

This reading questions the assumption that the goal of telecommunications should be to replicate face-to-face interaction as closely as possible. It argues that no matter how advanced the technology becomes, imitation will always fall short because people naturally will still pick the real thing when given the choice. Consequently the reading proposes a shift in focus toward understanding human communication in terms of needs, media, and mechanisms and then determining what might be lacking with face-to-face. Rather than copying physical presence, we should build tools that leverage the strengths of digital media, such as asynchronous messaging, anonymity, and searchable archives (among others). The paper gives us multiple examples, including ephemeral interest groups and enhanced feedback systems, to illustrate how digital communication can actually exceed the capabilities of face-to-face interaction in some cases. Their core argument is that to truly solve the telecommunication problem, we need to stop trying to recreate being there and start redefining what being there even means.

I really enjoyed this reading, particularly because it made me think about Ready Player One, where the entire VR experience is different and actually better than real life. I thought the concept of imitation by definition never living up to the real thing was really interesting, and it makes sense given that if the imitation was actually better then it wouldn't be an imitation any more, it would be its own thing. I liked the examples used, but I was also a little confused at times and wished there had been more detail about exactly how the systems worked (then again, this paper was written in 1992 (which is absolutely bonkers) and that might be to blame). The bulletin board concept especially was very unclear to me from a mechanics perspective. Despite this, I loved how they highlighted things that face-to-face isn't particularly good at. Now, in 2025, I find that some of face-to-face's weaknesses are being covered by my technology. Synchronicity and asynchronicity hit especially for me, given that I'm in a long distance relationship and I don't think I could do it if it wasn't for the magic of asynchronous communication.

Pitch: This paper was written in 1992 (crazy! bonkers!). What are ways in which today's technology is still trying to imitate face-to-face? And on the other hand, what are ways in which our current technology might actually be filling in the gaps of face-to-face weaknesses and allowing for richer communication?