

ABSTRACT

How Psychotherapists Practice In the Digital Era

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The digital era, marked by digital devices connected via high speed data networks, has altered human experience in profound ways over the past 40 years. The potential for novel forms of human relating and fulfillment of desire has led to myriad changes in behavior, thought and unconscious activity. While many adapt or thrive in expanded reality, for some, the digital can be context, source and/or location for psychological affliction. When those who suffer seek psychological relief, how psychotherapists listen for, conceptualize and work with the effects of the digital matter a great deal. While theoretical and quantitative research literature exists at a population level, there is little study of how analytically oriented psychotherapists practice in light of the technological world. This dissertation used an interpretive qualitative method with a small sample (n=6) to explore in depth how analytically oriented clinicians based in New York City in Spring 2019 and Fall 2020 are responding to this phenomena. Results suggest that therapists tend to use existing theory and clinical methods to guide treatment, but to varying degrees are attuned to new or extreme presentations of symptomology that finds expression in digital modes. Younger therapists and those that include Lacan as part of their theoretical orientation were more agile in hearing traces of the digital both in manifest and latent aspects of patient communication and linking them conceptually to sometimes novel methods of working with such effects. The inclusion of factors unique to the technological era in clinical training, a treatment method for digital illness, and two novel theoretical constructs informed by the literature reviewed and interviews, the Virtual Cathexis and Techno-shame, are proposed.