The Synthetic Situation in Diplomacy: Scopic Media and the Digital Mediation of Estrangement

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What happens to the diplomatic encounter when it is digitally mediated? This article investigates how multilateral diplomats, who understand themselves as bringing people and politics together, cope with and resist the move to online settings, replacing handshakes with touchless greetings in videoconferences. Our starting point is the Covid-19 pandemic, but the article theorizes the effects of digital technological mediation already under way before. Translating Knorr Cetina’s notion of “synthetic situation” into the discipline of international relations (IR), we address how the very composition of diplomatic interaction is undergoing transformation. Building on immersive and remote fieldwork, among ambassadors, attachés, interpreters, and journalists constituting the field of European Union diplomacy, our argument speaks to IR debates on international practice, face-to-face interactions, digital technologies, and the political sociology of diplomacy. We show how practicing diplomacy online and with restrictions on in-person meetings involves (re)constructions of its dramaturgy, props, symbols, and authenticity as well as “heroic” fantasies of duty and exceptionalism; we analyze how diplomacy is practiced in “screen worlds” through scopic media enabling “response presence” or virtual co-presence across geographic and professional/private sites; and we trace how the resistance to synthetic emerges as screen fatigue spreads. Overall, we find that the pandemic has facilitated the ongoing transformation of diplomacy from “naked” face-to-face interactions to digitally mediated “synthetic situations,” producing new interpretations of who is “essential” in diplomacy. We conclude by questioning the term “digital diplomacy,” suggesting that virtual practices are in fact not simply “online” but embodied offline, and sometimes actively resisted. In the screen world, diplomats’ bodies (and home offices) become key sites of IR.

¿Qué sucede con los encuentros diplomáticos cuando son mediados de manera digital? En este artículo se investiga cómo los diferentes diplomáticos, que se caracterizan por ser el nexo entre la gente y el sistema gubernamental, se enfrentan y se resisten a ser parte de un entorno online en el que se reemplazan los apretones de manos con videoconferencias. Nuestro punto de partida es la pandemia de COVID-19, pero el artículo teoriza los efectos de la mediación tecnológica digital que ya se viene viendo desde hace unos años. Trasladando la noción de “situación sintética,” propuesta por Knorr Cetina, a la disciplina de Relaciones Internacionales, abordamos cómo la composición de la interacción diplomática está experimentando una transformación. Sobre la base del trabajo de campo inmersivo y remoto, entre embajadores, agregados, intérpretes y periodistas que constituyen el campo de la diplomacia de la Unión Europea, nuestro argumento habla acerca de los debates de RRI de práctica internacional, las interacciones cara a cara, las tecnologías digitales y la sociología política de la diplomacia. Mostramos cómo la práctica de la diplomacia en línea y con restricciones en las reuniones en persona implica (re)construcciones de su dramaturgia, así como también fantasías “heroicas” de deber y excepcionalismo; analizamos cómo se lleva a cabo la diplomacia en el “mundo de la pantalla” a través de medios escópicos que dan lugar a la copresencia virtual en sitios geográficos y profesionales/privados; y hablamos de cómo el mundo se resiste al simetrismo a medida que se expande la fatiga causada por las pantallas. En general, descubrimos que la pandemia ha acelerado la transformación de la diplomacia, que ya se venía dando, pasando de ser interacciones cara a cara “desnudas” a “situaciones sintéticas” medidas digitalmente, lo que da lugar a generar nuevas interpretaciones de quién es “esencial” en la diplomacia. Concluimos cuestionando el término “diplomacia digital” y sugerimos que las prácticas virtuales no son simplemente “en línea,” sino que se materializan fuera de línea y, a veces, el mundo se resiste a ellas activamente. En el mundo de la pantalla los organismos diplomáticos (y las oficinas) se convierten en lugares clave cuando hablamos de relaciones internacionales.

Qu’advient-il d’une rencontre diplomatique lorsqu’elle a lieu numérique? Cet article étudie la manière dont les diplomates multilatéraux, qui se voient comme réunissant peuple et politiques, font face et résistent au passage aux environnements en ligne qui remplacent les poignées de main par des vidéoconférences. Notre point de départ est la pandémie de COVID-19, mais cet article théorise les effets du passage au numérique qui avait déjà commencé des années auparavant. Nous transposons la notion de “situación sintética,” propuesta por Knorr Cetina en la disciplina de las relaciones internacionales y nos abordamos la manera de que la composición misma de las interacciones diplomáticas es en train de se transformer. Nous nous sommes appuyés sur un travail de terrain mené à distance auprès d’ambassadeurs, d’attachés, d’interprètes et de journalistes constituant le champ de la diplomatie de l’Union Européenne, et notre argument contribue aux débats de RI portant sur la pratique internationale, les interactions en tête-à-tête, les technologies numériques et la sociologie politique de la diplomatie. Nous montrons ainsi la manière dont la pratique de la diplomatie en ligne, avec restrictions des réunions en personne, implique des (re)constructions de sa dramaturgie ainsi que des “heroic fantasies” dans le devoir et de l’exceptionnalisme. Nous analysons également la manière dont la diplomatie est pratiquée dans le “monde des écrans” par le biais de médias scopiques permettant la coprésence virtuelle sur différents sites géographiques et professionnels/privés. Enfin, nous retraçons la mesure dans laquelle un résistant au synthétisme s’opère tandis que la fatique face aux écrans s’accentue. Globalement, nous constatons...
Introduction

Looking up from his speaker’s notes on March 10, 2020, Charles Michel, President of the European Council (EUCO), faced a wall (Figure 1).\(^1\) Rather than seeing colleagues assembled around a large meeting table, he was looking into the blinking lights of video cameras. “The virus is spreading in all Member States,” Michel said, “this is a matter for all of us . . . we should therefore try to coordinate as much as possible,” adding, “apologies for the short notice, I thought after some informal consultations that it was useful, and even necessary, to call this videoconference in light of the situation.” The “situation” Michel and his colleagues faced was the rapid spread of a novel infectious coronavirus: “Covid-19.”\(^2\)

In 2020, governments in the EU and around the world introduced restrictive measures ranging from the compulsory wearing of face masks to complete social lockdowns. Citizens were advised to engage in “social distancing” and avoid close physical contact. In effect, Covid-19 accelerated the migration of social life into virtual settings. In the “corona era,” cloud-based video meetings began to dominate private and working life. Spending many hours on platforms like Zoom or Microsoft Teams leaves us alienated and exhausted, as Dutch media theorist Gert Lovink writes, struggling to “socialise in a wall of mirrors,” trapped in “the society of synthetic performances” (Lovink 2020). With EU policymaking challenged by the closing of borders and the Brussels lockdown, Covid-19 has become associated with a lack of solidarity and coordination. For months, there have been few physical meetings, no handshakes, no state dinners, no corridor talks.

The pandemic challenges diplomacy as a “socially intimate meeting” of strangers (Sofer 1997, 185). Theorized as the “mediation of estrangement” (Der Derian 1987), diplomacy is about building relations and seeking familiarity while also keeping distance through diplomatic code and protocol. Mediation has thus meant to create “a connecting link,” “an intervention between two or more individuals or entities” that allows for diplomacy’s relational and reconciliatory nature to unfold (Der Derian 1987, 95). Taking such links to be almost synonymous with in-person meetings, face-to-face situations have become emblematic for how social theorists and international relations (IR) scholars conceive of “the emergence of sociality and effects like trust” (Knorr Cetina 2014, 47). The social relations enabled by physical proximity and immediate, often informal, sociability, scholars argue, promote the familiarity (Neumann 2012, 2013; Nair 2020) necessary for forming international alliances, building coalitions, and achieving compromises (Holmes 2013; Duncombe 2017). But the present condition invites us to think about “mediation” and “links” also in a second, more sociomaterial sense. The pandemic has seen the importance of mediation not only in terms of “bringing together” disparate positions or creating face-to-face encounters, but also in the work done by technological media to create the conditions for such encounters in the first place. To explore this digital mediation of estrangement, we ask in this article: What happens to diplomatic life when it moves online—and how can we conceptualize this move?

The two-fold disruption that COVID-19 has inflicted on diplomacy (demanding social distancing and accelerated digitalization) has been addressed in a first round of publications.\(^3\) We agree with some of this scholarship that the pandemic represents a starting point for analyzing emerging social norms and practices of online interaction in IR and diplomacy (Sánchez 2020). We also acknowledge that experiences of the pandemic vary across diplomatic communities and settings. There is a growing sense, for instance, that the pandemic has affected consular, bilateral, and multilateral diplomatic settings differently, and diverging coping strategies were developed in different parts of the world.\(^4\) Generally, however, we do not see the pandemic as a “natural experiment” (Anthes 2020), or a “critical juncture” that will fundamentally alter IR (Drezner 2020). Instead, we see Covid-19 as revelatory of deeper transformations in diplomats’ interactions that were already in place before, but overlooked or taken for granted by observers and scholars as ordinary elements of everyday diplomacy.

This article introduces the concept of “synthetic situations” to account for these transformations. According to sociologist Karin Knorr Cetina, synthetic situations occur when participants do not (primarily) meet face to face but interact with and through communication technologies, particularly “scopic media,” i.e., screen-based technologies of observation and projection, rendering distant phenomena situationally present (Knorr Cetina 2009).\(^5\) Such situations range across a spectrum of intensity and immersion, some entirely constituted by screen-based technologies enabling “response presence” or virtual co-presence, others with the help of technologies integrated into otherwise primarily in-person encounters (Knorr Cetina 2014). Translating Erving Goffman’s symbolic interactionism into the mediated environments of the twenty-first century, Knorr Cetina

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1. EU CO consists of the heads of state or government of the EU-27 together with its President and the President of the European Commission. It sets the political direction of the European Union (EU).

2. At the time of writing, more than 155 million people have tested positive for Covid-19 worldwide, and 3 million have died with it since the virus was first registered in December 2019 (https://covid19.who.int/, last accessed April 20, 2021).

3. See 2020 forums/special issues in The Hague Journal of Diplomacy, International Organization, and Bransen and Hagemann (2021).

4. See the difference between accounts of “Chinese mask diplomacy” (Verma 2020) or “Russian anti-COVID assistance” (Terry and Makarychev 2021) in bilateral relations versus accounts on the means of diplomatic exchange in multilateral settings like the UN (Naylor 2020; Bransen and Hagemann 2021), ASEAN (Kliem 2021; Rilind 2021), or the EU (this study).

5. A different understanding of ‘syntheticism’ has been introduced into the study of IR by Daniel and Musgrave (2017), who draw on the concept of ‘synthetic experiences’ to assess how popular culture matters for images of International Relations. In their work, syntheticism refers to the fictional character of cultural products or texts like films, narratives or videogames, whereas we refer to the changes in social interaction that come with technological mediation.
shows how face-to-face interactions are being gradually replaced by "synthetic situations." The same, we argue, has happened in multilateral diplomacy. During Covid-19, online interaction has turned into the emblematic socio-spatial condition of social life—but, as we will argue, most diplomatic meetings were also synthetic pre-Covid.

Adopting this lens of the synthetic situation allows us to investigate assumptions about the nature of diplomacy as a social situation reliant on face-to-face interaction, to build confidentiality and trust. Moreover, this lens highlights how diplomacy is staged not just through norms and protocol, but also through digitally (mediated) artifacts such as props and symbols. For example, lined-up national flags are the standard backdrop to diplomatic meetings, but an aura of multilateralism is just as much created by the synthetic voices of simultaneous interpretation streaming in and out of headsets and microphones. Conceptualizing diplomatic encounters as "synthetic situations" lastly throws light on how diplomats cope with sudden changes to their work setting; how the aides and affiliates of the diplomatic field adapt to changes in diplomatic practice (and their exclusions from it); and how technological change affects diplomacy by creating both professional tensions and personal resistance. Using EU multilateral diplomacy as an explorative case, we learn how the pandemic challenges diplomacy's already delicate balances between familiarity and distance, but also see how new ways of mediating estrangement have emerged. Rather than the "elimination" or "loss" of meaningful diplomatic encounters (Naylor 2020), we find creative attempts to perform diplomacy's intimacies—and we show how they both become "mediative" and are "mediated" all the while remaining deeply entrenched within the bodies of diplomats, and hierarchies of the field.

The article is organized as follows: we begin with translating "the synthetic situation" into IR and diplomatic practice scholarship. Second, we present our methodology that is based on a combination of long-term immersive and remote fieldwork. Third, we survey how different actors in the diplomatic field have coped with and resisted increased syntheticism within the multilateral setting of Brussels between March and December 2020, excluding some actors, while insisting that others are "essential." The concluding section discusses how the concept of "synthetic situation" offers new avenues for examining international practices, diplomacy, and, eventually, IR.

**Diplomacy, social interaction, and the synthetic situation**

Diplomacy has long been theorized as a social situation akin to a spectacle (Constantinou 2015), a theatre (Cohen 1987; Kuus 2019; Nair 2019), or an artform (Kissing 1995; Towns 2020). Drawing on diverse traditions in sociology and social theory, IR scholars point to social conventions, dramaturgy, everyday habits, and ordinary doings to understand the dynamics of international negotiations (Adler-Nissen 2014), conflict mediation and intervention (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014; Ralph and Gifkins 2017), or international hierarchies (Pouliot 2016). Over the last two decades, such ideas have instigated growing research into diplomatic practice (e.g., Neumann 2012; Cornago 2013; Pouliot and Cornut 2015; Bicchi and Bremberg 2016; Hofius 2016) with the argument that focusing on the doings of diplomacy provides unique insights into the power, agents, and structures that shape international political life.

Methodologically, this research program homes in on the face-to-face interactions and physical sites where "the action is" (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 9), using interviews, observations, or archival work to get a sense of the atmosphere in meeting rooms, corridors, cafés, and embassies where diplomats meet. "Intimate encounters," as Standfield (2020, 155) notes, remain central to diplomatic practice. It is only by being together, looking into another’s eyes and seeing one another’s bodily movements, Marcus Holmes (2013, 2018) argues, that leaders and diplomats can connect and find agreements. As Wong writes, drawing on Erving Goffman, diplomacy "enables practitioners to exchange
individual-level expressions of intentions—and, by extension, the intentions of the government they represent—that are otherwise lost, attenuated, or distorted if communications were to occur through other impersonal and irregular channels" (Wong 2016, 145). Indeed, face-to-face encounters remain the (ideal-typical) image of diplomatic interaction, perceived as crucial for developing empathy and trust. Yet what if this image does not fully capture how diplomacy is performed today? If, as we develop below, some diplomatic encounters are better understood as synthetic situations, then we should not only study face-to-face meetings to understand the diplomatic spectacle, but take seriously the work done by scopic media and by technologically mediated props and symbols.

Important work initiating this research agenda has emerged in recent years, where scholars have in very different ways explored how “traditional” face-to-face diplomacy and multilateralism is affected by digitalization and the use of digital communication technology (e.g., Ross 2011; Hocking and Melissen 2015; Barrinha and Renard 2017; Adler-Nissen and Driescha 2019; Duncombe 2019; Bjola and Zaiotti 2020; Hedling 2021). Some suggest these technologies can make state-to-state interactions more public and transparent, rendering back-room negotiations and stiff diplomatic protocol increasingly obsolete (Copeland 2009). Others investigate the dark sides of digital diplomacy (e.g., Bjola and Pamment 2018). Others, drawing on the sociology of Collins and Goffman, question whether “social bonding” can happen between diplomats in cyberspace, lacking “subtle facial expressions, micro-expressions, and other expressive clues that may reveal mental states” (Holmes and Wheeler 2020, 157). Scholars such as Constance Duncombe (2017) have analyzed digital practices in foreign policy and diplomatic life, highlighting how digitalization changes “the space within which diplomacy unfolds” (Duncombe 2017, 547) and Heidi Ray Cooley (2004) has shown how screen-based technology such as mobile phones materializes the visual, connecting screen and body. As Dittmer and McConnell put it, “the worlds of Twitter and Weibo” are now diplomatic spaces, but “no less real for being on the screen” (Dittmer and McConnell 2016, 10). Acknowledging that diplomacy happens across different sites (Neumann 2013), Merje Kuus argues we need to go beyond places “in the conventional sense of a unit of territory” (Kuus 2019, 628).

Covid-19 shines new light on these arguments. Now the question is no longer how digital tools can extend or complement diplomatic practices, but what happens when diplomacy is forced to move online. This question sees “the digital” less as an extension of “traditional” sites of diplomacy, but as an imperative that practitioners may be reluctant to embrace. During Covid-19, diplomats face a situation comparable to other communities of practice with their struggles with telework or working from home: the screen and the mediated encounters it enables have moved from the background to the foreground of social interaction, literally providing the platform for sociability. In the next section, we draw on Karin Knorr Cetina’s sociology to understand how the increasing quotidian ubiquity of virtual technologies enables a new kind of social situation. While this situation has become more synthetic during the pandemic, we set out to argue, its history is much longer.

The Synthetic Situation: Goffman Meets Digital Mediation

In his essay “The Neglected Situation,” Goffman (1964) argues that social interaction is best analyzed as a “situation,” that is, “anywhere within which an individual will find himself [sic] accessible to the naked senses of all others who are ‘present,’ and similarly find them accessible to him [sic]” (Goffman 1964, 135). In such situations, he argues, “cultural rules establish how individuals are to conduct themselves by virtue of being in a gathering, and these rules for comingling . . . socially organise the behaviour of those in the situation” (Goffman 1964, 135). For Goffman, interaction is based on physical co-presence where participants can perceive each other with their “naked senses.”

Developing her ideas via ethnographic studies of financial infrastructures and the daily work of international traders, Knorr Cetina argues that Goffman’s framework is unable to capture a number of contemporary social practices, especially those that are global in scope and technologically mediated. With the advance of communications technology such as the internet, mobile phones, computer screens, and video conferences, social situations are “extended, enriched and transformed” beyond bodily co-presence (Reichmann 2019, 238).7 “The simplest reason for this,” Knorr Cetina argued a decade before Covid-19, is that a substantial and increasing portion of everyday life is spent not in the physical co-presence of others but in virtual spaces. The face-to-face domain, then, simply no longer has the structural importance it once had . . . [This concerns] not the transition from more face-to-face interaction to less . . . but the need to conceptualize, within microsociology and the interaction order, the presence of different electronic media and their contribution to both “situations” and the coordination of interaction. (Knorr Cetina 2009, 63–64)

To conceptualize this presence, Knorr Cetina introduces the notion of the “synthetic situation.” For her, a synthetic situation is a social encounter that relies—at least partially—on technological mediation to exist. The synthetic situation, for Knorr Cetina, is the merger of what we may heuristically describe as a naked “background” and a mediated “foreground.” As soon as digital props and tools are involved in a social encounter, the interactions on both sides of the screen are merged into a synthesis (hence the “synthetic” situation)—each reliant on the other to exist and be meaningful. Making this merger possible are so-called scopic media that spread and connect social practices across sites but also enable and mediate new ways of interacting. Scopic media are technological, often screen-based, tools enabling users to observe and project images, sounds, and representations, bringing what is physically distant into virtual proximity (Knorr Cetina 2009, 2014). Examples are videoconferences, projected images of live cameras used in surveillance or medical surgeries, social media feeds, or the presence of a TV in a waiting room. When such media are in place, Knorr Cetina (2009, 44) argues, “participants become oriented to [their] projected reality and their actions are responses to it—the system acts as a centring and mediating device through which things pass and from which they flow forward.” The synthetic situations created via scopic media need the constant processing and monitoring power of those participating in them. Two common effects of scopic media on social interaction are therefore, more positively put, immersion and, more negatively put, exhaustion.

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7 Diplomatic studies have focused on the telegraph, the radio, the television, and digital media, and have recently been summarized in Naclor (2020, 584–85). The argument we propose here can be seen as encompassing all of these technologies through the concept of the “synthetic situation.”

8 Thanks to our anonymous reviewer for helping us sharpen this point.
Rather than being accessible to each other via "the naked senses of all others who are [physically] present," (Goffman 1964, 135), scopic media and the synthetic situations they enable create moments of "response presence" where "participants are capable of responding to each other and common objects in real time without being physically present in the same place" (Knorr Cetina and Bruegger 2002, 398).

The trading floor of the bank becomes the "background" to the synthetic situation of global finance; its "foreground," the place where most of "the action is" (Adler and Pouliot 2019, 424). For example, the embodied co-presence of bankers on the trading floor of a particular bank is conditioned by the virtual presence across a global market network of computer terminals (Reichmann 2019; see Grabher et al. 2018). Even though the traders are individually placed in physical conditions "separate for each participant," their practice is concentrated on the "attention demanding global situation" of live market updates displayed as "running lines of text and numbers and running (live) pictures, figures, and graphs" (Knorr Cetina 2009, 47, 72).

The synthetic situation, however, "rarely occur in empirically 'pure forms' but are often mixed with elements from offline, unmediated, and naked situations" (Reichmann 2019, 424). For example, the embodied co-presence of bankers on the trading floor of a particular bank is conditioned by the virtual presence across a global market network of computer terminals (Reichmann 2019; see Grabher et al. 2018). Even though the traders are individually placed in physical conditions "separate for each participant," their practice is concentrated on the "attention demanding global situation" of live market updates displayed as "running lines of text and numbers and running (live) pictures, figures, and graphs" (Knorr Cetina 2009, 47, 72).

The trading floor of the bank becomes the "background" to the synthetic situation of global finance; its "foreground," the place where most of "the action is" (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 9), however, is to be found in the "screen worlds" it simultaneously produces and depends on. Such screen worlds, Knorr Cetina (2009, 72–73) argues, are both intersubjective and emergent and can be "inhabited" like any other site of social interaction. The markets that now make up screen worlds, by way of historical example, once were literal marketplaces, "physical locations where buyers and sellers were able to meet and coordinate their interests" (Knorr Cetina and Bruegger 2002, 398). Yet, in the context of globalization and with the help of scopic media, they have been "extended to electronic realities" that become additional professional "habitats" (Knorr Cetina and Bruegger 2002). The same logic of the screen world applies to the ubiquitous use of videoconference software like Zoom or Microsoft Teams: the foreground is the screen interface with its own ordering logics such as the gallery view function, while the background is the environment behind and beyond the screen, decontextualized but put up for public display. Both enable and constitute each other, create anxieties and immersions, and together form a new synthetic habitat for social interaction.

The Synthetic Situation in Diplomacy

Knorr Cetina’s conception of the synthetic situation allows us to reframe the current debate concerning the relationship between offline and online, or “naked” and “digital,” diplomatic practices. The concept of the synthetic highlights that there is no digital foreground without an analog background, and contemporary diplomacy could not exist as a global practice without scopic media that create mediated forms of virtual co-presence or “response presence,” be they phone calls, tweets, digital documents, videoconferences, or virtual summits (for a discussion of the latter, see Naylor 2020). As both a global and a localized practice, we suggest, diplomacy also happens in screen worlds, not only through face-to-face meetings in particular places.

One dimension Knorr Cetina’s framework captures less well, however, is the possibility of resistance to more extensive syntheticism in professions—like diplomacy—that have traditionally been imagined and imagined itself to be premised on naked interactions. While some practitioners in our field embrace digital communication tools, claiming that without them "you’re communicating on the wrong frequency" (Interview, November 23, 2018), others are annoyed by them. Regarding emails, one ambassador explains: "You have to decide: are you going to go along with it [the many forms of digital communication] or not . . . last year, I started all my days with deleting, forwarding and sorting through useless information. The only thing I wanted to do was to get rid of it. At some point I had 3880 unread emails in my inbox. Do you want to know what I did? I just deleted them all." (Interview with an EU ambassador, March 19, 2019). This tendency to try to "unlink oneself" from the synthetic situation is widespread, including in diplomatic life.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, resistance to the synthetic situation has occurred due to overexposure and exhaustion, along with the gradual realization that some things are better said and done "in real life." Knorr Cetina (2009, 64–65) describes how international currency traders walk into their physical offices, then strap themselves to their seats in the morning; [...] bring up their screens, to which their eyes will be glued from then on, their gaze captured even when they talk to or shout at each other. In this way, their bodies and the screen world melt together.

Such experiences of total immersion heightened by the pandemic are captured in the concept of "screen-fatigue" (see Lovink 2020). Yet the synthetic situation is theoretically useful, we argue, because it casts light on not just how diplomats deal with the online world, but also how they resist it. Currently, this resistance is demonstrated in trying to save some "naked encounters" from going virtual by maintaining distance, using disinfectant or wearing face masks. Adding this layer of resistance and reflexivity to Knorr Cetina’s framework not only reveals a given professional community’s basic standards of interaction, but also translates into politics. As we illustrate below, the ability to limit exposure to syntheticism is intimately linked to personal abilities, but equally so to positions of power and professional hierarchies. If you speak French or German, for example, you may detach your headphones when a colleague switches into either of these languages, but if you can be in a negotiation room or are instructed to conduct diplomatic meetings from your home currently depends on one’s place in the hierarchies of the diplomatic field. While political leaders such as President Charles Michel (see Figure 1) may be as dependent on scopic media as anyone else, they can access the screen world from an office building, whereas lower-level diplomats have been asked to "work from home," thus making their private spaces into sites of diplomatic encounters, which may require more "staging work" and thus, as we will show, more potential for fatigue.
Methodology: Immersive and Remote Fieldwork

These considerations of face-to-face and synthetic situations raise the following methodological challenge: How to research synthetic situations in diplomacy? To uncover the relationship between local, embodied action and digital media practices in diplomacy, it is useful to study a single, clearly demarcated case. We were in the fortunate situation of already conducting a research project on EU diplomacy when Covid-19 hit. For a year and a half before the outbreak of the virus, we had been researching the impact of digitalization on Brussels diplomacy. During this time, we spoke to ambassadors, negotiators, members of working groups, spokespersons, the heads of units, interpreters, interns, local staff, journalists, and journalists to learn about their work, and also had the chance to observe diplomatic meetings at working group and even ministerial level. During the pandemic, large parts of the EU multilateral diplomatic field have migrated deeper into virtual settings. While this “field” is geographically focused on Brussels, it is ultimately better understood as a sociological and methodological construct spun between the EU institutions, member states’ capitals, and diplomatic permanent representations (PERMREPs), as well as their staff, practices, and relations with the media, think tanks, academic institutions, and lobbyists that make the multilateral diplomatic spectacle possible.

When travel restrictions and lockdowns were introduced in March 2020, the diplomatic field changed, and so did our methodological possibilities and choices. Under Covid-19, our fieldwork became remote, using phone calls, WhatsApp chats, video calls, and emails, but we continued to be in touch with the same practitioners. The contexts where we could participate in/observe—webinars, chat windows, phone screens, email inboxes, and social media feeds—are also the contexts where practitioners carry out their work, hence sites where diplomacy happens. Some of them, like public webinars, were openly accessible and indeed made it easier to get in touch with “Brussels,” whereas others remained behind closed (virtual) doors. Questions of access thus remain, but the conditions of the pandemic also opened new ways into following developments in the field and put our way of engaging with practitioners in the same mode of how they engaged among themselves: via the screen.

This methodological approach has enabled us to access situations of varying degrees of synthetism and nakedness. Our interpretations of the data and observations collected remotely are shaped by their digitally mediated production. On the one hand, the methodological paradox of virtual ethnography is that we in some sense were able to get closer to our participants’ experiences, as their homes became their offices, their digital devices their key professional props, and the screen worlds we met them the dominant site of their everyday practice. On the other hand, our own practice of interpretation and analysis faced parallel issues of lack of context, body language, and face-to-face sociability that diplomatic practitioners complain about. Like the practitioners we followed (up with) from March to December 2020, conducting our research and (field)work from our computers, our phones, and—given that we, too, were working from home—our apartments and everyday life, we also became self-conscious about how we presented ourselves on the screen, and shared our participants’ sense of exhaustion after months of remote work.

In the sections below, we draw on conversations with fifteen long-term participants to analyze how EU diplomats and staff of different ranks and positions have been impacted by Covid-19 since March 2020, and how they have embraced or resisted the synthetic situation. In addition, we draw on documents and observations generated and collected from afar. Just as we would do in Brussels, we wrote observational fieldnotes when participating in webinars, receiving interesting emails, or following Brussels’ day-to-day-business in live-tickers and newsletters. In the analysis, we weave shorter and longer sequences of these notes into our theorization of diplomacy in the synthetic situation.

Naked Encounters?
Diplomatic Work before the Pandemic

On any given workday, the city of Brussels resembles a political beehive. More than 43,000 people are employed by the European institutions, a number overtaken multiple times by those who work around and with them. In what is often presented as a cumbersome bureaucracy, the buildings around Place Schuman hum with rounds of meetings, summits, conferences, plenaries, and negotiations. Hundreds of political files are passed along chains of meetings by experts, technocrats, civil servants, and diplomats before landing on the desks of EU leaders. Along with the official work done inside, conversations in any of the Union’s working languages can be heard on the street and in cafés. In Brussels, the latter are key sites of politics and knowledge formulation: “more relaxed but nonetheless choreographed [places] where [practitioners] are allowed ever so slightly to open the gap between their personal and professional performances” (Nair 2020, 201).

The (internal) diplomatic work of the EU is organized in the Council’s institutions. Monthly, European ministers meet with their sector counterparts, and at least six times per year the EU’s twenty-seven heads of state and government hold summits in Brussels. In between, agendas and files are prepared at ambassadorial level in the COREPER, the Committee of Permanent Representatives, the diplomatic engine room of the EU. Beyond COREPER and its preparatory groups are the civil servants seconded to the twenty-seven national PERMREPs, and the staff (e.g., experts, spokespersons, and interpreters) of the Council and Commission. In all these, hierarchies demarcate political and career rankings, but also differentiate those who are permanently employed and freelancers (Koskinen 2008).

Diplomatic practice in the EU is usually seen as an immediate, proximate, and place-bound affair. Summits are the key events around which the Union’s calendar is structured; big crises are handled through emergency meetings inside the Europa building; and EU treaties are named after the cities where they were signed. The European Economic Community came out of Rome, the EU’s common currency was born in Maastricht, and its citizens’ fundamental rights were constitutionalized in Lisbon. If the Union were to continue the tradition of naming treaties and policy directives after the places in which they were signed, the roadmap for the post-corona crisis may well have to be called the “Virtual Brussels Playbook.”
Treaty.” In broad strokes, European diplomacy thus resembles Goffman’s idea of social interaction as a situated and site-able practice.

Yet, pre-Covid, diplomatic encounters were seldom purely naked, face-to-face affairs. Our fieldnotes on a ministerial meeting in December 2019 illustrate its synthetic character and how normalized scopic technologies were in situ. Even though the elements identified by Knorr Cetina were further in the “background” here, they were there nonetheless, actively involved in setting the structure and outcomes of the meeting.

“Madame est avec moi,” the interpreter says as we move up to the 7th floor of the Europa building. We buzz our access cards two more times and finally reach the interpretation booth. The view of the meeting floor is unblocked, very clear, and very immediate. Around 9 a.m., the room starts to fill up. A young man carrying a backpack walks by, and a group of professionally-equipped photographers takes snapshots of people chatting.

“When do they start,” we ask. “At 10?”

No, the interpreter says, they start at 9:30 with a breakfast. But this is not some informal croissant thing, she adds, they are already working with the breakfast. Indeed, they are already working now. Do you recognise some of them?

“Not many,” we say.

The man who is kissing the black-haired woman is the French COREPER II ambassador, and the one with the red tie is the German one. As she lowers her pointing finger, an English “Good morning” vibrates through our headphones and the meeting begins. Over the next five hours, the room works through 14 agenda items. Parts of the meeting are “in camera” (confidential), and parts are in “public session” (recorded by the seven cameras screwed into the meeting room walls and streamed on the Council website). Around 13:30, the chair announces the end of the public broadcast. Nothing really changes in the room. While the chair reads out the next agenda item, the little orange word “public” disappears from the TV screens. (Fieldnotes, December 2019)

This account presents insights into two core practices of diplomatic negotiation now challenged by Covid-19: the “naked” interactive norms such as informal chatter and greeting rituals; and the mediation of social interaction through synthetic components such as photographs, live interpretation, and digital broadcasting and streaming. Such apparently ordinary practices framed everyday diplomatic work before the pandemic. The example of live digital broadcasting of parts of the meeting illustrates how synthetic mediation presents a technological attempt to defuse criticisms that negotiations in Brussels are made “behind closed doors,” lacking both publicity and democratic accountability (Bickerton 2012).

**Covid-19 Comes to Brussels, and Stays**

In early March 2020, the fast spread of Covid-19 took Brussels by surprise; within days, policy efforts to cope with the virus changed, and on March 9, Council and Commission issued a press release announcing institution-wide measures to prevent its spread (EUCO 2020). The European Summit on March 10, via videoconference (Figure 1), formed one of the first expressions of this new set of rules. Cutting the number of meetings in the Council, suspending training and visitor groups, and making teleworking the new norm were others (EUCO 2020).

Restrictions on face-to-face contact reached the diplomatic community around March 6, when it was reported that Irena Andrassy, the Croatian COREPER II ambassador, had to quarantine after contact with a Council staff member who tested positive for Covid-19. As a precaution, all high-level diplomatic meetings were cancelled. Within a week, the Belgian government had announced a general public lockdown.

In the course of 2020, Brussels emerged from its spring lockdown but entered a renewed winter lockdown. As we explore below, neither experiences of the lockdowns nor those of gradual de- and reconfinement have been uniform. While some staff were asked to stay home for the foreseeable future, others were asked to attend in-person meetings. Besides the emotional challenge of uncertainty and challenges of learning to work with new digital tools, diplomats, like everyone else, had to find new ways of balancing their private and professional lives, soon learning who and what was considered “essential”—and, in turn, “heroic.”

In May 2020, one of our practitioners described the Council as “basically one big physical meeting organiser” (Fieldnotes, May 19, 2020), asserting these meetings now needed to happen in other ways. As in other professional communities, informal diplomatic meetings in particular were limited under Covid-19. “I now mainly work from home and only sometimes come into the office,” one diplomat said (Fieldnotes, April 21, 2020); “It feels a little bit like a Saturday [because] nothing is really happening. We are supposed to coordinate but I cannot coordinate that much from home,” another admitted (Fieldnotes, April 23, 2020).

As Council staff patrolled the Europa building’s corridors, carrying signs demanding social distancing (Fieldnotes, May 4, 2020), the protagonists of the Brussels diplomatic field moved deeper into virtual settings. What that has looked like in practice is the focus of the remainder of this article. In particular, we consider how “the show” of EU diplomacy—as one of our practitioners put it (Fieldnotes, April 21, 2020)—has continued offline, as well as online. As we will see, these processes are interrelated rather than mutually exclusive, as emphasized in the theory of synthetic situations.

**The Show Must Go On(line): Diplomacy in the Synthetic Situation**

Covid-19, social distancing, and increased digitalization of daily life drive diplomats to find new ways to work. In the pandemic’s early days, we observed the adoption of strategies to (re)produce a sense of new normalcy, involving maintaining routines of decorum, form, and coordination, as well as constant reflection on how the show could “go on.” As we shall see, diplomats succeeded in performing the diplomatic spectacle, but not without also changing it on the way. We begin by exploring the immediate coping, with ambassadors’ insisting on meeting face to face, expressing “heroic” fantasies of duty and exceptionalism, while most other diplomats moved to online settings, improvising simulations of face-to-face encounters in the screen world. We then explore the synthetic diplomatic spectacle from the perspectives of assistants, interpreters, and journalists who struggle with being included or excluded from the socially distant or synthetic situations. In tandem with finding practical solutions for connecting spatially dispersed staff members, questions
of what are “essential” or merely “decorative” elements of diplomatic practice emerge. Lastly, we examine how practitioners reflect on, accept, or resist the spread of syntheticism.

Immediate Coping: Social Distancing and the Performance of Diplomatic Exceptionalism

While everyone recognizes this moment as unprecedented, COREPER ambassadors in particular emphasize continuity over change in the early stages of the pandemic. These ambassadors and their assistants—with two exceptions in July and September 2020 during in-person summits in Brussels—have been the only groups meeting face to face continuously during the pandemic (see also Maurer and Wright 2020, 14). The diplomats’ insistence on face-to-face meetings in the spring had both legal and organizational reasons. First, the decision-making procedure renders it impossible to adopt legally binding Council decisions via videoconference. Second, Brussels-based diplomats complain that videoconferences, held between the national capitals, risk cutting off the multilateral diplomatic levels. The latter point resonates with one practitioner’s early comment that it was “unsurprising” that COREPER kept meeting face to face:

they [the ambassadors] insisted to meet in person after they could not listen in at the first video-summit. They were pretty upset about it, because normally they are in the room or just next to the meeting room. But now, they could not listen and could not counsel their Head of State … they were upset because they are basically the ones who are running the whole thing – so they insisted on having physical meetings in order not to get cut off. (Fieldnotes, April 16, 2020)

Signaling how integral they were to the workings of the EU, members of the European diplomatic corps also started to address the public directly. On May 14, Goran Štefanić, Croatian Deputy Ambassador to the EU, posted the following image on Twitter, showing members of the COREPER I Council standing in the Europa building’s atrium, respecting the 1.5-m distance rule (Figure 2).

The caption “In case someone was looking for people who didn’t stop working & physically meeting during #COVID19 crisis” conveys a heroic message, and “AD 2020” implies a moment for the history books. A member of the Council’s preparatory body emailed us the link, saying “Every presidency makes a family photo . . . it’s a nice memory. We [the preparatory body] too did the photo with social distancing . . . many people posted it, even though it was really meant as a joke” (Fieldnotes, May 19, 2020).

These photos and their circulation via scopic social media like Twitter illustrate how diplomatic rituals of representation are adjusted in times of crisis, but also how they function as a “joke,” a fun diversion from the usual protocol. Other practitioners explained the images as an opportunity to “highlight the role of the ambassadors, who keep meeting physically on almost a daily basis, or at least 2–3 times a week and to show that they are still there and that the Council is open for business” (Fieldnotes, April 16, 2020), and to reinforce the image of COREPER as “the last line of defense of the system” (Fieldnotes, April 21, 2020). If you stop COREPER, one diplomat told us, “you cannot pass legislation, and then the show cannot go on.” We heard the same from another practitioner, who suggested there was broad consensus among the member states that you “cannot close the COREPER down because then the EU and all its policy will stop. And the EU stopping – that is not something we can afford at the moment” (Fieldnotes, April 21, 2020). While not portraying the risks nurses, doctors, or police officers take, in terms of face-to-face encounters, the tweets appear to appeal for public respect alongside other “front-line” professions, delivering a script of heroic duty (see also Neumann 2012). As these images confirm, this role is reserved for high-level diplomatic staff, as no such images exist or have been shared of other groups of staff.

Immersion and Staging the Synthetic Situation: Decorum and Décor

Apart from COREPER and its preparatories, almost all other diplomatic encounters during the pandemic have been virtual. The familiar spectacle of diplomatic meetings has changed from heads of state and government flying into Brussels to gather around meeting tables, to talking heads assembled in screen worlds. While the foreground of these meetings has become two-dimensional and flat, the background is manicured according to the traditional norms of the profession, featuring neat arrangements of flags, works of art, or other official backgrounds displaying logos or key political messages. Thus, even though the meeting has changed its composition from more or less “naked” interaction to increasingly synthetic situation, it is still immediately recognizable as a diplomatic encounter.

To understand the immersion into the synthetic situation, Fiona McConnell’s (2018) focus on diplomatic decorum is helpful. Decorum is the written and unwritten code of conduct judged to be appropriate and central to the diplomatic
profession. The term therefore refers to both ways of doing things, and the artefacts and props used to stage diplomatic encounters. To highlight the latter, we can more precisely speak of diplomatic “décor.”

In addition to attempts to translate the décor into the online setting, diplomats create screen worlds with their own rules and tacit knowledges. “The good thing with diplomacy is that people don’t interrupt each other,” one practitioner told us, “or when they do it’s a really bad thing—so there is a lot of discipline in these virtual meetings, maybe more than in the in-person ones” (Fieldnotes, April 26, 2020). While the background of these meetings becomes less evident, confidential, and less easily controlled—for example, it is now “much easier to lose track of who is among the participants and it can easily happen that someone joins a meeting who is not supposed to join” (Fieldnotes, December 15, 2020)—the foreground has remained remarkably similar. Indeed, as POLITICO observes, some EU officials report having to make phone calls in their closet to isolate from their noisy children, while others have foregone regular business lunches in favor of homeschooling sessions. Yet, on screen, they still appear in professional attire as they would in face-to-face meetings: “27 speakers, one after the other giving a two-minute statement, everyone saying the same thing and no one directly speaking to each other” (Fieldnotes, September 30, 2020).

Beyond inserting props and symbols (i.e., flags) and rules (i.e., non-interruption, speaking times), ensuring interaction is considered difficult to “translate into virtual settings,” practitioners agree. It is “the atmosphere of the meeting, and the sense of who is talking to whom and who is not talking to anyone” (Fieldnotes, May 19, 2020) that seems to be “lost.” Asked about videoconferences, former Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker bemoaned the inability “to be able to read the faces of the [Council’s] members,” asserting the “need to be able to see who is looking unhappy, who is smiling, and who is looking at whom, as all of this is part of the choreography of the meeting” (Fieldnotes, March 26, 2020).

Essential or Decorative? Inclusions and Exclusions from the Synthetic Situation

To shine light on power relations and emotional work at play in the synthetic situation, we now turn to the experiences of staff members working in support of or on the margins of diplomatic spectacles in Brussels. Here, practical considerations of how to connect press conferences to journalists or diplomatic spectacles in Brussels. Here, practical considerations of how to connect press conferences to journalists or virtual co-presence, both décor (i.e., flags now appear as and in videoconference backgrounds) and decorum (i.e., tacit agreements on who can speak when and for how long) are important.

McConnell focuses on how liminal actors adopt behaviors and styles to appear appropriate in diplomatic spaces. While formulated in a different context, her ideas speak to what is happening in Brussels during the pandemic. The following excerpt from our fieldnotes relates how an EU interpreter perceived her daily work routine during the first phase of the pandemic, considering both her role in the institutional hierarchy and the changes affecting everyday interaction between the people whose statements she translates, such as the COREPER ambassadors.

We are considered essential personnel so we have to go into work … but then some of the colleagues are asking what is the point of that? Everything is in English and everyone understands English, so why should we risk our lives for decorum? It is like we are part of the furniture … I know that some are refusing to go and some have complained that the [interpretation] booths are not properly cleaned, so we have to clean them ourselves … I was at COREPER I two days ago, watching the ambassadors entering the room and saying hello to each other. Some are really relaxed about it, they are normal, and some are really completely paranoid … One came with a high security mask that is theoretically reserved for health personnel … another had his own improvised mask and he went to say hello to another ambassador who just had one of those paper surgery masks. And they had this reflex of extending the arm to shake hands and then they stopped – oh my God, what are we doing – and so they awkwardly waved at each other at a distance …

(Conversation, WhatsApp video call, April 2020)

The interpreter’s viewpoint is important, as hardly any other practice captures the feel of Brussels diplomatic as much as in being in a meeting with a “full language regime,” covering the Union’s twenty-four working languages. Significantly, this aspect of the meeting has always had a synthetic dimension, as the relationship between interpreter and listener is established through a headphone wire, not “naked” speech. While interpretation becomes “easier when the delegate can look at you in the booth,” which explains the spatial arrangement of the negotiation room (Fieldnotes, December 5, 2020), diplomat and interpreter primarily communicate via “response presence,” i.e., virtual co-presence. Thus, sentences often heard across the audio channels include “Please wait for interpretation to finish” or “The delegate is speaking too fast to allow for interpretation.” Underlining how this form of mediation and synthetic depth adds more to the atmosphere of the meeting than to covering its practical needs, the interpreter relates a colleague’s concern about accepting unnecessary risk by going to work and sitting in a cramped interpretation booth. As she put it herself, is it worth risking one’s life for decorum?

EU institutions employ 800 interpreters on permanent contracts and 3,200 freelance interpreters, of whom 1,200 have regular contracts.15 Meetings at the Commission and the Council have been severely cut back, meaning much less work for interpreters and freelancers. The official EU line is that there are concerted attempts to provide interpretation in videoconferences, including via a new app called “Interacto,” but interpreters are deeply frustrated. Yet linguistic diversity is an EU fundamental value and there is a long tradition of simultaneous translation during multilateral spectacles. “The language regime is very important,” one diplomat told us, “when things go digital, we have to make sure that it does not become English only. Then we are a Europe that only speaks English … It is not a practical problem of speaking English … politically speaking it is a problem” (Fieldnotes, March 27, 2020).

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13 According to van der Wusten (2016), diplomatic décor refers to locations and materials used to design diplomatic stages, such as group photos taken “among a panoply of flags” (p. 237). For our conceptualization of synthetic situations, both décor (i.e., flags now appear as and in videoconference backgrounds) and decorum (i.e., tacit agreements on who can speak when and for how long) are important.

14 https://www.politico.eu/article/coronavirus-covid19-confinement-restrictions-create-havoc-in-the-secret-world-of-eu-interpreters/, assessed January 11, 2021.

15 https://www.politico.eu/article/coronavirus-covid19-confinement-restrictions-create-havoc-in-the-secret-world-of-eu-interpreters/, assessed January 11, 2021.
The relationship between diplomats and journalists gives rise to a similar debate about who should be included into official proceedings and how. During the pandemic, journalistic engagement has been almost entirely transformed into a synthetic one. “The press is very angry about the whole situation,” one participant explained early on, “because traditionally we have this system of the press conferences that happen right after the meetings down in the press room of the Council” (Fieldnotes, March 27, 2020). As the number of people who can enter the Council buildings is severely curtailed, the format had to change to hybrid–online press conferences for which the journalists had to send advance questions via email or text to the PERMREP’s spokesperson. During the third virtual summit on April 23, one participant recalls that he was constantly “receiving phone calls from media people because they are anxious to know what’s going on in the summit, but that [he] too does not have that information because he has to work from his office, not the delegations’ back-room in the Europa building” (Fieldnotes, April 23, 2020).

The biggest challenge for journalists is the cancellation of the “spectacle” of the press center in the Justus Lipsius building. Normally, “hundreds of journalists are here, sitting around, gathering information, and getting a coffee with that person there and another one there.” For the journalists, it is “exactly like it is for the leaders, given that the way somebody is telling you something is completely different when you can look at his face” (Fieldnotes, April 24, 2020). They argue, “being a few floors down or in the next building does make a big difference in relation to how much, how fast and how smoothly information travels” (Fieldnotes, April 24, 2020).

The position of the staff on the margins of the field suggests that access works differently in the synthetic compared to the naked situation: you can hide outside the view of a camera in the background of a videoconference, and no one will notice, but to appear in the foreground requires explicit invitation (with the press being cut off). Previously, during our fieldwork in Brussels, we could sometimes “hide” in the foreground of a physical meeting, visible to everyone, on the back rows. In the synthetic situation, such access has become impossible for us, and difficult for others located on the margins of the diplomatic spectacle.

To nevertheless maintain conversations connecting the Brussels diplomatic field with the European public, Council staff work hard to rebuild communication routines with journalists that, diplomats and politicians agree, are crucial to multilateral diplomacy and European democracy (Fieldnotes, April 23, 2020). “In the first days, we didn’t know how to manage this,” said one practitioner, talking us through in-notes, April 23, 2020). “In the first days, we didn’t know how to multilateral diplomacy and European democracy (Fieldnotes, March 27, 2020). Addressing how to keep the EU open to the public will be crucial, not least because displays of unity within the Union’s institutions mediate fundamental political disagreements between the member states.

Beyond Screen Fatigue: Accepting and Resisting Syntheticism

What are the long-term effects of scopic media and extensive syntheticism for diplomatic life and how do diplomats themselves reflect on the consequences? During lockdowns, the synthetic stretching of the “Brussels bubble” beyond the “Quartier Européen” (Busby 2013) has had important implications for our theorization of diplomacy. Being unable to mingle in the physical sites around Place Schuman, diplomats, interpreters, and institutional staff improvise to (re)create the normalcy of their scene. Upholding the credibility of representing the state requires dispersed diplomatic bodies, frustrated, with or without kids at home, to engage in an elaborate performance of organizational maintenance in front of a screen. As POLITICO ponders, “at home, Charles Michel spends most of his days in video meetings with EU leaders. But he probably also spares a few minutes for Lucie, his 9-month-old second child.” Yet as can infer from our practitioners’ reactions, working in screen world is challenging not just because of practical issues like bad internet connections or childcare, but because of the sudden—and more extensive—syntheticism that questions the integrity of the diplomatic spectacle.

One ambassador reflected on this question in Spring 2020, having worked in and out of Brussels for almost 25 years:

I don’t belong to the doomsday prophets. We have always been good at coordinating and dealing with crises; in the media this is all being portrayed as if the EU is close to falling apart. But I can tell you it most definitely is not … the biggest change is maybe that we now have to negotiate with open doors, that there are fewer people in the room and that we can no longer shake hands or kiss. We now sit with more distance between our tables too, and we are not allowed to touch the surfaces … In substance, however, it is very much the same – it all depends on Germany, how we will get on with this crisis, since France does not have money and the usual North–South, East–West rivalries persist.

There was a brief moment when we discussed whether to stop meeting face-to-face, but that was just in the beginning when some colleagues and especially the Commission were very nervous. They told us we couldn’t meet. It was dangerous, they said. But they don’t say that anymore now … One of my colleagues said for fun that his mom told him that he wasn’t allowed to go to meetings … But as you know, we always stick to the rules. We keep a meter and a half

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16 See de Orellana (2020).
17 https://www.politico.eu/article/coronavirus-how-the-brussels-eu-bubble-is-coping-with-covid19-pandemic-confinement/, assessed April 19, 2021.
distance and we disinfect our hands. So, it smells like a bar … but we continue our work. (Interview, phone, May 2020)

Similar to the implied heroism of the Croatian ambassador’s tweet analyzed earlier, this ambassador’s remarks highlight that the decision to avoid “going digital” was a deliberate one. We can stick to the rules, so the show can go on, he argues. However, as the months pass and Brussels moves deeper into the “new normal” of life in “screen world,” diplomats (like all of us) are experiencing videoconference fatigue. “EU Ambassadors had a lively debate on Wednesday,” POLITICO reported on May 21, but “[t]here’s a growing mood that these new, crisis-induced, parallel [online] structures are becoming a hindrance rather than a help.”

“Those meetings have outlined their usefulness,” said one EU diplomat during Wednesday’s closed-door debate (cited in Eder 2020). Mid-morning the same day, we received a text from one of the practitioners with a section of the above text copied, followed by a short “I can confirm” and a smiley face (Fieldnotes, May 21, 2020). As Knorr Cetina (2014) puts it, “situational integrity” is much harder to maintain in the synthetic situation than in the face-to-face situation. In mediated situations, “the result is much more like a muddle: a disorderly interactional arrangement struggling with problems of differential access, orientation and perspective, and coordination” (Knorr Cetina 2014, 47). This is simply exhausting. Over the course of the pandemic, this feeling intensified. In September, one participant forwarded us an email from POLITICO’s pro subscription with the title “‘We can’t work like this’: Transport Council videoconference abandoned due to technical issues.” He wrote: “You might enjoy this . . . we cannot work like this” (Fieldnotes, September 28, 2020). The article reported that “a videoconference between transport ministers was cancelled shortly after it began amid complaints that a single statement by French Minister Jean-Baptiste Djebbari could not be heard properly . . . Since the technical issues could not be fixed, the meeting was moved to a later date” (Fieldnotes, September 30, 2020). Such examples show how more extensive technological mediation creates new sorts of interactional problems. Asking practitioners how work can continue, one reports:

My feeling is that people here [are] at the same time quite fed up with the situation, the second wave, etc. and at the same time getting used to that, and using in full normality the whole set of new things and work methods. Masks, distance, lack of human contact … the whole thing is quite dystopic! (Fieldnotes, September 30, 2020)

That exasperation caused by overuse of the medium reinforces the previously expressed reluctance of the Brussels diplomatic field to rely on digital communication, long before Covid-19. The same holds true today. The extensive syntheticism combined with the need to continue the visual and bodily performance of diplomacy in one’s personal space (nominally a place of rest or retreat from work for most people other than freelancers, for example) requires additional investment of emotional labor. This contributes to a sensory overload that—coupled with tech problems—may tip immersion in the synthetic situation into exhaustion.18

While some practitioners proclaim “we can’t work like this,” others see opportunities to learn, and the glass as “half-full.” Trying to take a long-term view, one diplomat reconfirms the hierarchical nature of who gets to opt out of syntheticism:

I am sure that we will learn a lot from everything that we have achieved in these weeks and months … we will have more videoconferences for a good part of the Council work at the technical and expert level … but for other parts, like the European Council, we will try to return to the old normal very soon. (Fieldnotes, May 19, 2020)

Further optimistic assessment comes from an ambassador reflecting on the achievements, despite the crisis, of the German Council Presidency:

Overcoming Covid has become one of our main priorities in the past year, but we have also maintained other priorities, such as climate policy … So let’s start with the glass half-full: when Covid broke out … member states of the European Union suddenly closed down their borders and all the achievements we thought were so secure were suddenly put into question by this virus – at least we managed to bring the EU leaders together a few times and reinstate those basic freedoms. (Fieldnotes, December 3, 2020)

Another practitioner, not at ambassadorial level, who was asked, during a webinar, about her work practices during the pandemic, sees the uptake of scopic media as more enduring and encompassing:

You know, the first three weeks we were frozen … we didn’t know what to do and we still thought that everything will go back to normal after three weeks … slowly we started to realise: no, things will not go back to as they were before … and it was only then that we started to adapt. There was Easter, and then, five weeks later, people realised that we needed to really change the way we work – and then we moved into Zoom-land and fell into WebX-mania and since then, all we have is fatigue. (Fieldnotes, December 15, 2020).

At the time of writing, perhaps the defining feature of the coronavirus pandemic is that no one knows what form it will take or what effects vaccination roll-outs will have. As Brussels has settled into a “whole set of new things and work methods” (Fieldnotes, September 30, 2020), Covid-19 keeps impacting diplomatic life. Perceived as anywhere between a “half-full glass” and a broken system, the more diplomats are immersed in synthetic situations, the more the concept becomes socially meaningful.

Our analysis tells an uneven story of nostalgic repair work, performative continuation, and reflexive resistance to the screen world. What becomes evident is that aspects of keeping the show going are expressed in public statements (such as ambassadorial tweets), while stories of fatigue are told in more informal interactions (such as text messages). This opens up new questions for research in diplomacy and IR as different synthetic situations seem to promote more or less trust and confidentiality, simulating original “nakedness.”

**Conclusion**

How can we conceptualize this move? With the rise of synthetic situations, the idea of face-to-face encounters as the precondition for social and political lifeloses the structural significance it once had. What becomes relevant is how technologies, media, and screens configure the situation. The
Covid-19 pandemic led abruptly to remote meetings and social distancing, but the disruption exposed how the diplomatic profession has actually been partially virtual for a long time. Previously, diplomats communicated via telegraphs and telefax; today, they employ computational technologies and digital media tools, such as WhatsApp or Skype. From this perspective, digital devices not only present possible contexts for diplomatic sociability and its analysis, but also participate in the very articulation of the diplomatic spectacle.

Our analysis speaks to widely held theoretical assumptions about face-to-face meetings as key to diplomatic practice. On the one hand, frustrations with forced social distancing and online encounters seem to confirm the common view that “physical co-presence of individuals” (Holmes 2018, 266) is key to international cooperation. On the other hand, when we begin to take seriously that the doings of diplomacy, including symbolic and social interaction, do not necessarily presuppose direct physical interaction, established ideas of sociability and emotional cues are questioned. For well-nigh a year, no physical place can be entered or seen where multilateral negotiation becomes “real”—nevertheless, hundreds of people simultaneously participate in it. Diplomats sit physically dispersed and negotiate via scopic media. During Covid-19, the video call became a central element in the diplomatic ecosystem. But we learned that synthetic encounters could allow for trust management, and that much of the familiar dramaturgy and scripts are imported into screen world, from flags to simultaneous interpretation. The screen becomes a portal, through which a diplomatic identity is to be performed. During Covid-19, this portal often disturbed public–private boundaries, in a synthetic continuation of previous practices such as diplomats hosting dinners at home (Standfield 2020).

In Brussels, Covid-19 closed traditional sites of diplomacy, except selected ambassador circles, which continued to meet physically in often surreally empty meeting rooms. Framed as practical necessities, these practices also reinforce a digital script of exceptionalism, professional hierarchies, and “discrete heroism.” Ambassadors saw their work as crucial for making the EU deliver—and proudly shared how they were actually able to execute this. This script stands in contrast to the many people on the margins or outside the Brussels bubble who lost their relatives, jobs, or sanity during the pandemic.

In the synthetic situation, these dynamics raise questions about who gets invited into the virtual diplomatic spectacle, the divisions of labor between different categories of “essential” staff, and more broadly often gendered hierarchies that become visible or silenced in screen world. For example, our observations from Brussels unsettle the techno-optimistic fantasy that diplomacy can “go digital” to become transparent and public. Contrary to the expectations of more transparency through “digital diplomacy,” the abrupt turn to online summits has hitherto had the opposite effect, hindering media oversight and democratic control. The shift to more synthetic situations is bound to reveal structural inequalities between countries, as those with large technology budgets and better infrastructure will find it easier to establish themselves and competently “inhabit” (Knorr Cetina and Bruegger 2002) screen worlds. Echoing earlier debates about the “digital divide,” exploring the synthetic situation will allow for new insights into (technological) hierarchies and biases of diplomacy.

If diplomacy is increasingly sited in the dispersed and synthetically connected bodies of leaders and diplomats in their capitals or in their private homes (“living at work”), then fundamental shifts are required in our view of diplomatic practice. In a literal sense, and in line with Knorr Cetina, it is not accurate to talk about “digital diplomacy”; the messy, embodied, awkward, emotional, emergent activity required for the performance of diplomacy is still “glued to” human bodies. Indeed, the synthetic does not mean “vaporisation” of the concrete, embodied social life but is rather an “important extension of notions of reality” (Shields 2003, 79). As such, diplomatic practice is also site-able in the virtual domain. Hence, rather than thinking in terms of “either/or,” the issue of how diplomats manage the relationship between the synthetic and the naked is a question of “both/and.”

Finally, the synthetic situation, as Knorr Cetina wrote, “not only transcends the local and the face-to-face but also enables global orders of activity” (Knorr Cetina 2014, 47). Understanding the implications of synthetic international practices will be key IR research agenda in coming years. For example, the “sense of place” often debated in studies of status and hierarchy (e.g., Zarakol 2010; Pouliot 2016) takes on a different meaning in a synthetic situation. Careful attention to the politics of synthetic situations, to its exclusions and inclusions, must be key to this agenda, as illustrated above with the exceptionalist scripts, interpretations of who is essential, and the reinvention of normative codes of conduct and display. Rather than imagining that the places where we are situated fade into the background, we should focus on the emerging and continued symbolic rituals and scripts that are being invented to perform and resist synthetic IR.

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19 See recent work by Towns et al 2020 on the gendered aspects of diplomacy in synthetic situations.
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