

8-15-1997

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Recommended Citation

Cass, Kimberly, "The World-Wide Web's Shadow of Opportunity: A Heideggerian Perspective of Authenticity in the Information Age" (1997). *AMCIS 1997 Proceedings*. 307.

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The World-Wide Web's Shadow of Opportunity: A Heideggerian Perspective of Authenticity in the Information Age

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Abstract

This paper will examine Heidegger's conditions for Dasein (human being) discovering its authenticity through acting (in the world) in such a way as to create meaning for itself through its relation to the world and to others. (I will follow Heidegger's convention of using the third person singular neuter pronoun form when referring to Dasein.). Next we will consider three modes of *fallenness* that prevent Dasein from realizing a meaningful relationship to itself and to the world and how the World-Wide Web (Web) contributes to these conditions. Finally, four principles for authentic being with the Web are proposed and discussed.

Dasein's Challenge To Live Authentically In The World

We must struggle with the following questions:

What does it mean to be *authentic* in an information society? How can we, as information persons, find our appropriate and *natural* relationship to the Web? How can we curb the temptation to *over-informate* ourselves? How can we meaningfully integrate our excessively large span of awareness into our relatively limited span of action?

In *Being and Time* Heidegger (1962 translation of 1927) examines Dasein and its way of being. Heidegger posits that understanding and experience come about by encountering and acting in the world and by encountering others. Dasein exists in time as a historical being who has a past that is conditioned by family, culture, and the opportunities that are possible for it given its life situation. Dasein also has the possibility of a future into which it can project itself through purposeful action. Dasein's future creates an organizing and contextualizing power for its present. Dasein's authentic contribution arises from discovering its uniqueness through its encounters with the world and other beings. By choosing certain possibilities that stem from its authentic *being*, Dasein provides meaning for its life by projecting itself into the future. Because its possibilities are limited by its death, Dasein must choose to act within a finite sphere of opportunities.

Dasein's struggle occurs in the present, where it must become aware of the constraints of its past, and authentically invest itself in its future projects to realize its unique possibilities. The present confronts

Dasein with obstacles that distract it from knowing and acting in accordance with its authentic self. Dasein loses contact with its genuine self by losing itself in day-to-day concerns and activities; this thwarts the realization of its authentic possibilities. Heidegger terms this dysfunctional immersion into the present *fallenness* which entails three conditions: idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity, all of which prevent Dasein from encountering its genuine self in relation to the world and others.

Idle Talk, Curiosity, and Ambiguity: Three Conditions of Fallenness

Idle talk cuts Dasein off from concrete experience and hence from authentic encounter with the world. In this condition Dasein employs pre-articulated terminology without applying the effort needed to understand it. Discourse occurs at the level of ungrounded abstraction where minimal content is

conveyed through the use of clichés that conceal rather than reveal reality; reality for Heidegger is a category of interpretation rather than brute facticity. Here Dasein equivalences the use of second-hand terminology without understanding and confuses the articulation of an experience with the experience itself.

Curiosity uproots and distracts Dasein from its purposeful action in the world. Dasein desires to experience exotic new possibilities not for the purpose of understanding them, but for the purpose of distracting itself. Curiosity uproots Dasein from where it is into a foundationless nowhere. Here Dasein attempts to experience new ideas and sensations without attempting to understand them and integrate them into its being.

Ambiguity entails Dasein confusing talk about something with doing it. Dasein looks to others to interpret and define situations and to articulate what it should do. With many perspectives on an issue, and because Dasein is cut off from its authenticity, it is incapable of recognizing an appropriate possibility and taking committed action to realize it. Dasein becomes diluted and is ineffective in this condition.

The Challenge to Dasein in the Information Age

These ideas pertaining to Dasein discovering its authentic way of being-in-the world and the pitfalls that it encounters in the process have much to say to us at the end of the twentieth century where part of our world consists of the always-everywhere-already overlay of the Web. In light of the continuing removal of economic and technological barriers that once functioned to limit our encounters with the Web, now we can expose ourselves to as much information as we want. With this backdrop, we need to grapple with what it means to use this vast information resource judiciously. We need to expend the effort to articulate the information problems and their consequences from an authentic, human perspective. We need also to face the possibility that these problems and their consequences may be impervious to technological fixes, and hence, demand a new way of being-with the Web.

The Being of Technology

A technological worldview structures all aspects of our life and reveals them to be projects for improvement [Heidegger (1977)]. Technology exists for Dasein not so much as a tool, but rather as a paradigm for revealing the world. The pre-technological way in which the world once disclosed itself is concealed by its disclosure as something to be mastered through technology [Zimmerman (1990)]. Technology no longer functions as the means to accomplishing something, rather, it shapes the ends of society [Winner (1986)].

Heidegger (1976) became concerned about information technology's emphasis on efficient functioning and on knowing more. When information becomes reduced to logistics, ideas that do not conform to that structure become devalued and invisible. Heidegger remarked that "...everything essential and great originated from the fact that man had a home and was rooted in tradition" [Heidegger (1976), p. 277] while simultaneously observing that technology uprooted Dasein because Dasein inauthentically attempted to define itself in accordance with technology's requirements. He did not believe that technology could be controlled or managed, yet through thinking and being-with, Dasein could achieve an adequate relationship to the essence of technology.

The World-Wide Web

The Web has revealed space and time to be less constraints than conditions to be overcome. In some ways, the Web seems as though it was designed for Dasein's fallenness, as it can facilitate the conditions of idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity very well. Like any form of technology, the Web resists our attempts to control it. So perhaps now is the time to approach it with an attitude of emptiness and openness, silently awaiting its disclosure of being to us. What does the Web reveal about the way we need to relate to it, to information, and to others?

How can we authentically be with the Web as a mechanism for being with others?

Whereas the Web is always-everywhere-already, we are not. We experience it in very small fragments unfolding through time. We also must contend with our limited attention, short-term memory, and assimilation abilities. Although it is artificial, we need to relate to the Web in a natural way; one that is respectful of both the Web's being and our authenticity. Both beings become diminished when their revelation is ignored. Rather than retreating from it (rejecting it) or getting lost in it, the Web challenges us to be with it. We must be more thoughtful with our use of Web because it, being part of the world, impacts our being.

Four Principles For Authentic Being With the Web

Respect for Human Processing Limitations: We all face the realities of wasted time and information overload whenever we use the Web. Using the Web as a substitute for life causes people to reveal themselves in inappropriate ways, by trying to conform to a technology of which they are constitutionally incapable. We need to acknowledge and be respectful of our spatial, temporal, and intellectual limitations, and respectful of the Web, itself. While keeping aware of the realities of information anxiety and information overload we must answer the following questions: Why are we accessing information? How much information do we truly need? Why are we creating information? How much do we truly need to express? How can we be deliberate and considerate in articulating and disseminating our ideas?

Considered Thought: This principle counteracts idle talk and pertains to creating and disseminating information. With exhaustless capacity for dissemination, how can we publish our ideas meaningfully for ourselves and others? How can we integrate our ideas into the pre-existing mass of ideas, or at least allow them to co-exist with it? Creating useless or unconsidered information wastes other people's time and dilutes the quality of public discourse. The cost of unconsidered thought can be seen when it drives those with wisdom from the public sphere and into hidden private discourse. We must humbly remember that accessibility to information is not equivalent to being able to competently use it. We must be honest about our limitations. If we are incapable of intelligent discourse on a subject, perhaps we must first listen and work hard to achieve a degree of knowledge before entering into conversation. Perhaps lurking is thus justified.

Clarity of Purpose: This principle counteracts curiosity and pertains to accessing and retrieving information. In the shadow of this burgeoning information resource that gives us access to masses of information, we must keep in mind that the answer is not out there. Instead of becoming ubiquitous and scattered, we are challenged to recall our future possibility and from this foundation encounter the Web. If we do not purposefully use the Web's massive information resource, the quality of our lives is diluted. When we intend a purposeful encounter with others and their ideas, we approach the Web from authentic integrity with an openness to discovery. We must be mindful that the answers require the interaction of our purposeful and thoughtful articulation of a question, with the information that is attracted to that context for us to examine and interpret what we find. When we pause and reflect on its purpose, we imbue our relationship to the Web with our uniqueness.

Assimilation: This principle counteracts ambiguity and pertains to the responsibility one has in understanding information. Usually, the bulk of our time on the Web is spent looking for and obtaining information, and not in pondering and assimilating it. With the Web, as with any information repository, the answers are not instantaneously accessible. In order to find suitable information, we must sift through much that is useless and irrelevant to the inquiry at hand. Understanding, interpreting, assimilating, and integrating information into our body of knowledge is hard work, and cannot be delegated to a computer or someone else. This is time that is spent off-line.

Conclusion

These principles are not intended to be exhaustive, but, rather they are a first step at guidelines for authentically using the Web. They attempt to reflect realistic assessments of both Dasein and the Web with the intent of preserving both kinds of being. Whereas it is possible to endlessly flit about in cyberspace, Dasein's authentic presence requires stability and rootedness in that artificial world.

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