and saber-toothed cats. Speed of reaction was essential. Instant reading of intent—correctly—meant the difference between life and death. We learned to communicate quickly, unconsciously, and simply.

We based our reactions on what we learned about humans and other animals, recognizing patterns and acting on them instantly to keep on living. To keep those patterns—and memories of those patterns—fresh, we ordered them in a hierarchy of importance determined by emotional tags. The most frightening things we remembered best. Every day, our brains learned to scrub away the less emotional memories to start again, retaining the patterns and

memories that seemed the most important—the most scary, closely followed by relevance to food, shelter, sex, and the other essentials.

That was 300,000 years ago. Things didn't change much for roughly 299,900 years. Then humans started communicating virtually. As we'll explore in more depth in the following pages, virtual communications unintentionally stripped out most of the emotional structure of face-to-face communications, while making it much easier to connect with more people faster and with less effort.

The result? We were soon both overwhelmed and bored.

When humans communicate face-to-face, we do so with little conscious effort most of the time. Even when language is a barrier, we can quickly get the gist of the idea through body language, facial expression, and the emotion conveyed. When we communicate at a distance, the effort involved is considerable and the opportunities for miscommunication are multiplied.

Face-to-face communication is the norm for human behavior, even though it is getting hard to remember ever living life without a mobile phone. We evolved over millennia to communicate quickly, efficiently, and easily face-to-face. What happens when you put that fabulous organic communicating machine to work in a virtual environment?

The virtual environment is disastrous for our normal modes of communicating

Picture a worker in a cubicle. Gray walls, gray chair, gray computer. Gray hum of background noise all around. When she picks up the phone, the way the voice is processed over that instrument cuts out most of the emotion. That's why telephone calls and webinars are so boring. No emotion.

Now stretch that picture out, day after day, month after month, year after year. Is it any wonder that 70 percent of your workers are either actively disengaged or not engaged, according to the last Gallup poll?²² Another recent study found that regular face-to-face communication cuts the risk of depression in adults by half. Phone and email don't have the same effect.²³

Our unconscious minds need to get together so that they can find the emotional connections they crave. We humans are social beings. We don't do well when deprived of our fellow humans. We need to feed that unconscious mind, and we starve it at our peril as employers, as employees, as humans. We need face-to-face.

The virtual world is impoverished for us humans. We haven't had time—evolutionary time—to change to accommodate the communication shift of the past half century.

We are lost, bored, and alone.

Let's go a little deeper. What are some of the most important missing pieces? Think about how a normal face-to-face conversation goes. You use eye contact at the beginning to make sure you've got the other person's attention, and then you launch into that story about the drunk dog. You start looking up, down, and sideways for inspiration, to recall the tale, and simply to give your listener a break. Then, when you're ready to wrap up and hand the conversational baton off to your partner, you check back in with the person with a clear signal of eye contact to say, "Almost done. Get ready."

Without eye contact, we have a hard time talking

Eye contact is thus an important regulator of communication. And it's almost entirely missing from the virtual world.

What other areas of communication are important to face-to-face conversations—and what are the perils in the virtual world? Let's start with email, since that's where the digital world

really took off. The digital era began, arguably, with email and the attempt to solve two particular problems with older forms of communication: time and money. Letters, memos, and other forms of written communication, such as reports and white papers, were full of what the Silicon Valley calls *friction*—they were hard to create and cost money. And face-to-face communications required that busy schedules be synchronized. The engineers and scientists at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and in the defense industry wanted communication that was both frictionless and asynchronous.

The first email proper was sent in 1971 over something called ARPANET as a way for university researchers and defense contractors to share information that met the two criteria. Both problems were solved, and the digital era began. Communication became frictionless and asynchronous, and Pandora's digital box had opened.

Why did these laudable efforts eventually produce an emotional train wreck for the rest of us? In solving the problems of time and money, digital communication unintentionally created two other problems: we gradually became awash in email, and most of it was boring. But there lurked a deeper problem that only became apparent once we were firmly ensconced in the digital era (and the thrill of new technology had worn off): the emotional components of the letter (or even the telegraph) were stripped away. In exchange for asynchronous, frictionless communication, we got information overload and the emotional banality of the always-on social media era.

But it gets worse.

The main work of our minds is unconscious

Our minds are driven mostly by unconscious processes.²⁴ We get an unconscious thought or desire. We make an unconscious

decision. Then our bodies act on that decision, and only after that do our conscious minds catch up, notice what's going on, and take credit for what just happened. The mind edits out any awareness of the lag between unconscious impulse and conscious thought, presumably so we won't have to experience the vertigo of finding our bodies acting without our prior conscious knowledge.

That unconscious mind can analyze something like eleven million bits of information per second, while our conscious minds can only process about forty.²⁵ The unconscious mind has thus taken over most of our thought processes to keep us alive and safe. We react with our bodies milliseconds before our minds would even notice danger, saved by the split-second, lifesaving decisions of the unconscious. Like former president George W. Bush, who famously dodged an errant shoe thrown at him by a disgruntled Iraqi reporter at a news conference in the Green Zone, we move before we think. And that's a good thing.

But we also decide before we think, consciously, and that's a bit more problematic. We rely on our emotional memories and unconscious memory patterns to make decisions. Avoid strawberries; they make you sick! Find another way home; this feels dangerous! She's just not that into you!

Why is our tendency to decide on an unconscious level a problem, and what does it have to do with email? When you talk to someone face-to-face, you automatically absorb the emotional state of the person in front of you. Especially if you know someone well, you know whether the person is serious when he or she says, "Your hair is on fire," or is just kidding. That knowledge enables you to decide how to hear and understand the communication you're receiving. It's based on the emotion-tagged memories you have of your previous interaction with that person and a whole host of other interactions and memories.

Most of us simply don't appreciate that our decisions, our negotiations with other human beings, and our daily analysis of the familiar and the strange are expedited by two well-oiled unconscious processes: recognizing patterns and attaching meaning to them through emotion. Imagine the young child putting the proverbial finger on the hot stove. Instantly, the child's unconscious mind is seething with shock, anger, pain, bafflement. The little one is never going to do that again. Pattern recognition and emotional-memory tagging will ensure that he or she never even comes close.

That's how our minds work. Take away the emotion, and we can't get purchase on that mountain of messaging. You send and receive messages through email, and suddenly you and your recipients lack those immediate cues and your emotional-memory decision systems aren't triggered. You either find the messages simply boring or interpret them incorrectly. Either way, you're wrong.

Add to that a huge increase in the number of messages coming at you, because email is so easy to send, and suddenly, your whole decision-making process is registering overload. You can't keep up, and you can't decide the relative importance of all the stuff coming at you. Triage is hard to do, and most of the information is deeply uninteresting, anyway. When you do react strongly to something, your reaction may be just as likely a misreading as a correct interpretation.

And so, in sum, email (and texting, and Slack, and all the other forms of text-based communication) is frictionless and asynchronous. But it's also boring, overwhelming, and difficult to deal with. That's the real state of the digital era.

In contrast, face-to-face communications, the kind we evolved to handle very, very well, are fast, data-rich, and mostly unconscious.

The digital era is a communications disaster

I've focused on email so far to make things clear. But the same problem bedevils all the digital era's attempts to replace inefficient face-to-face talk with more efficient ways to transcend time and place—and make it easy. The engineers and scientists who launched the digital era weren't particularly aware of, and thus weren't thinking about, the virtues of face-to-face communications. As a result, they didn't optimize the various kinds of digital communications for what humans need: data-rich, emotionally complex, fast exchanges of human intent and meaning, largely through the unconscious mind.

Like most of us, maybe more so because they were engineers, they were only aware of their conscious minds. By definition, the unconscious remains just that, hidden away from the ego-saturated, confident, logical-seeming conscious mind. The latter thinks it's in charge, like the Western child who thinks that milk comes in a carton, meat in a plastic-wrapped package, and entertainment everywhere on devices you can pinch and swipe to your heart's content. Accordingly, the engineers gave us email, telephones and voice mail, video calls, and various other combinations of these digital sounds and images—most of which had the emotional components unintentionally engineered out of them.

Let's take the phone as a further, and important, example. When engineers were figuring out ways to condense the signal that is the human voice, they noticed that those voices were made up of three bands of sound. There's the pitch people speak at, which at the low end (mostly men) goes as low as 85 hertz and at the high end (mostly women) goes as high as 255 hertz. That's a narrow range, when you consider that if you have good ears, you can hear from 20 to 20,000 hertz. The engineers

figured they could get the important part of human speech if they just took the 85- to 255-hertz range and cut out the overtones and undertones of human voices; these tones range considerably above and below the range of audible pitch.

What are the undertones and overtones? You don't hear them consciously, but, unconsciously, you're incredibly good at picking them up. Every human voice has a slightly different mix of pitch, undertones, and overtones. Added together, these features give each voice a distinctive quality—what musicians call the timbre of an instrument, only for the voice. You are so good at hearing the timbre of human voices that you can identify every human voice you know—typically hundreds—in an instant, without being aware that you're doing any work and without consciously hearing the undertones and overtones. You just blur them all together in John's voice or Jane's voice.

Your unconscious mind has amazing power

The ability to distinguish hundreds of people by voice is an astonishing feat when you think about it. It's the unconscious at work again, running mental circles around the conscious mind, teeing up voices, patterns, and memories at unbelievable speeds, all before the conscious mind even knows something is about to happen. Milliseconds before, for the most part, but still well before your consciousness catches on, and in time for most predicaments.

Because the engineers working on telephones cut out most of those undertones and overtones, voices don't sound quite as distinctive on the phone but are still distinctive enough to be told apart, usually, by the unconscious. So far, so bad.

But here's where it gets really interesting. It turns out that the emotions in human voices are carried by the undertones, so that

when you cut out some of that spectrum of sound, you take the emotion out of voices. It's why audioconferences are so boring. And when you realize that you base some decisions on your emotions, you begin to see that audioconferences, internet calls, most computerized phone systems, and most computer video systems based on the same bandwidth compression are all rendered both uninteresting and difficult to think about usefully. Sure, you register boredom, but is that the best basis from which to make your decisions?

What's more, we pick leaders according to the authority in their undertones. When US presidential candidates Barack Obama and John McCain debated, McCain was generally considered to have won the first two debates. And when researchers analyzed the men's vocal patterns, lo and behold, they found that Obama had matched his undertones to McCain's—thus showing that Obama, at least, was deferring to McCain. The voters thought so too, and McCain was ahead in the polls.²⁶

In the third debate, roughly one week after the second, Obama suddenly took command. McCain matched his own undertone vocal patterns to Obama's, and Obama was widely considered to have won this debate. He took the lead in the polls and won the presidency.

We pick our leaders in a surprising way

Leadership is determined by the vocal patterns of our undertones, most of which are usually removed from digital audio communications. In other words, you can't lead a team effectively over the phone or any other similar digital means. And it's harder to pay attention, make decisions, analyze meaning, recognize patterns, and have those deep aha moments—all the mental work everyone counts on in the information age. And

yet the chance are good, if you're reading this book, that this is exactly what you're trying to do.

What about video; does adding a visual element help? And the answer is yes, of course, video helps somewhat. But it brings its own challenges. Why do most people find video such hard work? Why do people tend to shout during videoconferences even when others tell the shouters they can hear just fine?

Your unconscious mind manages yet another incredible feat while you're talking face-to-face with someone else. We tend to move closer to people, ideas, and things we like and away from those we don't like. It's a body-language signal that most people are not very good at disguising. We rear back our heads, for example, when we are hit with an offensive smell, person, or idea.

Now, your unconscious not only notices visually that the people around you are moving back and forth as a gauge of their moods, but it also notices the small changes in the air caused by those motions. When you're watching someone on a video-conference, your unconscious mind is looking for those breezy clues, but when it receives no such clues, it decides that the other person is further away than he or she actually is.

We cannot easily measure the distance between us online

Hence the shouting. And why people feel that video calls are hard work. Video calls are to face-to-face communications as tin-can telephones are to real phones. (And remember that phones are hard work, too.)

Much of the digital world is effectively two-dimensional, when our minds crave three-dimensional. The audio stream is reduced. The emotions are blocked or deracinated. Video is in

fact two-dimensional and lacks essential sensory input. Email and text lack tonal and audible clues to intent. In system after system, the bandwidth is reduced in imperceptible ways that relate to emotion and the core human-thinking processes.

And the flatness of digital is also partly why we find digital communications such hard work. They feel as if they should be easy. And being mostly frictionless, they are easier in some ways. But in unconscious ways that we can't easily appreciate, they are sorely lacking, and we find it hard to compensate as a result.

We humans crave connection with other humans

In the end, we humans are a social, empathetic species, and we crave the basic connection that comes from urgent, authentic, face-to-face communications. We're wired to live in that world.

When humans communicate face-to-face, they exchange huge amounts of information about each other, only some of which they're aware of. As soon as this human communication is reduced to the virtual world, it becomes impoverished. That's the imbalance we need to redress.

Next, we'll turn to the first of the big five problems with virtual communication.

How to read this book

The first five chapters of this book take on the five big problems with virtual communications—the lack of feedback, empathy, control, emotion, and connection—how to think about them and what to do about them. The next four chapters take on specific issues and fixes for the various digital channels: email, email alternatives, text messages, conference calls, webinars, and Skype/hangout/chat sessions. There is a final chapter on sales,

since of all the important areas of human commerce, the sales side particularly depends on human connection and is perhaps most upended by the changes brought about by the virtual world. Finally, I conclude with a look at the future.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- We humans evolved as face-to-face communicators.
 - Most of our communication is unconscious and based on emotion.
 - Emotion helps us determine the importance of a communication.
 - Virtual communications remove most of the unconscious emotion from communication.
 - With its lack of emotional content, most virtual communication is overwhelming, boring, and forgettable.
 - Most forms of virtual communication don't allow the unconscious mind to do its communication work.
 - We seldom make good decisions virtually.
 - Research shows that when we're online, we don't work together as well as we do when we're face-to-face. We don't trust each other as much and are angrier.
 - To succeed in the virtual world, we have to consciously reinsert the emotions that are missing.
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