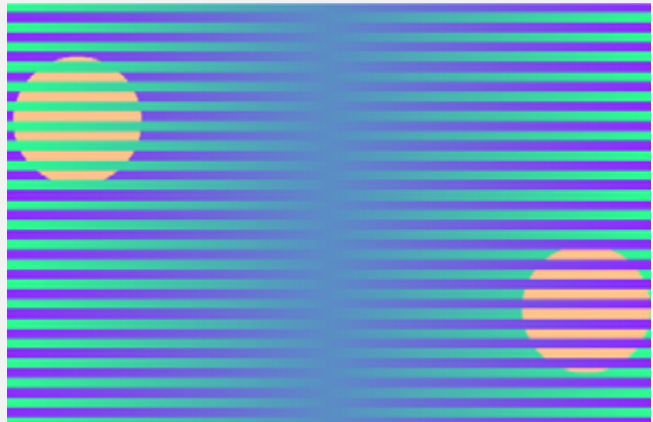


## CSS MEDIATION RESOURCES

# Contact Theory with No Contact: Facilitating Dialogue Online

Inbal Ben-Ezer



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Front cover picture: From a distance, the circles seem to be differentiated with one pink circle and one yellow; yet a closer look reveals they share the exact same light-orange pigment – an optical illusion. While groups in conflict tend to develop strong biases toward each other, seeing themselves as distinctly different, contact – offering a “closer look” – helps reduce this effect, revealing similarities and re-humanizing “the other”. The possibilities that contact offers to overcome our biases – even online – is the subject of this paper.

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# Contact Theory with No Contact: Facilitating Dialogue Online

Inbal Ben-Ezer

Foreword by  
Ambassador Simon Geissbühler



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# Foreword

What have we learnt from the past years of moving dialogue from the room to Zoom? This paper provides a unique contribution to a more nuanced understanding of how we can use online dialogue to improve inter-group relations and decrease prejudice in conflict contexts. Why “dialogue” and why “online”?

Dialogue is one tool in the set of peace promotion tools. Its purpose is to increase understanding and trust. A carefully structured dialogue setting is also a key foundation upon which effective negotiation and mediation is built. Mediators can therefore learn from this publication, for example, how to shape inter-group encounters to facilitate trust building, understanding and foster constructive emotional exchanges.

The use of online forms of dialogue have increased during the Covid pandemic and because of the necessity to reduce climate change emissions. This paper is useful exactly because it does not argue for or against online dialogue, but rather it shows what is possible, as well as the complementarity between different approaches. The paper outlines practical considerations, including regarding “do no harm”, as to what third party facilitators need to consider when designing and facilitating online dialogues. It is therefore a must-read for all third parties thinking of when and how to use online dialogues for the sake of peace promotion.

**Ambassador Simon Geissbühler,**

Head of the Peace and Human Rights Division,  
Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs

# Executive Summary

“Contact Theory” is a robust academic theory showing that contact between groups typically reduces prejudice and improves intergroup relations.<sup>1</sup> Originally developed in the field of social psychology in the mid-20th century, this theory has since been repeatedly verified and further explored, including as a conflict resolution tool in contexts of political violent conflict. In practice, bringing adversaries together is a prominent peacebuilding strategy and a significant part of any dialogue, negotiation, or mediation process: at some point, parties meet. At the same time, accelerated processes of digitalization in the 21st century have drastically changed the possibilities for interpersonal encounters. Now meeting online, in *electronically* mediated interactions, is both possible and commonplace. Participants may even prefer digital meetings due to their perceived convenience, overcoming limitations related to political, security, climate, health, or financial considerations, to name but a few. The question then arises: to what extent is intergroup contact effective in positively influencing intergroup attitudes and relations *online*? Reviewing both current academic literature and experiences from practice, this paper attempts to answer this question and provide initial guidance to peace practitioners who – whether by choice or necessity – organize encounters between groups in conflict online.

Research shows that intergroup contact is most effective in changing attitudes and bettering intergroup relations under four **optimal conditions**: (a) meeting under equal status conditions, (b) cooperating, (c) having a shared goal, and (d) having the support from one’s environment – authorities, laws, customs, etc. The effectiveness of intergroup contact on attitude transformation is primarily due to the **emotions** this encounter elicits: reducing anxiety and increasing empathy. The ability to **generalize** perceptions formed about individuals “in the room” to the entire groups they represent depends on keeping the presence of *group* (rather than individual) identities prominent during encounters, so participants are perceived as representatives of their groups. Not only direct physical contact but also various types of **indirect contact** positively influence attitude changes; including vicarious (observing others meet), ex-

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1 Miles Hewstone and Hermann Swart, “Fifty-Odd Years of Inter-Group Contact: From Hypothesis to Integrated Theory,” *British Journal of Social Psychology* 50, no. 3 (September 2011): 374–86, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8309.2011.02047.x>; Thomas F. Pettigrew and Linda R. Tropp, “A Meta-Analytic Test of Intergroup Contact Theory,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90, no. 5 (2006): 751–83, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.90.5.751>.

tended (knowing about such a meeting), and imagined contact. Yet, intergroup contact is no panacea. It has stronger influence on **high status** compared to **low status groups**, to the disadvantage of the latter, and may even lead to negative consequences, creating false expectations for equality that lead to frustration, and demotivating action towards structural changes. Furthermore, **negative contact** – frequent in violent conflicts – has a more profound impact on people’s attitudes compared to positive contact, undermining positive attitude transformations and making them less sustainable. Finally, it might just be an **impractical** approach to peacebuilding in conflict contexts where it is unrealistic to bring enough people together to induce societal level change.

How does this research translate to *online* intergroup encounters? A review of both extant research and practitioner experiences shows that virtual meetings *can* positively influence attitudes, maintaining some of the advantages of in-person encounters and even overcoming some of its limitations, but also presenting new challenges for relationship building. Practitioners who – by choice or necessity – bring adversaries together online, should consider six principles for improving relationships online (see Table 2 for practical questions therein):

1. **Ensure and enhance the four conditions for optimal intergroup contact:** (i) create equal status conditions in both access to the virtual space and within it; (ii) create opportunities and conditions for cooperation; (iii) have shared goals that provide motivation and direction; and (iv) be creative in getting the support from authorities, laws or customs, at minimum by the presence of a facilitator, or through engaging outsiders, such as international experts, authority figures, diaspora communities, etc.
2. **Engage emotions:** capitalize on the reduced anxiety from and during the encounter, providing a low threshold for participation and more openness throughout it; and overcome limitations regarding empathy and trust building, for example by using video communication, ensuring participants have a quiet meeting space, and setting ground rules to increase the focus of participants, as well as structuring time and space for informal exchange.
3. **Intentionally manage the extent to which participants convey individual versus group versus superordinate identities,** to increase both humanization and attitude generalization from the individuals in the encounter to the entire groups to which they belong.



4. **Link the encounter to participants' daily lives** and vice versa, increasing chances of the sustainability of attitude transformations.
5. **Create more encounters and/or vary participation**, taking advantage of the simplicity of organizing online meetings.
6. **Increase security and ensure informed buy-in** when it comes to the platform(s) being used, home/work environment, and related security risks involved.

# Introduction

“Contact Theory” is a robust academic theory showing that contact between groups typically reduces prejudice and improves intergroup relations.<sup>2</sup> The theory is often attributed to the American psychologist Gordon Allport who articulated it in his 1954 book *The Nature of Prejudice*.<sup>3</sup> It has since been tested in hundreds of studies across a variety of group relations (between groups of different races, religions, genders, ages, etc.) worldwide, showing robust support for its validity, and, while stemming from social psychology, it has also been verified in contexts of political violent conflict as a tool for conflict resolution.<sup>4</sup> This is good news for the peacebuilding community which, for a long time, has advocated for contact between adversaries as a necessary step in advancing peace: at some point, parties should meet. Yet, developments of the 21st century such as climate change and the global COVID-19 pandemic have challenged this fundamental reality. The pandemic has accelerated what some term the “Fourth Industrial Revolution”<sup>5</sup>, drastically limiting physical contact while replacing it with digital/electronically-mediated interactions: e-contact. The widespread use of these new technologies – which has been increasing for several decades – is likely to stay with us, if not gain further popularity as a medium of interaction, given critical climate and sustainability considerations. **How does this “no-contact contact” impact peace dialogue<sup>6</sup>? Can digital contact still “work” in support of peace?**

In trying to answer these questions, I first turn to the academic literature. I outline under what conditions does contact “work” in improving intergroup relations and what are its limitations (part 1). Looking at each of these conditions, I evaluate whether and how the transition online may influence them – improving or limiting the effectiveness of e-contact for peacebuilding (part 2). Finally, I operationalize these findings in six principles and key questions that practitioners should consider when designing

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- 2 Hewstone and Swart, “Fifty-Odd Years of Inter-Group Contact”; Pettigrew and Tropp, “A Meta-Analytic Test of Intergroup Contact Theory.”
  - 3 Gordon Willard Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books, 1954).
  - 4 Ananthi Al Ramiah and Miles Hewstone, “Intergroup Contact as a Tool for Reducing, Resolving, and Preventing Intergroup Conflict: Evidence, Limitations, and Potential,” *American Psychologist* 68, no.7 (2013): 527–42, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0032603>.
  - 5 Arik Segal and Yotam Keduri, “The Impact of Facebook Communities on International Conflict Resolution,” *Rising Powers Quarterly* 3, no. 3 (2018): 211.
  - 6 For the purposes of this paper, I primarily use the term “dialogue”, referring to the particular process of interpersonal communication between adversaries in order to build peace, often by transforming attitudes and improving relationships.

online encounters (part 3). While there is already a body of academic literature on e-contact, research can struggle to keep pace with rapid technological development. Robust scholarship often requires significant time and the differences between the eras of email, messenger, Skype and Zoom are stark. While promising, academic research is therefore still limited or at times inconclusive regarding the conditions for effectiveness of online intergroup contact.<sup>7</sup> Given these limitations, in the second section I supplement the academic literature with perspectives from practitioners. The view from practice is based on several publications and workshops as well as over a dozen interviews and consultations with dialogue facilitators and mediators from a variety of contexts, working primarily for states and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) between July and September 2020 (see annex).

Finally, while this research is focused on dialogue facilitation – due in part to the fact most academic research on Contact Theory in conflict contexts is conducted in dialogue settings – it is worth emphasizing its relevance to mediators, negotiators and anyone facilitating meetings between conflict parties online. First, as most processes of conflict transformation require a multiplicity of conflict resolution mechanisms, dialogue could be taken into consideration as an element within a wider peace process – coming before, in parallel, or after other interventions such as political mediation. Second, negotiators working towards effective problem-solving, mediators assisting them in doing so, and even other actors, such as peacekeepers or humanitarian workers that need to bring parties together, could all benefit from a reduction of biases, increase of positive emotions, and ultimately bettering of relationships between conflict parties. These would, in turn, support better (more mutually beneficial) problem-solving and long-term trust, among other things. Moreover, the principles of Contact Theory have more to do with the intentional *structuring* of encounters than their specific substance. Therefore, lessons from Contact Theory can be applied not only to dialogue, but also mediation and other conflict resolution settings. Thus, while geared towards dialogue facilitators<sup>8</sup>, this paper is also a call to all peace practitioners to consider the relational dimension when planning meetings between adversaries and create optimal conditions for attitude transformations online.

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7 Chiara Imperato et al., “Allport Meets Internet: A Meta-Analytical Investigation of Online Intergroup Contact and Prejudice Reduction,” *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 81 (March 2021): 131–41, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2021.01.006>.

8 In the rest of the paper, I primarily use the term facilitators which is most commonly associated with dialogue processes; however, this analysis is also applicable to similar third-party roles such as conveners, moderators, and mediators.

# 1 Does Contact Theory “work”?

In their extensive and highly cited meta-analysis of intergroup contact, Thomas F. Pettigrew and Linda R. Tropp (2006) reviewed the results of 515 previous studies leading to a sample size of about 250,000 individuals from over 38 countries worldwide and a variety of contexts. They have shown that, put simply, **Contact Theory “works”**. Contact between groups reduces prejudice and increases social cohesion. While there are optimal conditions that make contact most effective, their research has also shown that they are not essential, and even contact under non-optimal conditions is likely to be effective in reducing prejudice and improving intergroup relations.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, additional research has shown that even in contexts of violent conflict – whereby contact can often only take place under *sub*-optimal conditions, such as lack of support from authorities and deep-seated inequalities – intergroup contact can still successfully advance peace promoting attitudes such as outgroup trust and forgiveness and ultimately improve intergroup relations.<sup>10</sup> However, positive outcomes are most likely when four **optimal conditions** are fulfilled. These are: (a) meeting under conditions of equal status, (b) having shared goals, (c) cooperating, and (d) receiving support from authorities, law, or customs.<sup>11</sup>

Various studies have tried to explain why intergroup contact is effective in improving intergroup relations. The assumption has been that “consistency theories” are responsible for this transformation, suggesting that when individuals are exposed to credible information that is inconsistent with their beliefs – such as the humanity of a previously dehumanized “enemy” – they experience uncomfortable dissonance and as a result may change their beliefs and attitudes in order to regain psychological consistency.<sup>12</sup> Whereas, previous researchers emphasized the importance of cognitive dissonance – such as unexpected knowledge about the “other” – recent empirical studies

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9 Pettigrew and Tropp, “A Meta-Analytic Test of Intergroup Contact Theory.”

10 Al Ramiah and Hewstone, “Intergroup Contact as a Tool for Reducing, Resolving, and Preventing Intergroup Conflict.”

11 These optimal conditions were first suggested by Gordon Allport, who coined the term Contact Hypothesis in 1954 in *The Nature of Prejudice*, and were later verified in additional research and the meta-analyses by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006, 2008).

12 Daniel Bar-Tal and Boaz Hameiri, “Interventions to Change Well-anchored Attitudes in the Context of Intergroup Conflict,” *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 14, no. 7 (July 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12534>.

have proved that **emotions are the main reason contact “works”**.<sup>13</sup> Intergroup contact reduces prejudice primarily because of the unexpected emotions the encounter elicits: reducing negative emotions such as intergroup anxiety on the one hand and inducing positive emotions such as empathy and perspective-taking on the other. Thus, while the optimal conditions outlined above make intergroup encounters more likely to be effective, the driving forces behind its effectiveness are reduced anxiety and increased empathy and understanding towards the “other side”.

Another research avenue has shown that, under certain conditions, **intergroup contact can have an exponential impact** on improving intergroup relations by improving one’s views not only about the specific people in the interaction, but the broader outgroup they belong to, as well as other “others” in society.<sup>14</sup> For example, if a member of group A (“circles”) meets a member of group B (“squares”), not only will he or she likely think better of that particular individual (that specific “square”), but also of other members of group B which they haven’t met in person (all other “squares”). They (the “circles”) would even think better of completely different groups in their community such as groups C (for example, “triangles”) or D (for example, “hexagons”). What enables us to generalize from an interaction with few individuals to entire societies? Research suggests that group categories must remain salient during intergroup encounters for this generalization to “work”. Once group differences are noticeable, participants view members of the outgroup in the interaction as *representative* of their group – not merely “special cases” or “outliers” – and thus generalize the positive effects of contact beyond the specific encounter.<sup>15</sup> However, the extent to which group categories should remain salient is still debated in the literature. Some have argued that encounters should in fact reduce the salience of group identities by “de-categorization” in order to reduce anxiety and allow for engagement on an individual interpersonal level that can overcome stereotypes and build

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- 13 Thomas F. Pettigrew and Linda R. Tropp, “How Does Intergroup Contact Reduce Prejudice? Meta-Analytic Tests of Three Mediators,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 38, no. 6 (September 2008): 922–34, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.504>.
  - 14 Oliver Christ and Mathias Kauff, “Intergroup Contact Theory,” in *Social Psychology in Action: Evidence-Based Interventions from Theory to Practice*, ed. Kai Sassenberg and Michael L.W. Vliek (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 145–61, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-13788-5\\_10](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-13788-5_10); Ashley Lytle, “Intergroup Contact Theory: Recent Developments and Future Directions,” *Social Justice Research* 31, no. 4 (December 2018): 374–85, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11211-018-0314-9>.
  - 15 Rupert Brown and Miles Hewstone, “An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Contact,” in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 37 (Elsevier, 2005), 255–343, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601\(05\)37005-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(05)37005-5); Miles Hewstone, “Intergroup Contact: Panacea for Prejudice?,” *The Psychologist* 16, no. 7 (July 2003): 352–55.

friendships. Others suggest encounters should focus on “re-categorization” by increasing the prominence of a shared superordinate identity (e.g., “women” or “victims”) that can unite groups through commonalities rather than focusing on the identity markers that divide them.<sup>16</sup> Given the importance of keeping group categorizations salient for generalizability however, suggestions have been made to combine these seemingly contradictory approaches sequentially, thus reaping the benefits of their relative advantages by first de-categorizing to increase personal connections on the individual level, then raising the salience of group categories to increase generalizability, and ultimately re-categorizing to enhance a shared identity.<sup>17</sup>

While promising, getting people from different groups to meet in person can be a difficult task, especially in conflict contexts where contact is often both practically challenging and socially unacceptable. So how can you get (enough) people to meet to make a real societal difference? Research provides some hopeful answers to this question suggesting that **when direct contact is limited, indirect contact can be a meaningful substitute**. Studies have shown that the effectiveness of intergroup contact does not rely solely on direct face-to-face encounters, but also “works” through indirect contact. This includes *vicarious* contact, including observing contact between members of an ingroup and outgroup. Indirect contact can also consist of *extended* contact: by merely knowing about contact between an ingroup member and an outgroup member, one’s intergroup relations improve. And finally, even *imagined* contact has positive effects.<sup>18</sup> This is good news for the peacebuilding community and may provide initial hints regarding the possibilities digital contact may offer.

Yet, Contact Theory is no panacea. As anything in life, it too has its limits. This is especially true in contexts of violent political conflict that often

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16 Samuel L. Gaertner et al., “Reducing Intergroup Bias: The Benefits of Recategorization,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 57, no. 2 (1989): 239–49, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.57.2.239>; Nurit Shnabel, Samer Halabi, and Masi Noor, “Overcoming Competitive Victimhood and Facilitating Forgiveness through Re-Categorization into a Common Victim or Perpetrator Identity,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 49, no. 5 (September 2013): 867–77, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2013.04.007>.

17 Christ and Kauff, “Intergroup Contact Theory.”

18 John F. Dovidio, Anja Eller, and Miles Hewstone, “Improving Intergroup Relations through Direct, Extended and Other Forms of Indirect Contact,” *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, March 25, 2011, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430210390555>; Gunnar Lemmer and Ulrich Wagner, “Can We Really Reduce Ethnic Prejudice Outside the Lab? A Meta-Analysis of Direct and Indirect Contact Interventions: Meta-Analysis of Contact Interventions,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 45, no. 2 (March 2015): 152–68, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2079>; Eleanor Miles and Richard J. Crisp, “A Meta-Analytic Test of the Imagined Contact Hypothesis,” *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 17, no. 1 (January 2014): 3–26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430213510573>.

provide suboptimal conditions for intergroup contact. There are **three key critiques of Contact Theory** as reflected in the literature: (1) it overlooks power relations; (2) it overlooks the destructive influence of negative contact; and (3) it is just not practical.

## 1 Intergroup contact does not address power relations and sustains the status quo

One key critique of Contact Theory is that, in focusing on commonalities and meeting under “equal status conditions”, it often overlooks power relations, thus ultimately sustaining the status quo of inequality rather than challenging it, to the disadvantage of the weaker party. This critique is two-fold. One school of thought believes the Contact Theory is effective for conflict resolution but needs to be tailored in order to address the different needs of low-status and high-status groups, as contact has differential effects on them and is generally less effective on changing mindsets of low-status group members.<sup>19</sup> For example, Bruneau and Saxe argue that, while most encounters emphasize perspective-taking activities – trying to get members of groups to “step into the shoes” of the “other” – research has shown this to be an effective strategy for high-status but not low-status groups, for which it may even be counterproductive. Instead, they argue low-status groups need to “be heard” through *perspective-giving* activities – meaning, having the space to share their perspective combined with a good listening counterpart.<sup>20</sup> A second school of thought argues that overlooking power relations is a fundamental limitation of Contact Theory, making encounters ineffective and at times even counterproductive for broader conflict resolution. Intergroup encounters facilitate building harmonious relations between participants; while seemingly a positive outcome, when unequal powers are involved, this sense of “harmony” has been empirically proven to often

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19 Lemmer and Wagner, “Can We Really Reduce Ethnic Prejudice Outside the Lab?”; Linda R. Tropp and Thomas F. Pettigrew, “Relationships between Intergroup Contact and Prejudice among Minority and Majority Status Groups,” *Psychological Science* 16, no. 12 (December 2005): 951–57, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2005.01643.x>.

20 Emile G. Bruneau and Rebecca Saxe, “The Power of Being Heard: The Benefits of ‘Perspective-Giving’ in the Context of Intergroup Conflict,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 48, no. 4 (July 2012): 855–66, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2012.02.017>.

demotivate the disempowered group members from seeking change.<sup>21</sup> Intergroup encounters may also create false expectations for equality which often lead to disappointment, undermining or even worsening relations.<sup>22</sup> In fact, there is evidence to show that *negative* (rather than positive) contact is what mobilizes groups to act towards social change. Furthermore, research is divided on whether intergroup contact motivates the advantaged group to actively seek change, as, while its members may change *attitudes*, this does not necessarily translate into actual *behavioral* changes such as support for policies that favor low-status groups in conflict contexts.<sup>23</sup> Meaning, while intergroup contact generally influences a change of attitudes, it may not provide the conditions for advancing structural change, to the disadvantage of the minority or disempowered group.<sup>24</sup>

## 2 Intergroup contact overlooks the destructive impact of negative contact

A second major critique of contact theory is that it overlooks the destructive influence of negative intergroup contact which, research has shown, has a stronger influence on attitudes than positive intergroup contact.<sup>25</sup> The implication is that positive changes in attitudes may not be sustainable over time.

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- 21 Siwar Hasan-Aslih et al., "A Darker Side of Hope: Harmony-Focused Hope Decreases Collective Action Intentions Among the Disadvantaged," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 45, no. 2 (February 2019): 209–23, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167218783190>.
  - 22 Tamar Saguy et al., "The Irony of Harmony: Intergroup Contact Can Produce False Expectations for Equality," *Psychological Science* 20, no. 1 (January 2009): 114–21, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2008.02261.x>.
  - 23 Tamar Saguy et al., "The Irony of Harmony: Past and New Developments," in *Intergroup Contact Theory: Recent Developments and Future Directions* (Routledge, 2016), 53–71, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315646510-8>.
  - 24 Zvi Bekerman, "Rethinking Intergroup Encounters: Rescuing Praxis from Theory, Activity from Education, and Peace/Co-existence from Identity and Culture," *Journal of Peace Education* 4, no. 1 (March 2007): 21–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17400200601171198>; Lisa Droogendyk et al., "Acting in Solidarity: Cross-Group Contact between Disadvantaged Group Members and Advantaged Group Allies: Acting in Solidarity," *Journal of Social Issues* 72, no. 2 (June 2016): 315–34, <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12168>; Tabea Hässler et al., "A Large-Scale Test of the Link between Intergroup Contact and Support for Social Change," *Nature Human Behaviour* 4, no. 4 (April 2020): 380–86, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-019-0815-z>; Lytle, "Intergroup Contact Theory"; ifat Maoz, "Does Contact Work in Protracted Asymmetrical Conflict? Appraising 20 Years of Reconciliation-Aimed Encounters between Israeli Jews and Palestinians," *Journal of Peace Research* 48, no. 1 (January 2011): 115–25, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343310389506>; Saguy et al., "The Irony of Harmony."
  - 25 Fiona Kate Barlow et al., "The Contact Caveat: Negative Contact Predicts Increased Prejudice More Than Positive Contact Predicts Reduced Prejudice," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 38, no. 12 (2012): 1629–43.



Especially in ongoing conflict contexts, where there are constant negative intergroup interactions, chances are that the positive intergroup contact experienced in, for example, a few intentionally structured encounters will not have a meaningful or lasting impact.<sup>26</sup> Intergroup contact programs in conflict contexts often suffer from creating a “bubble” reality in intense workshop environments that “pops” once participants return to their daily routines. Once the encounter is over, individuals who have gained new perspective following an encounter with their adversary then return to their normal networks and are again faced with the same negative narratives towards the outgroup.<sup>27</sup> Over time, and with the accumulation of new negative contact experiences (e.g., discrimination, violence), participants may re-adopt their previously held attitudes and beliefs.<sup>28</sup>

### 3 Intergroup contact is an impractical approach to conflict resolution

A final major critique of Contact Theory is that it is simply not practical to implement. Researchers (and practitioners) have argued that it is unrealistic to have enough people meet one another to allow for attitude changes that would make a significant influence at the group or societal level. Limitations of time, space, financing, and motivation make gatherings challenging in any context, let alone in conflict contexts that are often further complicated by physical, legal, psychological, and linguistic barriers, to name a few. This challenge is partly why many researchers look to indirect intergroup contact for more practical ways of prejudice reduction.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, in violent conflict contexts, feasibility is only one factor to consider. Even if one were to succeed in gathering people from various groups in conflict, the encounter holds serious risks to their safety and security. Meeting the “enemy” can be perceived by others in their group as an act of dissidence or even treason,

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- 26 Sylvie Graf and Stefania Paolini, “Investigating Positive and Negative Intergroup Contact: Rectifying a Long-Standing Positivity Bias in the Literature,” in *Intergroup Contact Theory*, ed. Lorin Vezzali and Sofia Stathi (Routledge, 2016), 2016, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315646510-10>.
- 27 Daniel Bar-Tal, “Conflict Supporting Narratives and the Struggle over Them,” in *Israeli and Palestinian Collective Narratives in Conflict*, ed. A. Srour and A. Mana (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020), 36–60.
- 28 Segal and Keduri, “The Impact of Facebook Communities on International Conflict Resolution.”
- 29 Yair Amichai-Hamburger and Katelyn Y. A. McKenna, “The Contact Hypothesis Reconsidered: Interacting via the Internet,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 11, no. 3 (April 2006): 825–43, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2006.00037.x>; Dovidio, Eller, and Hewstone, “Improving Intergroup Relations through Direct, Extended and Other Forms of Indirect Contact.”

alienating them from their own communities. This can have serious social, economic, political, and legal ramifications (e.g., excommunication from one's community, losing one's job, or imprisonment) and can even be life threatening.<sup>30</sup> Thus, any attempt at bringing people together must be considered with great caution, limiting its feasibility even more.

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30 Béatrice S. Hasler and Yair Amichai-Hamburger, "Online Intergroup Contact," in *The Social Net*, ed. Yair Amichai-Hamburger (Oxford University Press, 2013), 220–52, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199639540.003.0012>.

**Table 1: Summary of key insights from the academic literature**

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**Does intergroup contact “work”?**

- Generally: Yes!

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**Conditions that enhance the effectiveness of intergroup contact**

- a Meeting under equal status conditions;
- b Cooperating;
- c Having a shared goal;
- d Having the support from one’s environment (e.g., authorities, laws, customs).

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**Why does intergroup contact “work”?**

- Primarily due to emotions, in particular:
  - Reduced anxiety and intergroup threat.
  - Increased empathy and perspective-taking.
- Also due to cognitive experiences: new information about the adversary.

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**How do attitudes about individuals (in the encounter) generalize to the entire groups they belong to?**

- Group identities must be salient (to some degree) during the encounters; or participants should be perceived as representatives of their groups in some way.

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**What types of contact “work”?**

- Direct contact: Physical face-to-face encounters.
- Indirect contact:
  - Vicarious contact = *observing* an intergroup encounter.
  - Extended contact = *knowing about* an intergroup encounter.
  - Imagined contact = *imagining* meeting an outgroup member.

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**Key limitations and critiques of the Contact Theory**

1. It overlooks power relations, demotivating behavioral/structural change to the detriment of the weaker party.
  2. It overlooks the influence of negative contact, which in some contexts may mean a less sustainable attitude change.
  3. It is not practical when it comes to advancing societal level change.
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Given all the above, what happens to Contact Theory in the digitalized world of the 21st century?

## 2 Does *digital* contact “work”?

As of January 2023, 5.16 billion people, who represent 64.4% of the world population, use the internet<sup>31</sup>, with an average of 38% of their time spent on social media.<sup>32</sup> COVID-19 has accelerated these digitalization processes, including digital communication. With considerations of sustainability and climate responsibility, among others, digitalization will likely continue to grow in the years to come. Thus, it seems justified to ask ourselves: is Contact Theory relevant to *digital* contact? Can intergroup contact online reduce prejudice and improve intergroup relations?

The answer according to the academic community is a careful “yes”. A recent (2021) meta-analytical study that reviewed 23 previous studies of online contact – including but not limited to conflict contexts – showed a correlation exists between online intergroup contact and reduced prejudice towards outgroup members.<sup>33</sup> Several later studies have also showed the effectiveness of e-contact in conflict contexts.<sup>34</sup> However, scholars also found large variability across studies, meaning some were more successful than others and a need exists for further research on the topic to make more conclusive claims.<sup>35</sup> Some researchers hail the new possibilities of online encounters, claiming they can be even *more* effective than in-person meetings for

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31 Simon Kemp, Datareportal, “Digital 2023: Global Overview Report”, [https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-global-overview-report?utm\\_source=Global\\_Digital\\_Reports&utm\\_medium=PDF&utm\\_campaign=Digital\\_2023&utm\\_content=Global\\_Overview\\_Foreword](https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-global-overview-report?utm_source=Global_Digital_Reports&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=Digital_2023&utm_content=Global_Overview_Foreword), 26 January 2023.

32 Simon Kemp, Datareportal, “Digital 2023 Deep-Dive: How Much Time Do We Spend on Social Media?”, [https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-deep-dive-time-spent-on-social-media?utm\\_source=Global\\_Digital\\_Reports&utm\\_medium=Partner\\_Article&utm\\_campaign=Digital\\_2023](https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-deep-dive-time-spent-on-social-media?utm_source=Global_Digital_Reports&utm_medium=Partner_Article&utm_campaign=Digital_2023), 26 January 2023.

33 Imperato et al., “Allport Meets Internet.”

34 Sabahat C. Bagci et al., “Investigating the Role of E-contact and Self-disclosure on Improving Turkish-Kurdish Interethnic Relations,” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 51, no. 6 (June 2021): 577–93, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jasp.12760>; Joy Benatov, Rony Berger, and Carmit T. Tadmor, “Gaming for Peace: Virtual Contact through Cooperative Video Gaming Increases Children’s Intergroup Tolerance in the Context of the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 92 (January 2021): 104065, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2020.104065>.

35 Imperato et al., “Allport Meets Internet”; Sandy Schumann and Ysanne Moore, “What Can Be Achieved with Online Intergroup Contact Interventions? Assessing Long-term Attitude, Knowledge, and Behaviour Change,” *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* 22, no. 3 (December 2022): 1072–91, <https://doi.org/10.1111/asap.12333>.

improving intergroup relations.<sup>36</sup> Others argue that, while effective, online contact is *slightly less* so than physical meetings (but still better than none at all).<sup>37</sup> Still others argue that while preliminary evidence is promising, decisive conclusions are not yet possible as more rigorous research is needed, especially outside the lab.<sup>38</sup> It is important to note that the research community has reviewed very different types of virtual contact, from text-based large group unstructured encounters (i.e., of thousands on platforms like Facebook)<sup>39</sup>, to small (e.g., 8–12 people) structured encounters on video-based platforms such as Skype.<sup>40</sup> The latter encounter allows for a more enriched audio-visual environment leading to a higher sense of presence, which has been found to enable empathy, thus making the encounter more effective for prejudice reduction.<sup>41</sup> Video-based encounters are also as close to direct face-to-face encounters as possible; while such “e-contact” means meeting in cyber space rather than physical space, it can still occur synchronously (in “real time”) and all parties can be actively engaged. In these ways, it is considered even better than other types of indirect contact such as extended, vicarious,

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- 36 Amichai-Hamburger and McKenna, “The Contact Hypothesis Reconsidered”; Fiona A. White et al., “Beyond Direct Contact: The Theoretical and Societal Relevance of Indirect Contact for Improving Intergroup Relations,” *Journal of Social Issues* 77, no. 1 (March 2021): 132–53, <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12400>; Fiona A. White, Lauren J. Harvey, and Hisham M. Abu-Rayya, “Improving Intergroup Relations in the Internet Age: A Critical Review,” *Review of General Psychology* 19, no. 2 (June 2015): 129–39, <https://doi.org/10.1037/gpr0000036>.
  - 37 Salma Mousa, “Contact in the Classroom: Can Virtual Exchanges Build Tolerance?” (May 30, 2020).
  - 38 Lemmer and Wagner, “Can We Really Reduce Ethnic Prejudice Outside the Lab?”; White, Harvey, and Abu-Rayya, “Improving Intergroup Relations in the Internet Age.”
  - 39 Yifat Mor, Yiftach Ron, and Ifat Maoz, “‘Likes’ for Peace: Can Facebook Promote Dialogue in the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict?,” *Media and Communication* 4, no. 1 (February 18, 2016): 15, <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v4i1.298>; Segal and Keduri, “The Impact of Facebook Communities on International Conflict Resolution”; Haim Weinberg, *The Paradox of Internet Groups: Alone in the Presence of Virtual Others*, The Paradox of Internet Groups: Alone in the Presence of Virtual Others (London, England: Karnac Books, 2014).
  - 40 Emile Bruneau et al., “Intergroup Contact Reduces Dehumanization and Meta-Dehumanization: Cross-Sectional, Longitudinal, and Quasi-Experimental Evidence From 16 Samples in Five Countries,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, August 31, 2020, 014616722094900, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167220949004>; Mahin Tavakoli, Javad Hatami, and Warren Thorngate, “Changing Stereotypes in Iran and Canada Using Computer Mediated Communication,” *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, 2010, 15.
  - 41 Stef G. Nicovich, Gregory W. Boller, and T. Bettina Cornwell, “Experienced Presence within Computer-Mediated Communications: Initial Explorations on the Effects of Gender with Respect to Empathy and Immersion,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 10, no. 2 (June 23, 2006): 00–00, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2005.tb00243.x>.

or imagined contact, and thus more effective for attitude transformation.<sup>42</sup> Finally, a most recent research avenue has been Virtual Reality (VR) based intergroup contact. Many have hailed the value of VR for positively influencing intergroup relations, calling it “the ultimate empathy machine” (a term partially popularized by Chris Milk in a successful 2015 TED talk about VR). Its supposed capacity for eliciting intergroup empathy relates to the unique sense of immersion and “real” presence one feels despite being online.<sup>43</sup> However, experimental studies have so far led to mixed results<sup>44</sup> with critical voices warning about some of the limitations and risks of VR for intergroup relations.<sup>45</sup>

In many ways the experiences from the field – primarily based on small, synchronous, structured<sup>46</sup>, video-based encounters – concur with the academic research on the advantages of online contact, while also highlighting some of its limitations. However, many practitioners end up with a much more ambivalent conclusion regarding the potential of digital encounters to build relations among adversaries. This could relate to their extensive experience of in-person encounters providing a high benchmark for relationship building. Indeed, the advantages and disadvantages of online encounters (or at least, their perception) are partially related to their contextualization among other alternatives: when the alternative is a rich in-person encounter,

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- 42 Yair Amichai-Hamburger and Shir Etgar, “Online Contact and Intergroup Conflict Resolution,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*, by Yair Amichai-Hamburger and Shir Etgar (Oxford University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.458>; Amichai-Hamburger and McKenna, “The Contact Hypothesis Reconsidered”; Hasler and Amichai-Hamburger, “Online Intergroup Contact”; White, Harvey, and Abu-Rayya, “Improving Intergroup Relations in the Internet Age.”
  - 43 Mel Slater and Maria V. Sanchez-Vives, “Enhancing Our Lives with Immersive Virtual Reality,” *Frontiers in Robotics and AI* 3 (December 19, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.3389/frobt.2016.00074>.
  - 44 Matilde Tassinari, Matthias Burkard Aulbach, and Inga Jasinskaja-Lahti, “Investigating the Influence of Intergroup Contact in Virtual Reality on Empathy: An Exploratory Study Using AltspaceVR,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (February 2, 2022): 815497, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.815497>; Soo Youn Oh et al., “Virtually Old: Embodied Perspective Taking and the Reduction of Ageism under Threat,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 60 (July 2016): 398–410, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.02.007>; Béatrice S. Hasler et al., “Virtual Reality-Based Conflict Resolution: The Impact of Immersive 360° Video on Changing View Points and Moral Judgment in the Context of Violent Intergroup Conflict,” *New Media & Society* 23, no. 8 (August 2021): 2255–78, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444821993133>; Fernanda Herrera et al., “Building Long-Term Empathy: A Large-Scale Comparison of Traditional and Virtual Reality Perspective-Taking,” ed. Brock Bastian, *PLOS ONE* 13, no. 10 (October 17, 2018): e0204494, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0204494>.
  - 45 Carles Sora-Domenjó, “Disrupting the ‘Empathy Machine’: The Power and Perils of Virtual Reality in Addressing Social Issues,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 13 (September 26, 2022): 814565, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.814565>.
  - 46 All practitioners referred to their experiences in programs that brought people from different groups together intentionally, in structured and often facilitated programs (compared to unstructured, “naturalistic” contact, such as a spontaneous meeting with an “outsider” on an online forum).

online meetings can be experienced as disappointing when it comes to relationship building, even if they still have value in this regard. However, when the alternative is no contact at all and the continuation of negative intergroup attitudes, online meetings can provide a low threshold for meaningful positive transformations. This seems to also suggest that, as much as possible, online and in-person meetings should not stand alone as binary possibilities but as complementary practices that can be sequenced or combined given context limitations and to build on their relative advantages.

In the rest of this section, I return to the conditions identified in scholarly research for effective intergroup (in-person) contact and review the opportunities and limitations of e-contact in meeting these conditions, and thus the possibilities of reducing biases and bettering intergroup relations.

## 2.1 Optimal conditions for intergroup encounters: can we create them online?

Both researchers and practitioners seem to agree that, similar to physical encounters, contact online *can* meet the four optimal conditions for effective intergroup encounters. In fact, some have even argued that the online environment provides *better* possibilities for meeting these conditions. However, the online space also brings with it new challenges that must be considered.

### Equal status

So long as one has access to the internet, combined with the skill and motivation to use it, the digital encounters “level the playing field”<sup>47</sup>, both in terms of access to the encounter and the environment within it. Digital spaces can strengthen the sense of equality between individuals and groups compared to face-to-face encounters by reducing the influence of power and status. The online space reduces inequality entailed in getting to a physical meeting location (for example due to physical, legal, or cultural barriers), and provides a relatively neutral space for the encounter to take place. As one interviewee mentioned, “now we meet when everyone is physically in their own home – it is

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47 Amichai-Hamburger and McKenna, “The Contact Hypothesis Reconsidered,” 829.

more equality, everyone is equally in their ‘safe space’”. The online environment also entails equal distribution of space *within* the encounter. As one interviewee put it: “there is an equalizing element in the location; no issues of where people sit to show their status etc., everyone has the same size ‘box’”. Furthermore, digital interactions reduce non-verbal cues of status and difference between parties, such as body language, physical attributes (such as height), dress, and seating positions, thus making (certain) power differences less pronounced, even subconsciously. The consequence of this “equalizer” is also that participants are less worried about what others think of them and have fewer inhibitions to actively participate in the encounter leading some (e.g., junior or otherwise lower-status members) to participate more frequently and be more open to self-disclosure.<sup>48</sup> Finally, in certain cases the virtual space can even help overcome language inequality, allowing everyone to speak in their native tongue while using instant translation services (such as “interprefy” or the interpretation feature on Zoom).<sup>49</sup>

While there is general agreement regarding the enhanced sense of equality in the online space, practitioners warned of the inherent inequality embedded in the platform for those with limited or poor internet connection and in contexts where one party has the power to monitor or control internet connection and traffic (e.g., a government controlling access to certain sites or spaces). Additionally, there can be inequality in terms of the convenience and safety of meeting online: for some, the home environment is in fact less convenient given personal/professional demands and a lack of a private space which could lead to higher sense of risk (e.g., if one’s participation is made known to the community). Finally, differing levels of digital literacy can lead to unequal ability and comfort of participation, and thus unbalanced participation in the session – for example, due to speed of typing,

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48 Yair Amichai-Hamburger and Adrian Furnham, “The Positive Net,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 23, no. 2 (March 2007): 1033–45, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2005.08.008>; Imperato et al., “Allport Meets Internet.”

49 Yair Amichai-Hamburger, Béatrice S. Hasler, and Tal Shani-Sherman, “Structured and Unstructured Intergroup Contact in the Digital Age,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 52 (November 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.02.022>; Amichai-Hamburger and McKenna, “The Contact Hypothesis Reconsidered”; Hasler and Amichai-Hamburger, “Online Intergroup Contact”; White, Harvey, and Abu-Rayya, “Improving Intergroup Relations in the Internet Age.”





Despite these clear advantages, digital realities are limited on a few key fronts. Unlike in-person meetings, digital meetings cannot be augmented with experiential physical activities outside of the meeting itself, such as visits and tours (for example to key locations of dispute); it is much harder to use visuals such as drawing on a flip chart together or working on maps; and it is also more challenging to finalize an agreement both practically and symbolically, given the lack of for example a handshake gesture or formal simultaneous signing of a document.

### Support from authorities, laws or customs

One of the key challenges of encounters between parties in ongoing conflict is that they often inherently lack support from their environment (be it from official authorities or laws, or through traditional customs or norms). In some cases, it may be legally impossible to meet, politically risky, or socially or even physically dangerous. Some researchers and practitioners suggest that, in conflict contexts, getting support from one's environment is easier online (compared to in person). They claim this is because the cost and effort to organize such events is lower, and therefore their perceived risk is lower too; they are perceived as "marginal" – often perceived to be less public, and demand fewer resources – and thus easier to support.<sup>56</sup> In contrast, physical encounters demand coordination and cooperation with many different community members – such as owners of meeting rooms, transportation and insurance companies, catering and printing services, etc. – who might be against the initiative. Organizers of the Israeli-Palestinian Memorial Day ceremony, for example, have struggled finding a location to host their event as municipal leaders refuse to allow it to take place in their jurisdiction<sup>57</sup>; they have also tried

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56 Yair Amichai-Hamburger, "The Contact Hypothesis Reconsidered: Interacting via Internet: Theoretical and Practical Aspects," in *Psychological Aspects of Cyberspace*, ed. Azy Barak (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 209–27, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511813740.010>; White, Harvey, and Abu-Rayya, "Improving Intergroup Relations in the Internet Age."

57 For example: Times of Israel Staff. Holon Refuses to host Israeli-Palestinian alternative Memorial Day event. (6 April 2018). The Times of Israel. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/holon-refuses-to-host-israeli-palestinian-alternative-memorial-day-event>.

keeping the location secret to avoid counter-protests.<sup>58</sup> In fact, in 2022, even when physical meetings were possible again towards the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, the organizers decided to keep the event partially online given the obstructive physical environment. In comparison, as online encounters can take place on various platforms (or on dedicated ones for added privacy, as in the case of the NGO *Soliya*), one does not need to engage with as many externals and can participate in relative anonymity. All this means that the need for external support might be altogether less important online.

At the same time, the digital space also opens new opportunities for gaining support from one's environment by allowing for an engagement of people from physically distant locations. These could be world experts or authority figures, international peace activists, or diaspora communities, to name a few. For example, in recent years, the abovementioned annual Israeli-Palestinian Memorial Day Ceremony invited external guests – including South African bishop and activist Desmond Tutu, UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Nickolay Mladenov, and actor and peace activist Richard Gere – to provide virtual speeches of support to this event, countering the lack of such support locally. Such an engagement would have been highly unlikely to take place if fully in-person. Finally, scholars show that authority support can at minimum be heightened through the mere presence of a facilitator who directs and structures the experience providing a sense of leadership, compared to “spontaneous” unstructured encounters without facilitation.<sup>59</sup> To sum up, the need for institutional or normative support is perhaps less important online, but, if needed, might be easier to find through alternative, external, communities and with the presence of a facilitator.

The key limitation of online encounters in this regard is the inability to separate participants from surroundings that may ultimately un-

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58 Ran Shimoni, “Secret Location, Israeli Coalition Members and Palestinians on Zoom: Join Memorial Offers ‘Alternative’”, *Haaretz*, 4 May 2022. <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-05-04/ty-article/premium/israeli-palestinian-memorial-event-offers-a-chance-for-connection/00000180-9e4b-d9e1-a9c0-bf5f5f1c0000>; Udi Shaham, “Ideological face off at joint Israeli-Palestinian memorial day ceremony”, *The Jerusalem Post*, 2 May 2017. <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/thousands-attend-joint-israeli-palestinian-memorial-day-ceremony-489447>.

59 Imperato et al., “Allport Meets Internet”; White et al., “Improving Intergroup Relations between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland via E-Contact.”

dermine the goals of the dialogue. In physical encounters, participants can be taken to a neutral or more supportive physical context – for example, taking Israelis and Palestinians to Norway, or Indonesian government and rebel group representatives to Finland. With digital contact, people often remain within their communities which, in conflict contexts, tend to be critical or fully opposed to encounters with “the other side”. Thus, getting “caught”, even online, can lead to significant repercussions (see section 2.5 on security) and cause increased anxiety from the participants, which can reduce the effectiveness of the encounter.

## 2.2 Engaging emotions: is it possible online?

Researchers and practitioners seem to agree that meeting online reduces the anxiety participants feel – which helps the encounter’s effectiveness – but also reduces our ability to feel empathy and take others’ perspectives, which hinders the encounter’s effectiveness. Given the importance of emotions for the efficacy of Contact Theory, I will elaborate on both dimensions.

When reflecting on the emotional experience in digital encounters, interviewees repeatedly expressed the notion that participants in online encounters are more relaxed and less intimidated or fearful compared to physical meetings. Evidence from academic research concurs.<sup>60</sup> Unlike physical encounters, participants interact from the comfort and safety of their own homes or home environments, with a much higher degree of control over their self-disclosure and over the interaction as a whole and are thus “more relaxed and in a collaborative mood”.<sup>61</sup> As one interviewee put it, “no one knows who I’ve met in the last five months” [referring to the time since the COVID-19 pandemic – IB], while others expressed their surprise at the high levels of sharing of personal information in small group encounters (of 6–10 people), suggesting this is due to lower levels of fear from asking

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60 Amichai-Hamburger, Hasler, and Shani-Sherman, “Structured and Unstructured Intergroup Contact in the Digital Age”; Amichai-Hamburger and McKenna, “The Contact Hypothesis Reconsidered”; White, Harvey, and Abu-Rayya, “Improving Intergroup Relations in the Internet Age.”

61 HD center. “Facilitating online meetings with counterparts and conflict parties: Lessons from the lockdown”.

the “tough” questions and sharing honest personal answers given the physical distance and overall sense of safety in one’s home environment. Indeed, in text-based interactions, participants can “pre-cook” every word, and even in video interactions, they can tailor their image, background, positioning in front of the camera, and even name. On various online platforms, they can even interact anonymously. Participants can mute themselves or others, turn off their camera, leave the encounter completely within seconds, and control the extent and frequency of their text-based messages. These all provide for a much more controlled and therefore less anxiety-provoking environment. Furthermore, the higher level of equality discussed above means that certain cues of power and status (such as clothing, seating arrangements, and body language) are less pronounced, reducing anxiety in turn. Finally, some claim that certain online encounters have an added element of fun: from the simple use of emoticons to elaborate avatars and virtual realities, the online space can bring humor and joy into what is otherwise an emotionally demanding experience. This means that participants are less anxious to join the encounter and more relaxed throughout it, ostensibly creating a more conducive atmosphere for attitude change and initial relationship building.<sup>62</sup>

The home environment has another significant advantage mentioned by almost all interviewees (albeit rarely noted in the literature): the humanizing effect of the intimacy of “entering” people’s homes, in the case of video-based encounters.<sup>63</sup> Participants can see into one another’s home environments, often providing a glimpse of their life: a family photo, a piece of furniture, an ornament, a messy kitchen table. Sometimes co-workers, family members or pets enter the frame in the background. These small pieces of information provide for a richer sense of the people “on the other side” of the screen – their human side. One cannot reduce them to a one-dimensional identity as representatives of the “enemy” group anymore. Rather, they are “forced” to see other aspects of their identities, for example as a family man or woman, an office mate, or an animal lover. This inherently reinforces superordinate identities and experiences that cut

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62 Amichai-Hamburger, Hasler, and Shani-Sherman, “Structured and Unstructured Intergroup Contact in the Digital Age.”

63 Weinberg, *The Paradox of Internet Groups*.

across cleavages and have been shown to overcome differences and increase empathy and trust.<sup>64</sup> One interviewee described the way this plays out in a dialogue session:

We are inside people's lives. Sometimes a grandma walks by, a grandchild watches TV in the background, several times a pet (dog or cat) enters the screen and all those who love pets go 'awwww' automatically and then everyone has to stop and chat about it for a few minutes. Sometimes the facilitator has to force them back 'on track'. These are actually key moments of humanization. People's humanity is much more prominent, in your face, than in face-to-face workshop environments.

A final advantage of holding encounters online from one's home environment concerns the relationship between the conflict parties and third-party facilitator. Especially in situations where participants come from cultures where family and relationships are of high value, seeing the facilitator as a family man or woman in the intimacy of their home – as more than a technical professional – can be particularly valuable for trust building.

In ideal online encounter conditions – e.g., where encounters take place over video telecommunication platforms, with all participants enjoying good connections, in quiet environments – participants can see multiple faces at once in a manner that is unlike physical encounters. The focus on faces online further amplifies the humanization process, providing a strengthened connection to emotional content expressed through facial expressions. Seeing many faces in the conversation at once (usually impossible in an in-person meeting) can create a stronger sense of community, togetherness, and even humanity. As one interviewee noted, "You can see everything when you have the luxury of seeing 30 faces." Furthermore, seeing yourself and being aware of how you are seen by others, while distracting, may in fact lend itself to higher self-awareness and thus higher levels of concentration and presence. Research suggests this is partly what makes on-

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64 Dekha Ibrahim Abdi and Simon A. Mason, *Mediation and Governance in Fragile Contexts: Small Steps to Peace* (Boulder Colorado: Kumarian Press, 2019); Samuel L. Gaertner and John F. Dovidio, *Reducing Intergroup Bias: The Common Ingroup Identity Model*, *Reducing Intergroup Bias: The Common Ingroup Identity Model* (New York, NY, US: Psychology Press, 2000).

line encounters so tiresome: We are more self-aware, more accountable to others, and trying to process more information all at once while overcoming the lack of non-verbal information we are used to (e.g., body language).<sup>65</sup> This is indeed a draining experience, however, as one interviewee emphasized, we will likely get better and better at reading people and reading “the room” through facial expressions and can practice it with intentionality.

One would think that conditions that allow for humanization processes would also enhance empathy and perspective-taking – key for attitude transformation. Yet, this is one of the key limitations of online encounters. “You lose the empathy”; that is how one interviewee described the difference between face-to-face and digital encounters. Many interviewees had similar thoughts. The virtual space limits emotional communication to a degree that, according to some researchers, may reduce empathy, trust, intimacy, and friendship-building.<sup>66</sup> There are several possible explanations for this. First, it is much harder to express and “read” or understand people’s feelings online; we are neurologically less able to experience what others are feeling.<sup>67</sup> This is partly due to the camera’s narrow focus leading to limited information about other participants – only seeing faces, in non-life-size scale and with no body language. We are used to much richer sensory information when it comes to our judgement of others – for example, through small physical gestures, sound utterances, smell, and of course physical contact, such as a hug or handshake. Furthermore, eye contact, key to trust building, is impossible even in one-on-one interactions, let alone in groups. In the virtual space people are thus reduced to what they say verbally and their tone of voice – perhaps explaining the efficiency and capacity to cooperate, but also the lim-

65 Assaf Ron’el, “zu lo (rak) hasicha, za hamedium: choker mo’ach masbir ma habasis hamada’i me’achorey ‘ayefut zoom’ [It’s not (only) the conversation, it’s the medium: Brain researcher explains the scientific basis for ‘Zoom fatigue’],” *Haaretz* פִּיֶּרֶס, April 27, 2020, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/health/corona/.premium.HIGHLIGHT-MAGAZINE-1.8803849>.

66 Leanne S. Bohannon et al., “Eye Contact and Video-Mediated Communication: A Review,” *Displays* 34, no. 2 (April 2013): 177–85, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.displa.2012.10.009>; Mousa, “Contact in the Classroom: Can Virtual Exchanges Build Tolerance?”; Giuseppe Riva, Brenda K. Wiederhold, and Fabrizia Mantovani, “Surviving COVID-19: The Neuroscience of Smart Working and Distance Learning,” *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 24, no. 2 (February 1, 2021): 79–85, <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2021.0009>.

67 Mousa, “Contact in the Classroom: Can Virtual Exchanges Build Tolerance?”; Riva, Wiederhold, and Mantovani, “Surviving COVID-19.”

itations on trust building.<sup>68</sup> As one participant noted: “the live encounter is richer...you see the person in his/her entirety, not just what he/she says.”

Empathy and emotional presence are further hampered by structural challenges related to the rhythm and context of online encounters. Online encounters are typically at home, short, spaced, and iterative (rather than out-of-home, long, dense, and immersive). This means that participants have less physical and mental space to immerse themselves in the experience and allow themselves to consider a change of perceptions. The transition time from encounter to daily life is zero, leaving no space for debriefing, reflection and letting processes “sink in”. One interviewee expressed it as follows:

You lose the post-event 20–30 minutes of informal debrief, the “talking about the show”; seeing that we have all experienced something similar; talking about specific moments; talking with the facilitator about something she said; asking a question; feeling like they are not alone, like everyone is going through the same challenges, understanding the emotional and intellectual challenge involved, etc.

The inability to immerse ourselves in the experience is exacerbated by the fact that the home environment makes people more distracted and thus the interaction less intimate in format and voice; participants are constantly tempted to do other things (such as check one’s emails or take care of a sick child) that hamper their ability to concentrate and listen and their counterpart’s ability to feel heard. As one interviewee mentioned: “We don’t mute, but then sometimes you hear a dog or a baby and that breaks the dynamics as well. There is no intimacy of a group.” Finally, with lower effort required to join encounters online comes lower commitment to them, and consequently lower levels of engagement and intimacy: “They don’t drive for two hours to get to the meeting, therefore sometimes they just ‘disappear’ from Zoom. This is very problematic for group dynamics.”

Finally, emotional connection is also challenged by the rigid nature of most online platforms, allowing little to no space for informal, unstructured, spontaneous, and non-verbal interactions, the kind

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68 Bohannon et al., “Eye Contact and Video-Mediated Communication.”



of “chit-chat” that usually takes place over coffee breaks or in the corridors and where relations are built and even where some say “real negotiations” take place. As one practitioner put it: “online is more formal posturing, like a series of speeches rather than discussion with listening not only speaking. It’s more stiff, especially if people don’t know one another from before.” Several interviewees emphasized the importance of, for example, a handshake or a sharing of a cup of coffee in certain cultures for trust building, and the limitations of digital contact in this regard. The rigid structure of a video-conferencing program allows for very limited interaction formats, e.g., changing which participants are highlighted on one’s screen or using a special function to create “Break-Out Rooms.” Consequently, the facilitator cannot utilize a U-shape table, a round table, change seating arrangements, organize walks, meet over meals or social events etc. In an attempt to partially overcome this challenge, the NGO Soliya developed their own video-conferencing platform so participants see themselves “sitting” around a round table. Still, for some practitioners, the entire methodology of encounter is based on how group and power dynamics developed organically, which are almost impossible to replicate online: “our dialogues are fundamentally un-structured, this [Zoom- IB] is the opposite of our approach.” With few formats for informal un-structured exchange, participants may see the encounter as a “business conversation” and prefer limiting the “unpleasant interaction” as much as possible. They use the time to “get things done”, before going to have dinner with their families; whereas in an in-person context, people are “stuck” together in breaks and evenings so might as well share a meal, a cup of coffee, or a glass of wine. Interviewees emphasized that while possible to *continue* meeting online if participants already met in person, it is extremely difficult to build trusting relations online from scratch. The rigid nature of the online tool was something almost all practitioners maligned. As one interviewee summed it up:

Zoom is good for a meeting of scientists; for a lecture it works, not for a dynamic process between people...it is much harder to be angry on Zoom. People are more “correct”. Hard to have heated debates. One person talks, then finishes, then the other speaks. It is a much more structured debate. It kills the group dynamics. It is more intellectual and less emotional.

The above challenges are partly associated with limitations in participants' sense of "presence" and rich sensory experience, which are linked to our capacity to empathize with others.<sup>69</sup> Some early researchers have claimed Virtual Reality<sup>70</sup> can overcome exactly these challenges through a sensorimotor immersion which makes the human brain believe one is truly present in the virtual space, quiets any distractions (for example through the use of a VR headset), and is based on our natural physical movements (such as turning of our heads in different directions for a 360 degree view).<sup>71</sup> This has led to early optimism regarding the potential of VR to be the "ultimate empathy machine." While research on VR is still in its infancy, from what we know so far, its potential is perhaps more limited than initially believed and also introduces risks as well as opportunities.<sup>72</sup> Specifically, while various VR experiences *can* lead to higher empathy with an outgroup, VR intergroup encounters might not be the best for this purpose. Two studies did not find a link between encounters in VR and increased empathy towards the outgroup<sup>73</sup>, while other strategies, such as embodying the "other side" in VR (e.g., Caucasians in dark-skinned virtual bodies; or Israeli Jews in Palestinian virtual bodies), seem more effective for perspective-taking and attitude transformation.<sup>74</sup> Yet, much more research is necessary to make any conclusive claims.

## 2.3 Making an exponential impact: is it possible online?

While there is limited empirical data in this regard, contributions from both theory and practice have suggested that the online space is

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69 Nicovich, Boller, and Cornwell, "Experienced Presence within Computer-Mediated Communications."

70 Whether using computer graphics or a 360-video technology.

71 Slater and Sanchez-Vives, "Enhancing Our Lives with Immersive Virtual Reality"; Sora-Domenjó, "Disrupting the 'Empathy Machine.'"

72 Sora-Domenjó, "Disrupting the 'Empathy Machine.'"

73 Hasler et al., "Virtual Reality-Based Conflict Resolution"; Tassinari, Aulbach, and Jasinskaja-Lahti, "Investigating the Influence of Intergroup Contact in Virtual Reality on Empathy."

74 Yossi Hasson et al., "The Enemy's Gaze: Immersive Virtual Environments Enhance Peace Promoting Attitudes and Emotions in Violent Intergroup Conflicts," ed. Stefano Triberti, *PLOS ONE* 14, no. 9 (September 11, 2019): e0222342, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0222342>; Herrera et al., "Building Long-Term Empathy."

conducive to intentionally controlling levels of group identity salience. In turn, this may increase the chances of generalizing attitude changes from the individuals in the encounter to the entire groups they represent. One study in particular showed the value of accentuating group identity (in this case through visual identification by national flags that identify majority versus minority groups in Spain), compared to emphasizing personal identities only.<sup>75</sup> From an implementation perspective, practitioners repeatedly mentioned the unequivocal level of control the facilitators/mediators/hosts have in an online encounter compared to a face-to-face encounter: “you as mediator have ultimate power. You can shut someone up, literally. You can even kick people out. This is more power than before [pre COVID-19 in physical encounters – IB] and it is significant.” Therefore, facilitators can and should aim to intentionally consider when in a process they wish to accentuate individual identities (for more interpersonal interactions), group identities (for more intergroup interactions), or superordinate identities (to create a collective shared identity).<sup>76</sup> This can be done, for example, by the use of particular language or names online, choice of backgrounds or “avatars”, as well as the choice of discussion topics – for example, in an Israeli-Palestinian dialogue project, participants in the first encounter introduced themselves on a personal level (their families, jobs, etc.), in subsequent encounters were asked to share how and when they encountered the political conflict in their lives, bringing forth a group-level perspective. During the final meeting, participants discussed being victims of violence and their shared sense of loss, which emphasized a superordinate identity of victimhood.<sup>77</sup>

According to many interviewees, while the influence facilitators have on group identity salience might be greater online compared to

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75 Salvador Alvidrez et al., “Intergroup Contact in Computer-Mediated Communication: The Interplay of a Stereotype-Disconfirming Behavior and a Lasting Group Identity on Reducing Prejudiced Perceptions,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 52 (November 2015): 533–40, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.09.006>.

76 Amichai-Hamburger, Hasler, and Shani-Sherman, “Structured and Unstructured Intergroup Contact in the Digital Age”; Amichai-Hamburger and McKenna, “The Contact Hypothesis Reconsidered.”

77 For more information, please see the documentary film “Two Sided Story” directed by Tor Ben Mayor and produced by Produced by “Families Forum”, the Israeli Production Company 2shotmedia, and the Palestinian news agency Ma’an <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RzJkBxQC4Tg>

in-person, the capacity to feel a sense of “groupness” at all is generally much weaker. Group dynamics are difficult if not impossible to create online as groups are quite literally fragmented on the screen. Therefore, even with such control, the capacity for a facilitator to create a unified group and allow for the expression of multiple group identities – including allowing for the disconfirmation of group stereotypes – might be limited at best.<sup>78</sup> Another challenge raised by practitioners is that, while control can enable the smooth advancement of a process, it also risks becoming too authoritative or imposing one’s own view on conflict parties rather than empowering them, and thus undermining participants’ ownership of the process. One small example is the inability of a third-party facilitator to knock before entering a Break-Out Room, which can lead to a sense of intrusion and even insecurity (leading facilitators to seek alternative ways to virtually “knock”). One could envision various technological advances that could one day help overcome these challenges.



## 2.4 Key limitations of in-person encounters: can digital contact overcome them?

There is little evidence that virtual encounters are any different when it comes to their limitations regarding addressing power dynamics and the differential effects of the encounter on the high- versus low-status groups. However, virtual encounters may have some advantages when it comes to overcoming the other two key critiques of Contact Theory: (1) the detrimental influence of negative intergroup contact; and (2) the impractical nature of intergroup contact for societal-level change.

### Can e-contact overcome the detrimental effects of negative contact?

As noted above, the prevalence of negative intergroup encounters, especially in conflict contexts, is a key limitation for the sustainability of attitude transformations. This has often been referred to in practice as

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78 Alvidrez et al., “Intergroup Contact in Computer-Mediated Communication.”

the “re-entry problem”<sup>79</sup>: participants create a “new reality” of togetherness in isolated settings, but cannot sustain it after reintegrating back into their normal lives. This is particularly true in situations where pervasive negative contact in daily life is the norm. On the contrary, the embeddedness of online contact within daily life – in one’s own room/office, in between family dinners, while fulfilling other work obligations – may help sustain the positive impacts of connection.<sup>80</sup> Online contact can take place on a continuous basis, in shorter but more frequent sessions that enable more long-term processes to take place. As the director of *Soliya* explains it:

[In the online space there is] no cognitive dissonance – they are ‘at home’ (or in the university) so they can discuss the conversations they had online with their family or friends immediately, and bring back to the group anything that came up in these conversations in the next session. They’re not responsible to face their community all at once when coming back from an immersive experience.

Taking advantage of this unique feature of online contact can help overcome one of the key limitations of face-to-face encounters, possibly making their long-term impact more permanent.

### Can e-contact overcome the impractical nature of Contact Theory for societal change?

A second, and perhaps most obvious, advantage of digital contact over in-person contact is its practicality. Digital contact is perceived by many to be cheaper, logistically simpler, more time-efficient and more environmentally friendly than physical encounters. Given secure internet connections, it is also in many ways less risky. As such, online contact overcomes one of the key limitations of Contact Theory: the practical difficulty and risks involved in getting enough individuals

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79 Segal and Keduri, “The impact of Facebook Communities on International Conflict Resolution.”

80 Segal and Keduri, “The Impact of Facebook Communities on International Conflict Resolution.”

from both sides to meet to resolve conflict at the group level.<sup>81</sup> Some interviewees noted further that the ease with which people can participate online also makes them more inclined to do so as compared to meetings held in person. The comfort of one's own home and frequent use of online communication in our lives in general (often finding ourselves engaging with complete strangers) makes this communication altogether less nerve-wracking. As one interviewee explained it:

You can just pick up your laptop and close it as easily, so open to those who otherwise wouldn't have had the strength or motivation or curiosity...or felt comfortable to do so...All those would be curious enough to just hit one "click" in the comfort of their own home. It's also easier as Zoom has become such a daily habit so just like you "click" to enter a cooking program, you "click" to enter an Israeli-Palestinian dialogue. It's part of the daily routine so it is much easier.

The consequent advantage of the ease with which one can participate in online exchanges is that they are accessible to more – and different – people than traditional in-person meetings and peace initiatives. This potentially expands not only the number but also the type of participants – for example, more individuals from more areas of the world or segments of society, less traditionally-dominant voices, and more "hardliners".<sup>82</sup> Indeed, with few exceptions, practitioners all argued online encounters change participation trends. The digital space increases the participation for introverts<sup>83</sup>, groups who lack connections to peace organizations, or those with limited time/resources/mobility or facing legal/political/cultural barriers that would prevent them from reaching a physical meeting location. The digital space can also enable groups that would otherwise have only sent few (perhaps senior) representatives to now include more (perhaps junior) participants in an encounter. Reaching out to multiple constituencies to increase participation also becomes much easier, "moving" from one lo-

81 Amichai-Hamburger, "The Contact Hypothesis Reconsidered"; Christ and Kauff, "Intergroup Contact Theory."

82 Segal and Keduri, "The Impact of Facebook Communities on International Conflict Resolution."

83 Amichai-Hamburger and Furnham, "The Positive Net."

cality to the next in a matter of seconds. Encounters can also much more easily gain access to expertise and authority – such as senior political figures, key influencers, or specialists for expert inputs – who otherwise may not have been able to attend. Finally, online platforms also help expand the participation of those not motivated enough to meet in person but curious enough to attend online given the reduced level of effort and risk involved. These include, for example, those holding more extreme perspectives who may remain skeptical of the process. It can also include alumni of encounter programs or people who have been disconnected from activism for a long time and would like to re-engage. The internet provides a low threshold for entering into challenging activities.

Of course, while many celebrate the potential for inclusion that digitalization provides, it cannot be ignored that 35.6% of the population are not connected to the internet (with wide variation across countries and contexts concerning how widespread and stable their connection is). Furthermore, those whose connections are unstable or limited, who do not have the necessary time or space at home to engage online, or for those lacking in digital literacy or who are insecure or resistant to new technology (for example, often older generations), e-contact is inherently exclusionary. Additionally, certain groups may choose not to meet online due to their limited sense of control over the secrecy of the exchange and the perceived security risks. Finally, in addition to the risks of exclusion, while efficient, online encounters still demand significant power to maintain the connection and are thus not environmentally or financially neutral.<sup>84</sup>

## 2.5 Online security: an opportunity or a new risk?

One aspect of digital encounters that was mentioned repeatedly by practitioners but not addressed in the academic literature is the question of digital security. While not directly related to Contact Theory, the protection of information and data is of increasing importance. Handling sensitive

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<sup>84</sup> Albeit far better, both financially and environmentally, than other physical alternatives such as flying.

information is a necessary consideration for facilitators regardless of their medium, and especially so during encounters in conflict contexts.

Some practitioners argue that online encounters are less risky, or at least equally risky, compared to physical encounters. Participants can still be recorded in face-to-face encounters (even if this might be logistically easier online). Many of us are also already regularly using online communication and are well aware of the risks involved; as one interviewee put it: “the secret services are already tapping all our phones so what’s the difference?” Furthermore, when online, participants will not be seen leaving their home or community, driving their car to a meeting location, getting on a bus or flight, etc. In fact, even if an encounter is witnessed by an outside observer, the true purpose of the gathering may not be obvious. A video call could easily be a work meeting, a chat with a distant friend, or an interactive computer game. This may help explain the increased sense of comfort and reduced anxiety from the overall experience.

Despite these possible advantages, the digital world brings with it its own set of challenges vis-à-vis security. Several interviewees found the security risk higher than face-to-face encounters primarily due to the lower levels of control over information management or data security, not knowing “who might be listening in” or whether one is being recorded. In certain cases, this may lead to higher levels of anxiety when having to meet online which hinder the process and may make participants hold back on revealing important information – or resist meeting or discussing sensitive issues altogether. The security threat is not to be taken lightly. In 2020, an NGO in a conflict zone shared an open link to a meeting between conflict parties. Members of a hostile organization that opposed this encounter entered the meeting and subsequently identified and imprisoned over a dozen participants. The security risks seem to be the reason why, particularly in formal track I contexts, few peace initiatives transitioned online during the COVID-19 pandemic. For the initiatives that did move to digital formats, many still chose to reserve specific elements of the process for in-person meetings only.



### 3 Six key principles for organizers of online intergroup encounters

Operationalizing both Contact Theory literature and practitioner experiences, some early conclusions regarding e-contact can be reached. Leveraging online intergroup encounters to transform attitudes and improve relationships requires ideally frequent, synchronous sessions with small groups (6–12 people), utilizing video technology and structured facilitation, with all participants actively engaged. While still less direct than in-person meetings, these conditions ensure the encounter most closely mimics a physical meeting and provides greater benefit than other types of more passive indirect encounters.

Organizers of intergroup encounters on digital platforms should consider six key principles to maximize the effectiveness of virtual encounters, which are described below and outlined as practical questions for consideration in Table 2. These principles are relevant to all peace practitioners who bring adversaries together online, including not only dialogue facilitators, but also negotiators and mediators. While perhaps focusing more on problem-solving, negotiators and mediators could still benefit from eliciting positive intergroup attitudes and bettering relationships, increasing trust and understanding.

1. **Ensure and enhance the four conditions for optimal intergroup contact:** (a) **Enhance equal access to the virtual space and sense of equality within it:** The virtual space has an inherent sense of equality, due both to its equal division of space in the virtual room (as all participants have the same size “box” or “avatar”), and the relatively equal access to the meeting space (contingent on good internet connection).<sup>85</sup> Practitioners should consider further equality of space and access, through their choice of program, the provision of necessary hardware, or training to increase technological literacy, as needed. (b) **Enhance cooperation and** (c) **have shared goals:** Online spaces can best support efficient collaboration and problem-solving between participants by having short, frequent meetings. Communicating through text as well as verbally, in part to offset the lack

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85 In contexts where this is not the case, facilitators need to consider how to equalize access to a good internet connection or other necessary infrastructure.

of body language, can also improve clarity and understanding between adversaries and offer clear spaces for both formal and informal exchange. Having a shared goal further motivates cooperation and provides a sense of shared purpose and direction. (d) **Be creative in getting support from authorities, laws, or customs:** At minimum, the mere presence of a facilitator can convey a kind of authority support. Beyond this, however, meeting online allows practitioners to engage people outside the direct conflict context – such as international experts and authority figures, peace activists abroad, or diaspora communities. These groups can convey an enhanced sense of support for the encounter, which might be otherwise lacking from within one’s local community.

2. **Engage emotions by capitalizing on reduced anxiety and increase opportunities for humanization, empathy, and perspective-taking.** Emotions – specifically reduced anxiety and increased empathy and perspective-taking – are the key reason why meetings between adversaries lead to changing attitudes. Compared to physical encounters, participants in online spaces tend to feel lower levels of anxiety from and during an encounter. Meeting from their home environments, they are often literally in their “safe space”<sup>86</sup>; the virtual set-up also means they have much more control, for example over their appearance, extent and type of participation, and ability to mute or leave instantly. There is also potential for higher (or different) types of intimacy, from the experience of seeing multiple close-up faces at once, to the possibility of seeing another’s home/work environment in the background. However, compared to physical encounters, the online space is less conducive to empathy and trust building, due to limitations such as lack of body language and eye contact, lack of space for informal “corridor chit-chat”, and rigidity in the structuring of space. Organizers should consider ways of overcoming this challenge, for example, by increasing opportunities for cooperation, enhancing presence by using video communication and even Virtual Reality tools, and structuring formal space and time for informal personal exchange. This can take the form of multiple communication modes and formats such as a combination of larger plenary sessions, smaller (two to four people) meetings, and text-based group chats.

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86 While this is often the case, depending on one’s individual conditions, for some the home environment might be more risky and therefore anxiety provoking. Practitioners should consider the different needs of diverse participants in this regard.

3. **Intentionally manage the extent to which participants convey individual versus group versus superordinate identities.** Meeting as *individuals* (rather than representatives of adverse groups) can help humanization and thus reduce biases. Similarly, highlighting *superordinate* identities – such as humans/women/youth/religious believers/sport fans etc. – brings out commonalities and improves relationships. Yet, the ability to generalize positive perceptions formed about the individuals involved in the encounter to the entire groups they belong to – thus creating a much more significant attitude transformation – depends on keeping the adverse *group* identities salient during encounters. While a sense of “groupness” is more challenging to feel online, virtual encounters provide a greater degree of control to the facilitator, which can allow for intentional management of the degree and timing in which individual and group identities are made prominent in the (virtual) room. Practitioners should consider the sequencing and ways in which they want to highlight participants’ different layers of identity, for example starting with individual level exchange, before highlighting group differences, and finally increasing a sense of a shared identity.
4. **Sustaining impact by connecting the intergroup encounter with participants’ daily life (and vice versa).** The return from “bubbled” immersive workshops, often characterized by positive contact, back to an everyday experience of violence and negative contact is a difficult one. Participants may revert to their previous biases and negative perspectives. Virtual encounters enjoy the advantage of taking place within one’s everyday context, possibly overcoming this problem. Thus, peace practitioners should consider ways of embedding the encounter in the daily lives of the dialogue participants both in terms of frequency and substance, as much as security or other concerns allow.
5. **Take advantage of the practical simplicity of organizing a virtual encounter by scheduling more encounters and varying participation.** One of the biggest advantages of virtual encounters over physical ones is that they are cheap and logistically easier to organize. The reduced anxiety they elicit also means they provide a low threshold for participation. Taking advantage of that, organizers of peace dialogues can consider ways in which they can reach more people, engage them more frequently, and increase the diversity of participants, e.g., including more hardliners, senior

authority figures, junior party members, or international experts. While holding great promise to those with access to the internet, peace practitioners must also consider and try to overcome the inherent limitations of virtual encounters, namely the exclusion of those without access to a stable internet connection. There are a number of strategies that may be successful in mitigating this issue, including bringing participants to locations with internet access and infrastructure or maintaining some degree of in-person meetings.

- 6. Increase security and ensure informed buy-in.** Some argue online encounters are safer than (or at least equally risky to) in-person meetings: participation takes place from the comfort of one's own home, with possibilities to leave instantly, limit visibility, and even change one's name to ensure confidentiality. However, online encounters also bring new security risks, primarily the ease of being recorded. This is a significant concern as sensitive topics need to be raised in privacy, and some groups risk legal, political, social, or other types of sanction for merely meeting with the "enemy". Special care must be taken to create utmost security – e.g., in choice of technology and set up of ground rules – while at the same time ensuring participants are aware of the risks involved and join the encounter voluntarily. For particularly sensitive topics, a facilitator may also choose to plan for parts of a process to take place in person.

**Table 2: Six principles and questions therein for organizers of online intergroup encounters**

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**1. Ensure and enhance the four optimal conditions for intergroup contact:**

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**a. Equal status**

*Before the session:*

- *Software:* What platform will you choose and how equally comfortable are participants with it? Are there any platforms they are already using? Do any of them need a “crash course” on the platform?
- *Hardware:* Do participants have equal access to necessary hardware? Can you ensure equally good (and safe) internet connection?
- *Space:* Do participants have equal access to conducive environments (e.g., private, safe, quiet)? If not, can you support them (e.g., by funding a hotel room or childcare)?
- *Tools:* If planning to use any additional tools/platforms/programs (e.g., online whiteboards), is everyone equally aware of and literate in how to use them? Are they equally aware of any security risks involved?

*During the session:*

- *Norms & Guidelines:* Are there clear norms or guidelines on how (and how not) to participate to ensure a sense of equality in the room? Are there any ground rules regarding the visual aspects of the “room” that can ensure a sense of equality (e.g., dress code, virtual backgrounds, titles if visible on one’s screen)?
- *Participation:* Is everyone participating? Are they contributing with equal time? Can you call on people who are quiet (if appropriate to context) or shift formats (e.g., from plenary to smaller groups)?

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**b+c. Cooperation and shared goals**

- *Goal:* Do you have a clear goal? Is it shared by all participants?
- *Collaboration:* In what ways are participants expected to collaborate? How are you segmenting tasks? Can you work in short but frequent and repeated meetings?
- *Tools for collaboration:* Can participants share documents or write together on a shared virtual document? If needed, what digital tools and platforms can you utilize for joint brainstorming, visualizations, and other collaborative tasks?

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**d. Support from authorities, laws, and customs**

- *Support structures:* How can you ensure as much support from the environment (e.g., community, authorities, laws, customs, norms) as possible? Can the exchange have a facilitator? Can you ensure some presence (or otherwise message of support) from an authority figure from

inside or outside one's community (e.g., diaspora, international peace activists, relevant influencers or authority figures, international experts)?

- *Platform*: Can you use a (more) secure or neutral online platform to reduce the need for external support?
- *Risk management*: If relevant laws or social/political customs are not in support of the encounter, how can you ensure participants are aware of the risks involved? How can you mitigate these as much as possible?

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## **2. Engage emotions: capitalize on reduced anxiety and increase opportunities for humanization, empathy, and perspective-taking**

- *Moments of humanization*: How can you prepare to create, amplify, and capitalize on moments of humanization (especially given the encounter “from-home” if applicable)?
- *Information sharing*: How can you increase the amount of information participants have about you and each other? For example, consider creating or asking participants to create video messages (showing full body/space/movement); send information about participants in advance of sessions; reach out to quiet voices on a one-on-one basis outside of the group context.
- *Informal interactions*: How can you increase opportunities for informal interactions and a sense of intimacy (that can increase trust building)? Consider the following suggestions:
  - Ensure all have good (enough) internet connectivity so they can keep video cameras on as much as possible, while maintaining a high standard of security;
  - Create and use multiple modes of digital communication (discussion boards, messaging programs, and videoconferencing programs) to ensure more diversity, frequency, and continuity of communication (including different online forums for more and for less formal interactions);
  - Create activities and opportunities for very small and intimate (e.g., 2–4 people) interactions where participants can discuss, share views, share personal information, or debrief sessions together;
  - Have more 1:1 phone calls before and after sessions to lay the ground work and debrief;
  - Encourage participants to have 1:1 interactions;
  - Consider creating visual cues that represent one's unique group and “space” that can be incorporated into multiple media of communication;
  - Dedicate time, specific structures, and activities towards sharing personal information (even within very formal peace processes);
  - Create “moments” in which all gather together for a fun/interesting/unique shared experience, for example a “watch party” where all gather online at the same time to watch an event, movie, or show together, usually while being able to correspond over chat;

- Send summary messages telling the “story” (not facts) of the encounter;
- Use or develop tailored online platforms that suit your needs, for example Soliya developed their own video-conferencing platform so participants see themselves “sitting” around a round table; new technologies are also in development to simulate the “coffee room” experience;
- Ensure ground rules are clear and have buy-in for them, as one interviewee explained it: “Make sure to have the time for the ground rules. Sometimes especially if there are tech issues and time is running out, you tend to skip that and jump into the dialogue. Not a good idea! You have to set the scene.”

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### **3. Create exponential impact: intentionally manage the extent to which participants convey individual versus group versus superordinate identities**

- *Group identity*: How can you enhance group identity salience in the virtual room and overcome group fragmentation?
- *Managing salience of identities*: When will you try to intentionally highlight individual identities versus group versus superordinate identities? How will you go about doing so for each of these?
- *Mitigating risks*: How can you mitigate the risk of over-controlling the process and ensure ownership of the parties is maintained?

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### **4. Create sustained impact: connect the encounter with participants’ daily life to limit the impact of negative contact**

- *Daily life and encounter interaction*: How can you most effectively embed these encounters in participants’ daily lives? For example, you may choose to structure meetings to be short but frequent, promote a flow of information to and from external community members, or encourage the sharing of one’s home environment if confidentiality and security considerations allow.
- *Management of challenges*: How can you ensure practical and security considerations are addressed if they represent significant challenges for participants?
- *Ground rules*: How can the ground rules help embed the encounter in one’s daily life, for example, will you address the possibility of seeing the home environments in the background of the participants? Are there any formats or activities you wish to create to capitalize on this aspect of the encounter (e.g., sharing of mini home-videos or community ‘tours’)?

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## 5. Be practical: create more encounters and vary participation

- *Simplicity of participation:* How can you make the most of the ease of meeting online? For example, plan for shorter, more frequent activities, create more encounters for more people simultaneously, or reach out to multiple constituencies.
- *Relevance of participation:* Given the above, how can you ensure the most relevant type of participation in your meeting, given the particulars of your target attendees? Is there a way to promote e-contact amongst the communities that may find it the most beneficial, or that otherwise would not participate in the same way, or even at all if the event was in person? For example, communities like hardliners, junior party members, diasporas, or those physically or politically unable to leave their community may be particularly well-suited or receptive to an online encounter.

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## 6. Increase security and ensure informed buy-in

*Before the session:*

- *Platform:* What platforms are most secure or perceived as such by participants?
- *Digital literacy and risk awareness:* How common is it for participants to use online communication in their daily lives? Which programs? How familiar are they with the risks involved? Is targeted information from the facilitator or expert needed in this regard? Participants must not be pressured to take part if they do not feel comfortable doing so.
- *Risk management:*
  - Can you take any additional precautions, such as using tailor-made programs and servers, private VPN services, requiring passwords, having participants enter with first name only? Do you need extra or designated staff to manage any potential interruptions?
  - Are background checks necessary in advance to check each and every registered participant who is not already known to the organizers (as much as possible via open-access tools)?

*During the session:*

- *Ground rules on security:* Are there any security-related ground rules that need clarification (such as no recording, taking screenshots, etc.)?
- *Contingency planning:* What happens if there is a security breach? What is your protocol, and should parties be aware of it?



# Conclusion

The extensive quantitative and qualitative research on Contact Theory draws a positive picture: even the barest of contact between adversaries can improve intergroup relations. Put simply, we should continue bringing people in conflict together. Four key conditions increase the effectiveness of such encounters: meeting under equal status conditions, cooperating, having a shared goal, and having the support of one's environment (authorities, laws, customs, etc.). Emotions – reduced anxiety and increased empathy in particular – are the catalysts behind these processes of attitude transformation. Intergroup contact can have an exponential impact on group relations both through direct and indirect contact, so long as group identity (i.e., the identity markers of the group) is visible to some extent during intergroup encounters. This then enables the generalization of attitudes from individuals to the entire groups to which they belong.

While generally effective, Contact Theory has its limitations. Negative intergroup contact – the kind that is often experienced in ongoing violent conflicts – can undermine the sustainability of attitude changes, and people may revert back to the biases and beliefs held prior to the positive encounter. In cases of significant group inequalities, the harmonious relations developed during intergroup contact can undermine the motivation for advancing structural changes in society, to the detriment of the disempowered party. Finally, it may just be impractical to expect enough people to meet to bring societal change (see Table 1 for a summary of the key insights from academic literature).

In the case of digital communication, preliminary academic evidence paints a carefully optimistic picture yet again: prejudice *can* be reduced online, trust *can* be built, and relationships *can* grow. However, there are significant downsides to digital contact and debate continues over its effectiveness when compared to in-person formats. The digital space can effectively meet the four conditions for optimal intergroup contact: it offers a high sense of equality within the virtual room and in accessing it; it provides easy and more efficient possibilities for collaboration, and similar possibilities for finding shared goals; and it allows access to new kinds of external support. In terms of its influence on emotions, compared to in-person meetings, encounters online provoke less anxiety in participants and a different sense of intimacy. Furthermore, new technologies like VR may open new possibilities for perspective-taking and empathy. Facilitators have more power to control

the dialogue process, including the degree and salience of group identities, leading to potentially more easily generalizable attitude changes and exponential impact. Online encounters can be more easily embedded within daily life, and can be cheap, accessible, and in certain ways more secure, overcoming key limitations of in-person meetings in terms of their ability to reach many (and diverse) people and create a sustained impact.

On the other hand, the key limitation of e-contact for bettering intergroup relations is its drastically limited possibilities for emotional connection: Empathy is neurologically less activated online and there are drastic limitations on communication, hampering trust building. Physically, eye contact and using body language are not possible on digital platforms today. Furthermore, such platforms lack the space for informal, unstructured interactions of the kind people may have around the watercooler. It is also almost impossible to experience a sense of “groupness” or group dynamics, and the distractions of a home or work environment can lead to an instability of concentration and presence, resulting in reduced commitment and immersion. Some also malign the security risks involved online. While it seems relationships can continue to be built, somewhat, on virtual platforms, creating them from scratch is more challenging online. These limitations seem to be the reason practitioners, unlike the academic community, end up with a much more ambivalent conclusion regarding the potential of digital encounters to build relations among adversaries. Typically, practitioners see value in meeting online for structured problem-solving, but relationship building and dynamic group processes face significant challenges in online environments.

Yet, between climate considerations and financial and logistical limitations, the need to meet online will likely only increase in the years to come. With new communication technologies rapidly developing – such as advanced video communications, avatars, virtual realities, and online security technologies – the potential for success of online encounters will hopefully only increase. Thus, while digital contact is no panacea, it is worth capitalizing on its advantages and attempting to overcome its limitations. This means taking advantage of the practicality and efficiency of the tool for problem-solving and engaging diverse audiences. It also means adapting to the overly structured nature of online communication, setting the ground rules up front, using one’s power to influence group identity salience, and dedicating ample space and time for relationship building. This will likely mean, somewhat counterintuitively, formalizing a time and space for informal exchange to ensure opportunities for “chit chat”. Working to overcome the

limitations of digital contact also means appreciating and benefitting from the relaxed nature of the encounter “from home”, amplifying moments of humanization and providing intentional set ups to increase empathy and perspective-taking (and giving), as well as explicitly managing distractions to the intimacy of the group and its dynamics.

Facilitators of intergroup encounters, as well as negotiators and mediators who bring adversaries together, should consider the six principles and related questions for effective intergroup e-contact. And, while particularly relevant to dialogue facilitators, negotiators, mediators, and other peace practitioners should also consider these lessons when holding dialogues within a broader peace process. This may allow these professionals to create conditions that better intergroup attitudes and relations even in encounters that substantively focus on problem-solving and decision-making processes. While peace practitioners can find hope in both the scholarly debates and each other’s experiences, this paper is also a call to academia to further advance our understanding of the relational aspect of online encounters, and to the technology and business communities to further the range of what is possible online.

The internet is here to stay. Therefore, whether you believe it to be divisive or unifying, a paradigmatic technological shift or simply more of the same in different packaging, it is worth making the effort to learn its parameters, adapt practices and research plans, and build peace online.

### **Additional tips and tricks for online facilitation, mediation, and mediation training<sup>87</sup>:**

- Online (free) course offered by UNDP/PA Mediation Support Unit, Build Up, HD Center for Humanitarian Dialogue and Tandemic. (2021). “Digital Process Design & Facilitation for Mediation”, including a module on building trust online.
- Search for Common Ground, BuildUp and ConnexUS. “Digital Peace-builder’s Guide. Find their “Full list of approaches” [HERE](#), including resources on “Digital Dialogue” and “Virtual Exchange”.

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<sup>87</sup> This is not a comprehensive list of tools and I welcome input regarding any additional digital peace-building resources. Please contact [ibenezer@ethz.ch](mailto:ibenezer@ethz.ch) for additional suggestions or questions in this regard.

- UN MSU and HD. “Digital Toolkit”, including sections on managing risks (see introduction) and Engaging with Parties.
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# Annex: Interviewees and resources consulted in this paper

## Interviews conducted with:

Dr. Emma Leslie (Center for Peace and Conflict Studies)  
Benjamin Smith (The Center for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD))  
Denis Matveev (CMI)  
Julian Th. Hottinger and Georg Stein (Swiss FDFA, email exchange)  
Matthias Ryffel (swisspeace)  
Maria Chalhoub (Folke Bernadotte Academy – Swedish agency for peace, security and development)  
Dr. Nava Sonnenschein (School for Peace Wahat el Salam Neve Shalom)  
Sarah Perle Benazera (YaLa Young Leaders; Arava Institute; Independent facilitator)  
Sirpa Mäenpää (Finland MFA; Nordic Women Mediators – Finland)  
Waidehi Gokhale and Salma ElBeblawi (Soliya)

## Conferences, webinars, and presentations consulted:

UNDPPA Mediation Support Unit, Build Up, HD Center for Humanitarian Dialogue and Tandemic. (2021). “Digital Process Design & Facilitation for Mediation”. Online course.  
FRONTLINE Webinar “Remote Negotiations: Building Rapport”, 31 August 2020. <https://frontline-negotiations.org/event/webinar-remote-negotiation-1/>.  
Ganz, Marshall. Presentation on “Building an Online Learning Community: Lessons from the Public Narrative & Organizing Courses”. Harvard Kennedy School, April 2020.  
Track II Conveners’ Experiences during the Pandemic. Virtual Conference, 10 September 2020. USIP  
Dr. Sascha Schneider, Technical University (TU) Chemnitz, Institute for Media Research, Germany. “Designing digital and interactive technologies to promote learning”. Presentation for ETH Zurich, 9 September 2020.

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**CSS Mediation Resources** is a series that aims to provide methodological guidance and insights to mediators, negotiators and peace practitioners working to address violent political conflicts. It is produced by the Mediation Support Team of the Center for Security Studies at ETH Zurich, with contributions from occasional guest authors. Previous issues include:

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The goal of the Mediation Support Project (MSP) is to improve the effectiveness of Swiss and international peace mediation. The MSP was established in 2005 as a joint venture between the Swiss Peace Foundation (swisspeace) and the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich. The MSP is a service provider to the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), but also to mediators and conflict parties that are strategically important for the FDFA.

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“This study by Ben-Ezer could not be more prescient. Given the travel limitations of the pandemic years, and the environmental travel challenges facing us today, this study is an important investigation into the possibilities of undertaking effective intergroup peacebuilding and mediation online. It found that, if carefully structured, online intergroup contacts can be effective in positively influencing intergroup attitudes and can be a meaningful substitute, or addition, for physical interactions. Such encounters, despite their limitations, have been shown to reduce intergroup prejudice, and facilitate more trusting relationships. This stimulating research makes for very good news for mediators and peacebuilders”.  
*Prof. Mari Fitzduff, Professor Emerita Heller School for Social Policy and Management, Brandeis University, author of “Our Brains at War: The Neuroscience of Conflict and Peacebuilding”*

“So-called ‘hybrid’ peace and dialogue processes that mix in-person and online meetings are here to stay. In this fascinating study, Inbal Ben-Ezer grapples with an urgent resulting implication: to what extent is online contact between conflict parties effective in positively influencing intergroup attitudes and relations? Her practical findings make a compelling case for mediators and peacebuilders to go beyond simply transferring offline practices into online meetings. Instead, she provides forward looking ideas for how to capitalize upon the advantages of digital contact while mitigating its real limitations such as reduced emotional connection.”

*Sean Kane, Team Leader of the Mediation Support Unit at the United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs*

“A must-read for all third parties thinking of when and how to use online dialogues for the sake of peace promotion”.

*Ambassador Simon Geissbühler, Head of the Peace and Human Rights Division, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA)*