

Mediated Presence: An Heideggerian inquiry into the perception of presence on WhatsApp

Abstract

The smartphone is often used as a tool to connect and communicate with someone who is physically absent. In these exchanges, the phone is used to create a sense of 'presence' of the person on the other side of the line. This thesis deals with the question of how this type of presence is constituted by the instant messaging application WhatsApp. It uses Heidegger's understanding of presence which can be understood as a *nearing*: that which *comes forward* (articulates) from the intersection of time (the interplay between future and past that creates the presence) and the nearing-distancing as a structure of concern. Heideggerian theory is both critical of modern (media) technology's capability of producing a true 'nearing' as well as allows an opportunity for it. This begs the question whether WhatsApp, following Heideggerian theory, is capable of such a 'true nearing' and, if not, what else comes in place? In this thesis WhatsApp is analyzed, using the method of the hermeneutic circle, whether it allows for this understanding of presence. This is followed by an analysis of WhatsApp's capabilities for producing a true nearing, which is subsequently followed by an analysis of what the consequences of this entails.

Keywords

WhatsApp, mobile technology, Heidegger, presence

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Benjamin Lenzner, PHD

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Preface

To those who helped, thank you.

To those who will read, enjoy!

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§ 1: Introduction

There is this little device and if it's not on your desk it is probably in your pocket right now. It holds quite a lot, if not all your contacts, stores messages you've sent to loved ones and has more processing power than the Apollo 11. We're talking about the smartphone; a nifty little tool that has in over just ten years, changed the way we engage with each other and the world in fundamental ways. Without thought we send a message, remembering our partner to pick up some milk on the way back home or navigate effortlessly through an unfamiliar city with the help of a navigation application. The smartphone plays a vital role in a lot of people's daily lives and the connection that people experience with their smartphone is intense (Lloyd 2010). Besides its technical properties and functions as a calculator, web browser, planner or gaming platform, the smartphone is above all a tool we use to communicate with each other.

Smartphone users report that they tend to use the smartphone as a tool that allows them to (metaphorically speaking) shrink or overcome the physical distance that is between them and their loved ones (Taylor and Harper 2003, 275). The various forms of instant communication allowed by the smartphone offer a *feeling of presence* of the loved one with whom they are communicating (Ito 2008; Licoppe 2004). Various scholars have attempted to understand the phenomenon of presence in mobile technology. In their seminal work; *perpetual contact*, scholars James Katz and Mark Aarhus note how the short messaging service (SMS) has allowed teenagers to establish intimate relations through the smartphone's function as a social tool (2002). Christian Licoppe's study showed that social relationships established and/or maintained through mobile technologies construct new forms of 'connectedness' that rely more heavily on a quick and continuous flow of small communicative acts rather than more 'formal' frames of interaction (2004, 154). O'Hara et al.'s study on the relationship "doings" in WhatsApp traces how togetherness and intimacy are enacted through small, continuous traces of narrative, of tellings and tidbits, noticing and thoughts, shared images and lingering pauses (2014, 1). Perhaps, you yourself have experienced the lingering dread of chatting with a (potential) loved one and have them not responding to your messages? All of these experiences have one thing in common: Through a media technology the experience of presence (of the other) is established. What we encounter is the feeling of another person being 'close by', we feel his or her *presence*.

But, what do we mean when we talk about this presence? We cannot solely relate it to a geographical, spatial relation; someone might be on the other side of the globe, yet we have a sense that he or she is present when we are chatting. Nor can we define it as something that relates to a certain material quality. Thoughts, feelings or ideas present themselves just as well as other people or things do, but lack material properties. We can give a technical account of all of the properties of the media technology through which this phenomenon is established and describe its characteristics and technical properties, but this would do injustice to what we actually *experience* when we encounter the phenomenon. Bits and bytes explain a lot, but they are not adequate elements for understanding such an experience that relates to our most primordial and innate qualities. We, as humans, are in the world and

our experience is our primary form of understanding the world around us. The central question my thesis revolves around is thus: *How do we experience presence through WhatsApp?* WhatsApp provides an apt case-study as it is world's most popular Instant-Messaging application (hence IM-applications) and shares many of the same characteristics with other IM-applications (Constine 2018). It portrays chats as a set of threaded messages displayed on a background using the position and color to differentiate between receiver and sender (see Figure 1). Users are able to send text messages as well as videos, GIFs, images, sound files, their location, contacts and other documents. Though WhatsApp is a cross-platform technology, this thesis focusses solely on the mobile phone application and its text messaging function as it is today's most used version and usage of WhatsApp (Constine 2018)¹. This thesis engages with the design and the characteristics of the application that denote a form of presence, among others; the blue ticks, the last seen at or the '...' is typing status. In the analysis (§ 4: *WhatsApp, Dwelling and Nearness*), these relationships will be explained in greater detail.



Figure 1: Screenshot of a WhatsApp conversation

To gain a better understanding of presence this thesis seeks to engage with the works of German philosopher Martin Heidegger. Heidegger was one of the first philosophers to understand presence as a process of *nearing* that articulates out of a coming-into-concern that is dependent on the interplay between time and nearness. Heidegger's main interest was to understand 'being'. In doing so, he developed the concept of *Dasein*, a mode of being as realized by human beings themselves. *Dasein* means being-there, it is always already in the world. How does *Dasein* makes sense of this world? It

¹ Besides a smartphone application WhatsApp is also available as a desktop version and a web-based version.

does so by a process of coming-into-concern, which should be understood phenomenologically (that is to say how it appears to us/how we experience them). Given Heidegger's heavy investigation in the experiences of Dasein and its sense-making of the world, Heideggerian theory provides an excellent gateway in to the *experiential* account of presence that I aim to investigate. Furthermore, Heidegger noted that '...there's an essential relation between technology and philosophy' (1963). The philosopher's work delves deep in to the human-technology relation and how technology co-constructs our sense-making of the world. Therefore, Heideggerian theory also provides a good way of understanding how our experience of presence is co-dependent on technology in order for it to occur. Heideggerian theory both argues that true (poetic) *presencing* can occur in modern (media) technology through *dwelling* as well as criticizes its capability of doing so as it creates *distancelessness*. Does WhatsApp allow for a poetic nearing? And if not, how does it create distancelessness instead? Media scholar José van Dijck notes that it is necessary to understand platforms such as WhatsApp as a socio-economic and techno-cultural construct in which sociality is engineered (van Dijck 2013). The design choices in WhatsApp are not made in a vacuum but deliberately made to keep us engaged and attracted. What does this do for presence as mediated by WhatsApp? These are the questions this thesis aims to answer and does so by using the hermeneutic circle. Hermeneutics is the method of interpreting by which one critically engages with the text (in this case WhatsApp) to understand its references and use in context. The method looks at parts of the text and relates them to an understanding as a reference to the whole, which in turn reflects back upon the individual part that is examined, creating a circle or spiral of deeper understanding. An example of this would be the tool-analysis that this thesis wishes to employ on WhatsApp. Does WhatsApp provide elements of tool-qualities? To prove this, the theory will be applied on both the IM-application and its individual parts, whereby the individual parts will be understood and analyzed as a reference to the whole and vice versa. Hermeneutics and the hermeneutic circle will be expanded upon in the method section (§2: *Approaching the subject matter*).

The thesis is structured as follows: Though unusual, it first introduces the method as it provides the necessary background information that makes it easier for the reader to interpret the works used in the theoretical framework (§3: *An introduction to presence*). First, I introduce the method and philosophical historical background of the method that Heidegger employs. Secondly, I introduce the hermeneutic circle as described above. In section three, I provide a conceptualization of presence building upon the works of Heidegger and later scholars who have been influenced by his works. I start this analysis with a brief introduction to the concept of *Dasein* to which I relate the phenomena of being-in-the-world and care (*Sorge*), which is the mood through which all of Dasein's experience of the world is orchestrated. Thirdly, I sketch out the tool-analysis of Heidegger and provide a way to explain how these two elements will be implemented. Fourth, I discuss the later works of Heidegger where he delves deeper into the notion of *nearing* and considers how modern media technology is both incapable and capable of producing a poetic nearing (by means of dwelling and distancelessness). All of this comes together in the analysis where I'll be analyzing how the notion of presence is interwoven into the design

of WhatsApp through a hermeneutic circle. I present my conclusions and discuss the findings in the last section. To conclude: This thesis aims to use Heidegger's understanding of presence and apply this, using the hermeneutic circle to understand how we perceive this notion when connecting with a person over WhatsApp. My main research question is thus. *How do we experience the presence of the other through WhatsApp?*

I am, of course, not the first to delve into the relation between Heidegger, technology and presence. Various scholars before me have also tied the notion of presence, (media) technology and Heidegger together: In this sub-section I'll briefly explain the relevant works and how I wish to improve upon them, contributing to the academic debate. Most relevant to my thesis is the work of Anna Kouppanou who approached technology in education through the concept of nearness in Heidegger's works (2018), media scholars Ingrid Richardson and Rowan Wilken who discussed how mobile media leads to various forms of presence (co-presence and telepresence) as well as how these are constituted by our body-screen relations (2012) and Leighton Evans who uses a Heideggerian interpretation of space to understand how we experience space on mobile media in location-based services (2015). I differ from the above mentioned academic works as I specifically aim to investigate both the possibility for a poetic nearing to occur in WhatsApp and what prevails instead if there is no poetic nearing. This allows for a new outlook on what it means to be present as constructed through a media-technology. I will expand upon the above-mentioned subjects more in section 3: *An introduction to presence*.

What is left for me to say are a few practical notes: To keep this work in line with other related works I have chosen to use the English translations of the various Heideggerian concepts in this work. However, given the various nuances and subtleties of the German words, each concept will be introduced with its German counterpart. Secondly, when referencing *Being and Time*, I have chosen to use the original page numbers, though I will refer to the Dutch translation of the work as it is the one that I have read (the English translations of the key-terms are taken from the Macquarrie & Robinson translation published in 2001). I hope this will keep the work accessible to most people.

Now, let us go *towards the things themselves!*

§2: Approaching the subject matter

Although it is unusual to start with the method section this research warrants it due to the intrinsic connection between the method and the subject matter, the theoretical framework and the analysis. This section highlights the philosophical tradition from which this thesis draws inspiration after which it deepens in the hermeneutic phenomenology of Heidegger as it both provides readers with the necessary point of view from which to interpret the philosopher's work and helps to understand the hermeneutic circle, which is used in the analysis of this thesis.

Towards the things!

Edmund Husserl introduced the term phenomenology in his studies on the relationship between consciousness and its object (Moran 2014). Husserl argued that to understand phenomena one should let go of all preconceived notions (Moran 2014, 127); this allowed the phenomena to emerge 'in the way they appear as such'. According to Husserl, we should try to unravel what is actually taking place within consciousness and the *here* and *now* to fully explore the experience, free from any assumptions. Husserl's works became the basis for the works of German philosopher Martin Heidegger. Heidegger took Husserl's phenomenological method as the basis for his approach and understanding of the world but argued that that we cannot approach or understand human existence directly; even attempts to reflect upon it are already distorted by the limitations of the temporality and spatiality we impose upon it (ibid). To overcome this problem, Heidegger develops '*Dasein*' (which will be discussed later on). For Heidegger, phenomenology needs to uncover the things as they manifest themselves (*der Sachen selbst*) and therefore there is no single method of phenomenology (1982, 322). Heidegger develops a hermeneutic phenomenology whereby he understands hermeneutics as a means of investigating non-symbolic facts of the real world in relation to *Dasein* (Mulhall 2001). For Heidegger, hermeneutics is not just a method particular to the cultural and historical sciences, but the whole manner in which human existence is interpretative. Our experiences are the interpretation and encountering of what has already been interpreted by ourselves and others (Moran 2014, 235). Hermeneutics is thus existential for Heidegger.

The hermeneutic circle

Given that all our experience is interpreting and encountering what has already been interpreted and encountered by ourselves and others, how can we learn anything new if we can only understand it in terms we already know? Heidegger argues therefore that we should approach the subject matter as a 'looking forwards and backwards' (Mulhall 2001). Our preconceived knowledge already structures our understanding of the phenomenon as well as it fills our expectations of it. By looking forwards and backwards we are able to reflect on this knowledge and acknowledge it, while simultaneously gaining a deeper understanding of the way our knowledge is structured and *the things themselves*. This is what is called the hermeneutic circle; a method that allows for new ways of interpreting through a continuous

feedback loop. The whole informs us about parts, which in turn informs us about the whole. The hermeneutic circle can therefore also be understood as a spiral as it leads to deepening understanding of the subject matter.

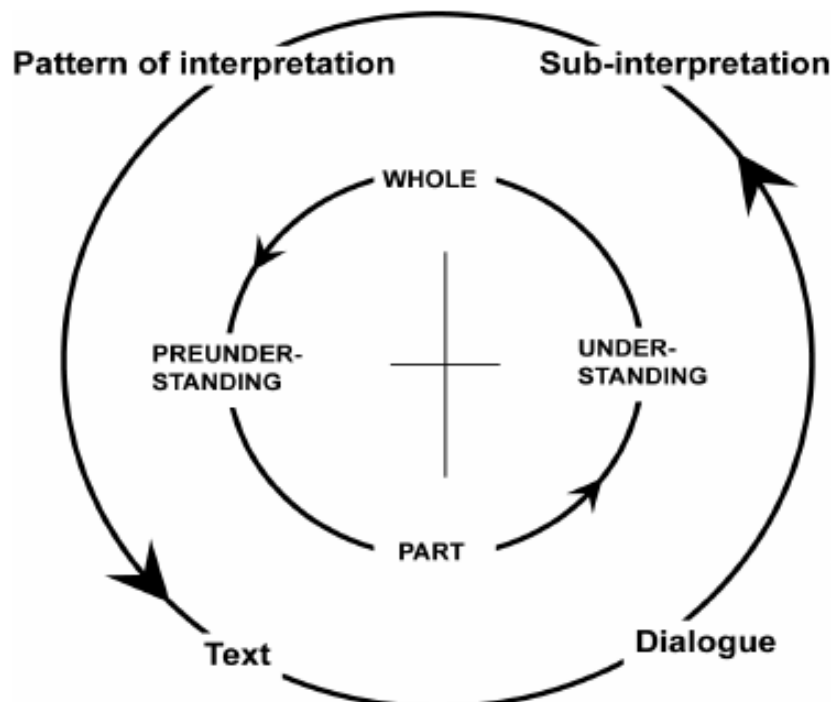


Figure 2: The hermeneutic circle (from Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2000, 104)

Why should we use the hermeneutic circle?

As mentioned, this thesis aims to analyze the *experiential* account of presence that is established through the mediating role of technology. Presence should thus be understood as a phenomenon and be perceived as such; a mere technical description of presence would do injustice to the subject matter. The hermeneutic circle offers us a good way of approaching the subject matter as it allows us to gain deeper insight in how our experiences are interpreted and encountered through the continuous feedback loop. Using the philosophical work of Heidegger, we gain an understanding of the actual phenomena of presence (the whole) that allows us to better *interpret* the meaning of presence on WhatsApp (the part). Secondly, how do the various elements (the part) help constitute this form of presence (the whole). This loop, then allows us for a better reflection on the whole (what does this mean for presence) and simultaneously for the part (what in turn does this for presence on WhatsApp?). Various present-day researchers have used the hermeneutic circle (or similar methods) to research and understand the relation between our experiences and (mobile) technology. Martha Ladly, employed a phenomenological hermeneutic method to research the relation between Heidegger's *Dasein* and our experience of virtual reality (2007). Anna Kouppanou uses a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to understand the relationship between 'being', Heidegger and the possibilities for modern technology in education (2018). Tony Wilson and Florence Thang use the same method for their analysis of continuing contact

with cellphone usage in a Malaysian context (2007). Herbert Spiegelberg describes seven steps when doing a hermeneutical philosophical research: 1) investigating particular phenomena, 2) instigating general essences, 3) apprehending essential relationships among essences, 4) watching modes of appearing, 5) watching the constitution of phenomena in consciousness 6) suspending belief in the existence of the phenomena, 7) interpreting the meaning of phenomena (1982). Step one, two and three are done in the ‘theoretical framework’ section (section three), where I investigate the particular phenomena (presence) through the works of Martin Heidegger and establish how the elements of what makes presence ‘appear’ work together in establishing this relationship. Step four and five involve an analysis of the way in which the phenomena appear. This is done in part in the analysis section where the aforementioned theoretical framework on the case-study of presence as it is constituted in WhatsApp is employed. Step six is employed in the analysis as well, as Heideggerian theory on the relationship between presence on modern (media) technology both criticizes and acknowledges the phenomenon. Step seven is to be executed in the conclusions and limitations section.

Hermeneutic phenomenology has often been criticized for its ‘seeming’ lack of transparency and its supposedly subjective nature (Kafle 2013). However, using the aforementioned steps I employ enough transparency in my way of approaching. Secondly, what is dealt with here is a phenomenon of a *subjective* nature par excellence. If we wish to grasp it in the form most connected to its origin, we have to look at how it appears in everyday practices. The hermeneutic circle, as a method that deals with how the phenomena appear, is therefore the most appropriate one and its research objective is therefore not subjective in nature but rather existentialistic.

§ 3: An introduction to presence

In order to adequately trace the concept of presence (as a nearing) in Heidegger's thinking it is necessary to first provide a preliminary introduction to the main concepts in Being and Time and how they relate to presence as a nearing. In his seminal work *Being and time* Heidegger delves deeper in the notion of what it means to 'be' and develops the concepts of being-there (*Dasein*) and being-in-the-world (*in-der-Welt-Sein*). This section first explains the concept of Dasein and how it relates to being-in-the-world. It then moves on to explain how presence is interwoven with these two notions.

Understanding Dasein, being-in-the-world and nearness

For Heidegger, the central question in *Being and time* is to understand what it means 'to be'. To understand this, the philosopher develops Dasein, characterized as the *mode* of being as realized by human beings (1998 23). This mode of being should not be understood as a human being in the bodily sense or as 'a person', but rather as the experience and implicit understanding of a being in that *it is* (to be) (Brandom 2002). Dasein has a threefold priority: First, at every moment of its existence, Dasein relates itself to its own being and does so in a particular way. Secondly, this issues an ontological priority: given that it always stands in relation to its being, it has a certain implicit understanding of that relationship. Thirdly, Dasein's relationship is not restricted to its own being. All our everyday activities are grasped in our capacity to understand other entities *as* entities (Mulhall 2001, 17). This threefold leads Heidegger to argue that 'the essence of Dasein lies in its existence' (1998 66). Dasein consists of two German words, *da*, meaning 'there', and *sein*, meaning 'being'. Dasein thus literally means, there-being (or being-there). Heidegger connects 'there' to 'being' to signify that Dasein always already *is* in the world and *in* the environment, it is always a being-in-the-world (*in-der-Welt-sein*) and we cannot disconnect this intrinsic link, Dasein is always situated within space and time. Furthermore, Dasein always relates to its own being and has an implicit understanding of this, it is characterized by a mineness (*Jemeinigkeit*) according to Heidegger. Mineness denotes individuality, it gives Dasein its own world of experiences: This is *my* body, are *my* thoughts and *I* have the possibilities to choose what *I* want to be and in this *I* differ from other Daseins. Dasein is thus free to make choices out of the possibilities of being. Heidegger argues that the world of Dasein is a with-world (*Mitwelt*). The world that we, as Daseins, encounter is always already filled with (notions of) the other. Heidegger illustrates this with an example; 'When we encounter, for example, a wheat field, we are dimly aware of the presence of the 'other' that takes care of the field itself and the grain that resides within it (1998, 117). Though Dasein is free to make choices out of the possibilities of being, it is always already limited in his possibility due to its thrownness (*Geworfenheit*). Dasein is 'in-the-world', but is not capable of choosing the time and space in which it is situated and is therefore limited to the place and time it resides in. In this sense Dasein is 'thrown' into the world (you did not choose to be born, nor did you choose the particular time and place in which you were born). Due to its thrownness it is always already a choice out of the

possibilities of being. Having to make choices out of the possibilities of being and therefore being projective (in the sense that it projects the possibilities on to itself) leads Dasein to always have a temporal, future projection of itself and therefore Dasein is being-ahead-of-itself, or more adequately formulated: being-ahead-of-itself-in-already-being-in-the-world.

The fundamental structure in Dasein's relation to the world is 'mood' (or care (*Sorge*) in *Being and Time*). Everything that Dasein encounters (from possibilities of being to the world as a phenomenon) is rendered through the lens of mood. As 'mood' structures how we relate to things, it changes how we 'care' about said things (when I feel sad, for example, I 'care' about a lighted candle differently than when I feel calm or relaxed). It thus structures how things 'come-into-concern'. Dasein does not choose to be in a mood, it always already is (remember how you never choose to feel excited, scared or grouchy, but just are?). It is thus both a pre-cognitive and an *a priori* ontological relation to the world (Heidegger 1998, 199). One of the most fundamental forms of mood is anxiety (*Angst*). Dasein is anxious about its being-in-the-world, as it confronts it with two things: A) its realization that it already-is out of the choices of possibilities (its thrownness), B) the temporal nature of its being. According to Heidegger Dasein is acutely aware of its own death and the nothingness (*das Nichts*) that comes after. Therefore, time becomes the structure of its being (hence the title *Being and Time*). Heidegger argues that *temporality* (time) is the mode (or modes) in which Dasein understands something like Being, it is always related to time as a standpoint (1998, 62).

Dasein is thus in-the-world ('thrown' in to a certain space and time) which it perceives through matters of concern (mood or care) of which the most fundamental one is the understanding of its own temporality. When Dasein perceives space and time it appears to us thus that these elements are not so much perceived in measurements, *but rather in matters of concern* (when we, for example, first enter a room we do not encounter it as a space of 'x' square meters but rather as a site that allows for a certain liveability, something that concerns us/that is of significance. Similarly, time 'flies' when you're having fun or 'drags' on when you're bored). Space and time are for Heidegger not a container in which things reside nor are they dimensions, they are the 'worldhood' of the world. It is, how we as Daseins experience the feeling of belonging to a world (Kouppanou 2018). Heidegger also underscores this importance by giving the example of the glasses, which can reside on someone's nose, but are 'further away' (as in matters of concern) than the picture s/he is looking at. What concerns us thus becomes *nearer*, what is insignificant to us *distances* itself in to the background. Having space become constructed out of matters of concern, elements of nearing and distancing are introduced. Heidegger acknowledges this aspect of spatiality in § 23 of *Being and Time*, by noting that within '*Dasein there lies an essential tendency towards nearness*' (1998 143). Nearness should thus be understood as a coming-into-concern which Heidegger describes as a de-distancing (*Ent-fernung*). Given that Dasein is structured by temporality (time) and nearness implicates space within time and just as nearness implies a farness, time implies a past, present and future. What then becomes present is what articulates, what *comes forward* from the intersection of time (the interplay between future and past that creates the

presence) and the nearing-distancing (as a structure of concern). What is present is what dwells – at a particular time, in a particular way – but also what hovers at a remove, what beckons and resonates from afar or from deep within (Eiland 1984, 152).

The man with the hammer (or the mediating role of technology)

Up until this point we have described Dasein and showed how it perceives its surrounding spatio-temporality through matters of concern. The question now is; how does this inflict its sense-making of the world? In chapter 3: *The worldliness of the world of Being and Time* Heidegger asks the question how Dasein makes sense of the world as a phenomenon, as a being that is in-the-world. This requires a rejection of mathematical and scientific interpretation of the world as these already presuppose a world. We have to understand the world in its average everydayness as this is the closest to how people go on with their daily lives and thus the ‘normal’ state of Dasein². That which is closest to our everyday world is the surrounding world (*Umwelt*). Heidegger then asks what is there in this surrounding world, pre-phenomenologically? The answer: Things. Things are pre-phenomenological aspects of the world around us. When we as Dasein deal with these things they become invested with *care*. When something is instilled with concern it becomes what Heidegger calls tools (*Zeug*). A tool, according to Heidegger never is a ‘being’ in its own regard (1998, 68). The being of a tool is always related to the totality of all tools. Tools are always an ‘in-order-to’ and the totality of tools is constituted by various ways of the in-order-to’ such as serviceability, conduciveness and usability (ibid). Within the in-order-to structure there is always a reference from something to something. Tools thus create a network of signs, references and signification. Because of the tools referential nature, it can never ‘just’ work for me. Tools are inherently social, they co-construct our being-with-others (*Mitsein*) (think of earlier mentioned wheat field example here). Hubert Dreyfus underscores this importance:

Equipment displays generality and obeys norms. First, a piece of equipment is the equipment it is no matter who uses it. Hammers, typewriters, and buses are not just for me to use but for others too. Equipment is for ‘Anybody’- a general user. . . . Second, there is a normal (appropriate) way to use any piece of equipment (1990, 51).

Tools are, constructed in a certain way that designates a purpose (a hammer is for example very useful for driving a nail into a wall, but is less useful as a paddle). In this sense they condition our sense-making of the world through their affordances – technology thus co-constructs and influences the space and time

² Heidegger argues that, as opposed to what the philosophical tradition implies, most people don’t spend their days wondering in solitude about their ‘being’, they just live their lives. If we thus want to understand ‘being’, we have to understand how it is grasped in its average everydayness. Any other attempt would only stray further from what ‘being’ actually entails.

as Dasein perceive it. In our everyday life we are however not ‘consciously aware’ of the tool, we’re only focused on the task at hand (are you *consciously* aware and acknowledging the screen or paper you are reading this from?). This particular aspect of tool usage is what Heidegger calls ready-to-hand (*zuhandenheit*). Contrary to ready-to-hand is present-at-hand (*vorhandenheit*). This concept is where we become aware of the tool and its affordances as such. This occurs when the tool is broken (we consciously realize how the hammer allows us to drive nails in to the wall by means of the hammerhead when said piece is broken or missing), missing or when investigating for (scientific) research. Because tools allow us to use them (within the bounds of their affordances) they establish a certain type of freedom. This becomes the horizon of the future as it dictates how we will use the tool to execute the purpose for which we use it. Tools are thus able to mediate the nearness that Dasein perceives when engaging with the surrounding world (*Umwelt*). Media is a tool as well and therefore plays a role in this construction of nearness. Heidegger writes of the radio as the expanding of Dasein in its everyday environment that it brings about a complete de-distancing of the whole world (1998, 105). This is a great danger that resides within modern (media) technology according to Heidegger. With modern media all temporal and spatial (the nearing-distancing) aspects of nearing are eliminated. This effect is what Heidegger describes as *distancelessness*. In his essay *the Thing* Heidegger explains this phenomenon:

All distances in time and space are shrinking. Man now reaches overnight, by plane, places which formerly took weeks and months of travel. He now receives instant information, by radio, of events which he formerly learned about only years later, if at all. The germination and growth of plants, which remained hidden throughout the seasons, is now exhibited publicly in a minute, on film. Distant sites of the most ancient cultures are shown on film as if they stood this very moment amidst today's street traffic. Moreover, the film attests to what it shows by presenting also the camera and its operators at work. The peak of this abolition of every possibility of remoteness is reached by television, which will soon pervade and dominate the whole machinery of communication (Heidegger 2009b, 163).

Heidegger is skeptical of this *distancelessness*. He argues that, although it may eliminate distance, it does not bring a nearing (*presence*):

Yet the frantic abolition of **all** distances brings no nearness; for nearness does not consist in shortness of distance. What is least remote from us in point of distance, by virtue of its picture on or its sound on the radio, can remain far from us. What is incalculably far from us in point of distance can be near to us. Short distance is not in itself nearness. Nor is great distance remoteness. The nature of nearness experienced as that which allows things to reveal themselves withdraws further from us since beings fall into a ‘uniformity in which everything is neither far nor near’ (ibid, 166).

According to Heidegger, modern media is not capable of producing true ‘nearness’. This is because modern media is dependent on modern technology which, according to Heidegger, condones an enframing (*Gestell*); the domination of the perception that views things as resources and not as the entities being for themselves. In *The Question Concerning Technology* Heidegger aims to unravel what technology is, in order to prepare us for a ‘free relationship’ to it (2014, 304). That is to say, he is interested how humans are orientated towards technology and how it affects us. This allows him to go beyond the technological definition of technology and understand its essence as a relation-to. Heidegger divides our common conception of technology into two understandings; *instrumental* (a means to an end) and *anthropological* (a human activity). These however, lack as an understanding, argues Heidegger, as they do not question what is meant by ‘a-means-to-an-end’ or ‘a-human-activity’. To overcome this, Heidegger returns to the ancient Greek philosophers (in particular Aristotle) and introduces the term *poiesis* (ποίησις), what in ancient Greek means ‘bringing forth’. Heidegger argues that technology (as thought of by the Greeks) is a kind of *poiesis*; that what brings forth from concealment in to appearance – a process of revealing. Heidegger argues that technology is a mode of revealing. However, as opposed to old technology that works in cooperation (reveals it) with its environment, modern technology is no longer in cooperation with the land but challenges (*herausfordern*) it by setting upon an unlocking and exposing of its energy supplies: The Rhine is no longer the Rhine, instead it is a resource for electrical power, the earth is no longer bound to the farmer in a relation where he/she carefully cultivates the land, instead it is a container from which minerals and other nutrients can be extracted to yield maximum efficiency (2014, 309). This type of interpreting then becomes the ‘frame’ (*Gestell*) through which we view the world. It turns our understanding of the nature of things into resources that can be called upon; everything becomes a standing-in-reserve (*Bestand*). This transformation into resources also transposes itself to humans. According to Heidegger this leads to the neglect of each other’s essence of being - the greatest danger for Heidegger.

Nearness in the fourfold

We previously established that it is things that Dasein first encounters when it tries to make sense of the world. In *The Thing*, Heidegger pays specific heed to this phenomenon and in doing so pays closer attention to the relation between nearness and things (2009b). Here, Heidegger makes a radical claim: He argues that up until now, there’s been an improper way of thinking about things. They are only thought of in terms of present-at-hand, they neglect the actual *thinghood* of the thing itself and that this *thinghood* should be thought of in a fourfold structure (*das Geviert*).

The fourfold is a somewhat mystical concept from the later thinking of Heidegger, a heavily metaphorical and poetic period. The fourfold has been criticized for being too vague or poetic and has received relatively little attention in comparison to his other works (Harman 2007). The fourfold exists out of four elements (earth – sky – divinities – mortals) that gather within the thing itself and in doing

so, present the thing in itself, as itself³. My interpretation of the fourfold follows that of Dreyfus and Spinoza (1997) who argue that the elements should be thought of as constituents of ‘focal practices’. Earth represents the taken-for-granted practices that makes situations matter for us (the family meal stands for more than just an indulgence in food; it also represents homeliness, warmth and a feeling of belonging)⁴. Sky represents the disclosed stable possibilities for action that arise in focal situations, during the family meal it is, for example, appropriate to discuss today’s events or have a pleasant dialogue, it is, however, less suitable for heavy-handed discussions or quarrels. The divinities stand for the coming-together of the various elements that constitute “in-the-moment”: At this particular moment, one feels at ease and in tune with what is happening, events such as toasting, the taking of a group picture or even prayers highlight these events. Mortals is Dasein’s realization of its temporal, non-fixed identity and how this identity needs to be attuned to the situation. When these elements establish a relation with each-other, mirror each-other, they establish a local world that is dependent upon the thing (Evans 2015, 64).

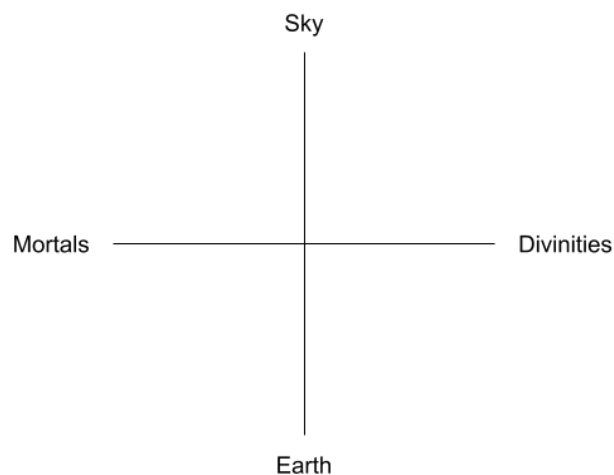


Figure 3: The fourfold of Heidegger

The fourfold is a coming-into-existence of nearness within things. True nearness comes from the fourfold when the thing ‘things’ (it gathers) and brings the four to one another without erasing their distance from another (Harman 2007, 134). Modern technology, according to Heidegger, is however incapable of this gathering as it does not respect the necessary distances. Is it possible for a digital (modern) technology (WhatsApp) to gather and bring near while preserving the distances? The answer

³ Heidegger took his inspiration for naming the terms from the works of the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin (Harman 2009).

⁴ ‘Focal practices’ is a concept developed by Alfred Borgmann that describes the practices that make human life meaningful such as reading, painting, playing sports or dining (Borgmann 2014)

to this lies in Heidegger's essay *Building, Dwelling, Thinking* where he delves deeper into the notion of what it means to dwell (2009a).

Can digital things... be things?

Before we do this however, it is important to consider how digital objects can also be things (phenomenologically speaking) as this allows us to understand WhatsApp in light of Heidegger's Theory. In the *Phenomenology of Digital Being* scholar Jooan Kim sets out to explore the implications of Heidegger's philosophy for our understanding of digital things (2001). For Kim, digital beings are either informative or executable. The former comprises of sensory data (texts, (audio-)visuals, among others). The latter is more akin to a tool (*Werkzeug*) that provides a certain "space" for working (Microsoft Word for example renders a two-dimensional space that allows me to type these words). Secondly, executables have many of the same characteristics that Heidegger ascribes to tools (*Zeug*): They are always something in-order-to, designed with a purpose in mind and in their everyday usage they are used in a ready-to-hand fashion. Thirdly, they have a relational nature due to their in-order-to nature, the best example here would be the hyperlink on the WWW that creates a network of signs and relations. This in turn creates an environing world (*Umwelt*) in which users can 'reside'. When we use our phone or PC we have a bodily relation to it (we control the mouse with our hand to move the cursor over the screen). There are also bodily relationships to signs within the technological software, i.e. emojis. With our physical phones, elements such as face scanning software and fingerprint technology are ways in which these companies and their products seek to provide seamless modes and methods of engagement with the tools. They thus have a quasi bodily-presence. There are however aspects in which digital objects differ from physical things. Most notably, digital things lack the spatio-temporality that structures physical things. They lack the essential properties of "thingly beings": the duration in the world-time and location in the world space (Kim 2001, 97). In cyberspace multiple versions of the same thing can exist at the same time, in different places. When a group of friends plays an online game, the web server allows them to view and engage with the same virtual environment, even though the players may be in totally different places. Kim argues that this is the fundamental difference between *physical* beings and *digital* beings. Physical beings are here *or* there, digital beings are here *and* there (ibid, 98).

To dwell digitally.

Having determined that digital objects possess thing-qualities, it is time to return to dwelling. Dwelling according to Heidegger preserves the fourfold by bringing the presencing of the fourfold into things (2009a, 149). He explains this using the bridge as an example. For Heidegger, the bridge is more than a means of 'getting across'; it is a mode of connectedness. Heidegger goes on to describe various bridges and their way of connectedness throughout time. Not coincidentally these seem to represent various stages in the historical way of thinking throughout time (Dreyfus and Spinoza 1997). First there is the *poiesis* bridge (think of the Greeks here) in the "old stone bridge that crosses the river". Secondly, there

is the *createdness* bridge of medieval times (“it leads from the precincts of the castle to the cathedral square”). Finally, we arrive at the *subject/object* bridge of the German Autobahn that is “tied into the network of long-distance traffic, paced as calculated for maximum yield” (Heidegger 2009a, 150). Here, the last bridge is of utter most importance. This clearly technical artifact of ‘modern’ times holds none of the characteristics that describes the old bridge, yet Heidegger thinks of this bridge as a thing that gathers the fourfold. For Heidegger the bridge *gathers* to itself in *its own way* earth and sky, divinities and mortals because it allows a *site* for it; a location comes into existence only by virtue of the bridge (2009a, 151–52). There are many spots along the two adjacent riverbanks that can be occupied, however only the bridge and its crossing make the two banks connect and create, phenomenologically speaking, a location. A location is determined by its boundaries. Boundary (in Greek *peras*) is that from which something *begins its presencing*. Space is what resides in between the boundaries of things (such as a bridge). Accordingly, spaces receive their being from locations (remember the mode of connectedness?) and not from “space” (ibid). Of course, Heidegger understands that there are many ways of interpreting space, both mathematical and measurable. This is however not how we experience space in our everyday life⁵.

Why all this talk of space? It stands in relation to dwelling. Heidegger interprets dwelling as a metaphorical movement into nearness. In dwelling, Dasein considers the entities in a locale (space) as meaningful (not just as a resource) and hence that environment becomes a meaningful place (Evans 2015, 66). What is of importance here, is the understanding of how the technological constitution (the bridge) discloses to us our understanding of our environment (the surrounding space), how it conditions the ‘there’ of our existence and becomes part of the hermeneutical structure and the very possibility of dwelling (Kouppanou 2018, 188–214). In this the bridge gathers the fourfold and leads.

§4: WhatsApp, Dwelling and Nearness

So far, we have attempted to understand what Heidegger’s understanding of *presence* entails and have reached the point of understanding presence as *a nearing*: That which *comes forward* from the intersection of time (the interplay between future and past that creates the presence) and the nearing-distancing (as a structure of coming-into-concern). We also concluded that, according to Heidegger, modern media poses a problem for nearing to exist as it brings about a uniform distancelessness through its enframing. Dwelling however provides an antidote to the distancelessness as it respects the fourfold out of which nearness is constituted. Heideggerian theory thus both dispels and acknowledges the possibility of nearness to exist within modern media technology. The aim now is to understand how this

⁵ In section 3: *An introduction to presence*, page 13, the concept of perceiving space is discussed through the example of the living room that Dasein encounters first and foremost as a site that designates a form of liveability (something that is of significance, comes-into-concern for Dasein) rather than a site of ‘x’ square meters.

holds sway in relation to the occurring of presence on WhatsApp. Is WhatsApp capable of producing a *dwelling* or produces it a *uniform distancelessness*? This section starts with an analysis of WhatsApp as a tool as it lays the foundation for how we can understand being-in-the-world and sense-making in a digital environment. Thereafter, we investigate whether WhatsApp is actually capable of producing a nearness. Does it allow for this interplay between time and space? We do so, by analyzing the various elements within WhatsApp that indicate both a time and spatial element. Lastly, we research whether WhatsApp's nearing is *poetical* or *distanceless* by analyzing the form of presence with the gathering of the fourfold and Heidegger's thinking on modern technology.

WhatsApp as a tool?

We previously established that digital things can, phenomenologically speaking, be things. It is now time to analyze them for their tool-ability. When we're using WhatsApp, we are often not consciously aware of the inner workings of the tool itself and can use it without theoretical contemplation. We use it in-order-to get a message across or to reach out to a person. This establishes a network of signs, references and signification: The person I aim to contact is referenced to with their name, which is saved in my contacts list. Secondly, when I reach out, the app shows whether the message is on its way, has been received or even has been read. Thirdly, it shows when this person was last online; an indication of the 'last' online appearance of said person. All of this also indicates how WhatsApp, as a tool, is inherently *social*. The tool serves no purpose if there is no one but me using it. Its design and structure needs to be *public* to let it be used by as many people as possible. The tool also clearly shows it is constructed to designate a purpose: The whole interface is designed in such a way that it allows for you to communicate with others. All in all it can be concluded that WhatsApp is a tool and as Heidegger mentioned it is tools we use to make sense of our world. How then does it create a sense of nearing (presencing)? Nearness refers to the experience of an articulation that arises out of the interplay between time (temporality) and space (nearness and farness) when something is instilled with *care*. When Dasein opens the interface of WhatsApp on his/her mobile device a list of most recent chats in chronological order is shown. On the most left-hand side the individual profile or 'Group' picture is shown, when there is no such thing it depicts a grey icon, featuring the pictogram of a person. Immediately next to it is in bold letters the name of the person/group⁶. Underneath it is the last message from the conversation. A number in a green circle indicates the number of unread messages with the time of the last message above them, if there are any. This indicates (a process of sense-making) to Dasein the social usage of 'the tool' and how the tool constructs the being-with-others (*Mitsein*). It also confronts Dasein with its thrownness (in a sense) as the interface allows for a limited amount of possibilities. This designates Dasein to make choices and this co-structures its being-ahead-of-itself-in-already-being-in-the-world (on the platform) as it leads Dasein to make choices and therefore have a future projection of itself.

⁶ The name of the individual appears as saved in your contacts folder on your mobile device.

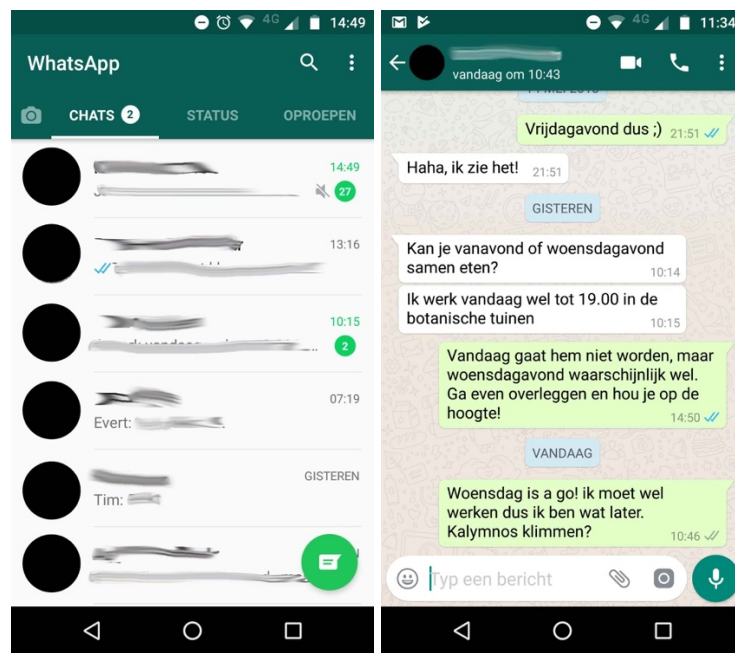


Figure 4: WhatsApp interface on an Android device (names, profile pictures and messages are blurred for privacy reasons)

What Dasein is confronted with when it uses ‘the tool’ is the enormous emphasis on time within the design of the interface. Chats are placed chronologically, the times when a message was received/sent are displayed on the home page, within the chat screen itself there’s an indication if or when the person was last ‘online’. When you’re chatting with a person it indicates whether the person is typing, by displaying “‘name” is typing’ underneath the name of the contact. Even the blue ticks indicate a moment of time, as it highlights when the person read the message. There is thus a sense of time in which something appears, an interval between past and future that indicates the present. Time as a constituting element of *nearness* occurs within WhatsApp.

Let’s move on to space: We previously established that digital things render a 2D-space. WhatsApp (being a digital tool) constructs a space that allows me to read and send messages within this 2D-interface. Within a chat I can scroll *up* or *down* or I can look at media or the people within a group and messages are displayed on a *background*. Whenever I receive a message, it *pops up*, I *enter* or *leave* a group. These elements (and their appropriate metaphors) structure how things ‘come-into-concern’ as they designate how things appear to us. Werner Kuhn notes how designers use spatial metaphors in their user interface design as it allows them to connect people’s experiences to effect similar experiences in the designs they employ (1996). Kuhn argues therefore that interface metaphors are conceptual and not just a presentational device (Kuhn, 1996 cited in Kouppanou 2018, 204). In other words, these metaphors build our thought instead of merely representing what is already there (ibid.). That is to say, that they in a Heideggerian understanding co-constitute our already-there (in a coming-into-concern sense). Dasein is embodied within the application. When we use it, we transfer ourselves to the digital realm, be that in the form of an avatar, profile or dataset. A digital version of ourselves is created. This

is not to argue that this type of representation is of similar importance as my body in the mirror. What is argued is that there is an element created by which Dasein can identify. This is perpetuated through the notion of the profile picture, the status that I can add, or the personal information that I use. These elements indicate a sense of mineness (*Jemeinigkeit*) (This is my profile, my contacts or my chat history). Out of the above-mentioned elements a *nearing* occurs; there is an intersection of nearness and farness (the elements that make a ‘coming-into-concern’ possible within the interface) and an interplay between past and future (all the time related elements within the design of the application). What thus occurs is that when Dasein opens the application in a ready-to-hand fashion, it is confronted with the above-mentioned elements that denote a sense of presence. WhatsApp designates a sense of ‘the other’ through its interface which is specifically designed to allow for sociality to appear. The profile pictures and names of the others reference to someone or a group of persons in the ‘physical’ world. They institute a perception of ‘the other’. When engaging with others through the application, the co-constructing features that allow us to ‘talk’ to this person or group disappear in to the background. WhatsApp has a social and public character; for it to work there’s a need for others to be present on the platform as well. In using WhatsApp Dasein is capable of recognizing ‘the other’. This allows Dasein to get a sense of being-with-others that denotes a with-world (*Mitwelt*). WhatsApp thus allows for a presencing to occur. But is this a poetical nearing or one that prevails in distancelessness? Let’s first consider WhatsApp as a ‘bridge’.

Take ‘em to the bridge

With the wheat field example in *Being and Time*, Heidegger notifies us how the world of Dasein is a with-world (*Mitwelt*). Dasein is always (dimly) aware of other Daseins in this world. In this sense this being-with-others constructs our already-there. A similar thing happens on WhatsApp, whenever I open the application I’m confronted by previous contact (or lack thereof) that I already had. This constructs my anticipation for the future. But this is not necessarily a dwelling that occurs, therefore it needs to establish a meaningful locale. The question is thus whether WhatsApp is capable of gathering the fourfold. At first glance it seems so: As mentioned, Dasein is transferred into the digital realm and is moving on from chat to chat. In this regard, WhatsApp is able to bring a relatedness to things that may not be in our immediate reach, it functions as a mode of connectedness. Whether we are chatting with co-workers, loved ones or distant strangers we often take for granted that which happens behind the everyday practice; establishing a relationship (earth). O’Hara et al, noted how peoples everyday usage of WhatsApp is primarily based upon relationships and bonding (2014). In a similar fashion, some actions are appropriate during WhatsApp conversations whereas others are not. O’Hara et al,’s study also noted how users tell stories and have a group-etiquette. They, for example, re-collect experiences of the night before or discuss daily events and out of these little tidbits series of stable positions rise out of the event (sky). Chen et al, note how the sharing of mobile media (such as videos, photos or audio-clips) help to constitute an in-the-moment (divinities) atmosphere (think for example of the collective

sharing of NYE pictures in a WhatsApp group) (2015). In daily use this is however less prevalent. We are, for example, not so much ‘in-the-moment’ when we’re hastily typing that we’ll arrive 30 minutes later. As Church and de Oliveira noted, organizing on WhatsApp is much more *on the fly* (2013). Dreyfus and Spinoza argue that this allows for an in-the-moment that makes us realize the in-the-momentness of technological flexibility, akin to the speeding over the German Autobahn bridge (1997, 171). WhatsApp also allows for a non-fixed identity construction by means of the profile picture, name and the tagline. Studies such as those of Carmen Maíz-Arévalo (2018) and Yus (2017) indicate that users of WhatsApp use profile pictures and taglines to present themselves in a certain light (e.g. as humorous, smart or tender). They also change their tone and demeanor from conversation to conversation and group chat to group chat and thereby adjusting their ‘identity’ as is deemed appropriate (mortals). These actions all mirror each-other and are part of the complex web of online relationships and methods of digital communication that go along with these conversations and connections: I cannot be ‘in-the-moment’ without having my identity attuned to the situation in which I’m situated. Therefore, users on WhatsApp change their tone and demeanor to fit the moment that is constituted in the WhatsApp conversation. This in turn, is constituted by the relationships outside of and those that arise due to usage of the medium. These (and the aforementioned processes) allow stable positions for actions to occur so that appropriate conversation happens.

We have now described how WhatsApp constitutes the four elements of the fourfold and how these processes mirror each other. Does the possibility for a poetic dwelling arise from this gathering? Before we can answer this, we need to take another element of the fourfold into consideration. Heidegger mentioned that for a ‘gathering’ to occur all elements of the fourfold need to respect the distance between them. As mentioned, boundaries are that from which *presencing* begins. There is both a spatial and a temporal limit that allows for a nearing to occur. Nearness maintains farness just as past maintains future. A mode of connectedness does not connect to every node, but it respects the distances that are inherent between some nodes (nearness vs farness for example). Kouppanou argues that this understanding of space is vital:

“To understand space otherwise is to understand it as having any kind of possibility available, that is, any connectedness available; it is to turn space into extension, dimension, distance and mathematical grid. In this space any location is the same with any other, or rather locations do not exist at all. Places become points that exist nowhere in particular, and in consequence *Dasein* itself is turned into a point through the practices it enacts (Kouppanou 2018, 215).

As mentioned previously, digital things are boundless; multiple copies of the same thing can exist at the same time in multiple locations. This poses a problem for the boundaries as described by Heidegger. If something is in effect boundless (I can enter WhatsApp on my desktop and other phones as well and the content will be the same) there is no place from which its presencing (in a poetic way) can start as it

does not respect the boundaries. Most WhatsApp conversations are established through mobile usage. This allows people to tell their daily stories and tidbits from every location and at every time (provided that an internet connection is established). Whereas previously WhatsApp was tied to one's phone number, these days the messaging app registers it when a new sim-card is inserted and ask the user to transfer their WhatsApp profile to the new phone number, making it in effect endlessly connectable and therefore unlocatable. Nearness vs. farness is thus not respected in the architecture of WhatsApp as boundaries do not exist. It's presencing becomes a form of connectedness (see the above quote by Kouppanou). But what is this form of 'connectedness' and how is it constituted?

Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan already argued that media functions as extensions of the man; media should not be understood as (merely) communicative tools but as cultural environments in which we situate ourselves in (McLuhan 2003). In their book *'De Platformsamenleving: Strijd om publieke waarden in een online wereld'* José van Dijck, Thomas Poell and Martijn de Waal explore how digital platforms such as WhatsApp increasingly mediate social, economic and civic interaction (2016). They note how these platforms are often thought of as a means to an end (WhatsApp allows people to connect, to initiate collectives or to organize), they are regarded (and pose themselves) as tools or instruments without presupposed biases or ideologies, while the opposite is often closer to the truth. Behind the façade of neutrality, WhatsApp and similar platforms are programmed with an objective and the sociality they pose is engineered. They promote an environment that stimulates users to share in order to grow profits (van Dijck 2013). Social networking sites turned being social in to an 'on demand' product. Users are always capable of reaching and being reached. Instant Messaging applications such as WhatsApp are no different, a chat conversation is always available, waiting to be picked up again. What is thus not respected in the fourfold are the necessary distances between nodes and intervals that allow for the possibility of a poetic dwelling to occur. WhatsApp allows conversation to happen by eliminating farness, what replaces it is a connectedness, not a poetic nearing. For Heidegger this is in effect a distancelessness that is filled with idle talk and mundane curiosity. For Heidegger to dwell means *to spare and to preserve* – to set it free in its own right (that is to say to acknowledge and to refer to the beings being as its being and only that), it has a positive character (2009a, 147). What is lost when we're not capable of dwelling is the ability to relate to the things as their own being, for Heidegger, the *seins*-thinker pur sang, the gravest danger of them all. I do not wish to go as far as this, as it is too bold of a claim to make, but I would like to point out some of the elements within WhatsApp that indicate that 'being' on WhatsApp is understood in terms of a standing-reserve (*Bestand*).

We previously established that a user is capable of sending and receiving messages from everywhere, regardless of time as long as there is an internet connection. This, as described, turns being social in to an 'on demand' product. The structure and design of the interface of WhatsApp stimulate and encourage such a behavior. We are prompted to check whether we have messages or to see if the messages we have sent have been received and read thanks to the blue ticks, pop-up notifications and such. Furthermore, WhatsApp also functions as an archive. Every log-in, chat message, photo or other

media file that has been sent is saved and logged. This storing and saving is however for the most part a concealed process. Although the messages sent back and forth from user to user are encrypted (end-to-end), the metadata (entailing, for example, when, where and from which device a user send a message) is not (Rastogi and Hendler 2017)⁷. Users get very little insight in to the (meta-)data that is collected about them. The information gained from this data is in turn used to structure how we communicate over the channel. As Jacques Derrida noted: “The technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. Archivization produces as much as it records the event” (1996, 17). In this sense the data helps structuring already-there of Dasein on WhatsApp and the data-structure therefore restricts our being-there (*Dasein*). With sociality being an on-demand product, the user is turned into a standing-reserve, quite literally a *bestand*. Presencing, on WhatsApp, comes forward through the interplay between time and (de-)distancing that is manifested through elements in the user interface and structure of the chat-application that co-construct Dasein's experience on the IM-application. This is however not a presencing that is akin to its poetic form, but rather a mode of connectedness that is akin to a challenging-forth that is influenced by its political-economical design and structure and turns Dasein in to a *bestand*.

§ 5: Conclusions, limitations and suggestions for future research

In this thesis I attempted to understand the experience of presence on WhatsApp through the understanding of presence as constituted by Heidegger. This led us through a journey that, respectively, handled concepts such as *Dasein*, the mode of being as described by Heidegger, through being-in-the-world, the realization of Dasein that it is always ‘already-there’ in the world and how Dasein makes sense of this world (as a phenomenon) through tools (*Zeug*). All of this laid the necessary groundwork for the conceptualization of presence as Heidegger understood it. We reached the point where we understood presence as a *nearing*: ‘that which comes into-concern on the intersection between time (the interplay between past and future that creates the present) and nearness (and implicitly farness)’. However, modern technology poses a problem to this poetic way of presencing and does so in two ways. First, modern technology in itself is both conducted by and creates an *enframing* (*Gestell*) that turns our understanding of being's ‘beings’ in to standing-reserves. Secondly, modern technology establishes a *distancelessness* that does not respect the boundaries necessary for a poetic nearing to occur.

Given this, does modern technology have the possibility for an actual poetic way of nearing? In his later work, the German philosopher offers us such a possibility through *dwelling*. Nearing, as he describes exists out of the interplay between the four elements of the fourfold (*das Geviert*) (earth – sky – divinities – mortals) and dwelling occurs when all of these elements are gathered and respected.

⁷ A little caveat here is that WhatsApp encrypts the metadata when the messages are being transferred, but not when it is stored on their private servers.

Though highly metaphorical, the fourfold offers us a method of analyzing whether poetic nearing can exist within WhatsApp. However, to do so we first needed to analyze whether we could understand WhatsApp as a (digital) tool. And, if there's no dwelling, what then does occur on WhatsApp? The method used in this thesis was a hermeneutical phenomenological one, based upon the works of Spiegelberg (1982). In the method section I first introduced phenomenology and Heidegger's hermeneutic philosophical method, as it provides readers with a basis to understand after which I introduced my method section. In the analysis section I let the aforementioned method come to fruition by applying Heidegger's philosophy of presence to WhatsApp. I concluded that although WhatsApp allows for the elements of dwelling to occur, it does not respect the necessary boundaries between them, making it impossible for a poetic nearing to occur. One can argue that this is prevalent in all modern media technologies (just as Heidegger argued). However, by focusing on the affordances of WhatsApp I have noted that although it may be an effect of modern media technologies it definitely is specific to WhatsApp. We then asked the question that if there's no possibility for a poetic nearing, what then does exist? A type of connectivity that turns being social in to social on demand, through the structure and the design of WhatsApp. This limits the already-there of *Dasein* and turns 'being' on WhatsApp in to a standing-reserve.

To be concise: I set out to research *how we experience presence through WhatsApp*. I used the philosophical works of Martin Heidegger to gain a sense of how we experience presence and how presence 'comes to be'. Secondly, I employed a hermeneutic phenomenological circle to investigate whether presence, as understood by Heidegger, comes to fruition on WhatsApp. As Heideggerian theory both dispels (through distancelessness) and acknowledges (through poetic dwelling) the possibility for the for presence to exist within modern (media) technologies, I researched both possibilities. I came to the conclusion that because WhatsApp does not respect the boundaries it is not capable of producing a true, or poetic, presencing. If there's no true presencing, what then does prevail? I researched this in turn and concluded that the presence of WhatsApp is more akin to a type of connectedness that is imposed (herausfordert) upon the user due to the design and structure of the instant messaging application.

Limitations

Of course there are limitations to this work. This work is highly theoretical and therefore pays little attention to "real-world" practices. It could for example benefit from a more quantitative analysis such as in the works of Leighton Evans (2015) and Galit Wellner (2016) who use a post-phenomenological method to research how people experience these phenomena⁸. The case-study could also be specified (and combined with the above-mentioned approach) to more specific cases such as news sharing on

⁸ Post-phenomenology is a method coined by US philosopher Don Ihde (2009). It is on the one hand inspired by the phenomenological tradition, but tries on the other hand to take on more empirical analyses of (contemporary) technologies (Rosenberger and Verbeek 2015).

WhatsApp or various usages that arise out of different cultural contexts. Secondly, this study neglects, in part, the bodily relation to presence and highly focusses on the chat function of WhatsApp, disregarding the ability to voice or videocall one another. Does this change the perception of presence on WhatsApp?

Future research suggestions

If we follow the old Greek understanding of boundaries (that from which *presencing* begins) one could of course argue that the aforementioned limitations provide ample ground for new research. These are however, not the most original interesting research suggestions. What would be more interesting, for example, is to include the work of Bernard Stiegler in to the investigation of this phenomenon. Heidegger, according to Stiegler, does not acknowledge the inherent technical nature of Dasein. Men, for Stiegler is not ‘natural’ in nature, but ‘technical’ (Stiegler 1998). Given this, to what extent does it affect the understanding of presence as this thesis entails? A second research suggestion would be to look in to the his criticism on the metaphysics of presence by Derrida, which offers a new take on Heidegger’s philosophy (Derrida 1995). Derrida tries to expose the dichotomies in our thinking such as those about presence and absence and suggests instead that presence also includes the traces left behind by absent things; there is no such thing as absolute presence or absence. How does this influence the work produced in this thesis? Last but not least: Albert Borgmann provides an interesting critique and extension of Heidegger’s critique on modern technology (Borgmann 2014). While acknowledging the destructive tenets of modern technology, Borgmann also understands that these technologies offer us ways of doing focal practices (such as the central heating system that provides us with the means of having a nice dinner at home). Can this account of modern technology be translated to WhatsApp?

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