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Abb. 1: Point cloud of Yandex SDG proprietary lidar. Online unter: <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:YandexLidarCloud.png> (letzter Zugriff: 16.05.2024).

Bell, virtual

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A familiar sound wakes me from my slumber. Sometimes it beckons me to wake up gently with its soothing, natural melodies, while at other times it is a more urgent tone, resembling a persistent siren. I reluctantly open my eyes, my hand fumbling for my phone. As my groggy gaze fixes on the screen, I'm confronted by a bell icon, swaying rhythmically. The decision weighs on me: postpone or switch it off? What time is it anyway?

I am standing in a bell tower, looking out of a small window at the city below. Suddenly, a resounding ringing pierces my ears, lingering like an echo long after the source of the sound has ceased.

The bell works seamlessly, often with minimal human intervention, in an age of advanced technology. The use of the bell, which conveys different social meanings

through the way it is used in public, the way it is rung and the number of times it is rung, is now much more individualised in virtual environments. While the bell is often perceived as a symbol intertwined with Christian culture, it is worth noting that it is one of the oldest percussion instruments, having had a remarkable journey through different cultures over the past four millennia (Whitehead 2022). My focus is on the virtual bell as a socio-technical object and its manifestation in virtual environments, where I explore its shaping sociality in different contexts.

The meaning and function of the bell has evolved throughout history, yet it persists as a socio-technical artefact. By decentering the bell from its Euro-American centrality legacy (Law 2002), we gain a broader perspective that allows us to explore its social relevance across different contexts and practices. When I wake up to the sound of my morning alarm, my mind shifts to the ringing icon on my phone – an object and its virtual representation. According to Star (2010: 63), objects, as non-human actors, are »something people act towards and with« (→ Objekt, virtuelles).

Although we use similar terminology for both, the social life and materiality of the bell as an object and the sociality of its virtual counterpart are not identical. If we consider the bell as a notification infrastructure, it can be seen as an all-encompassing socio-technical assemblage that facilitates ongoing interactions between human and non-human actors (de la Bellacasa 2011; McLoughlin/Badham/Couchmanet 2000) (→ Proteine). Science and technology studies (STS) have long focused on the social life of objects and objects that change and are changed by social life (Bijker et al. 1987). At the forefront of rethinking materiality, Latour (1993) emphasises that technology, as intertwined

with society, participates in processes of transformation, mobilisation, circulation and negotiation; in collaboration as part of social systems. »Socio-technical assemblages« highlight the intricate and interwoven networks of social and technological components that work together to perform specific functions within a broader system or context (Law/Callon 1992). These assemblages include not only technological components but also social practices, institutions and cultural norms, all of which shape and are shaped by technology.

Turning my attention to the diverse applications of the bell icon in the virtual world, I discuss its integration into infrastructures that have become an integral part of our daily lives. Star and Ruhleder's (1994) work on infrastructures highlights how objects are embedded in their environment, becoming almost invisible in everyday practices. By examining the different roles and different social dynamics of the virtual bell icon, I seek to understand its sociality. Latour (1996) suggests that we can explore the engagement of an object in different practices across time and place. Different uses of this symbol and the subjective meanings it acquires in each context, depending on the user, it may be possible to examine an object as both an artefact and a virtual icon.

The bell icon can take on different forms. It can appear as an angled bell, with brackets surrounding the bell to indicate that it is ringing, or with numbers added to the bell when a notification arrives. It can also be crossed out. What do these differences mean? What socio-technical roles do they play? Are they connected to our everyday practices? How can we explore the materiality of symbols and their relationships in different contexts? Following these questions, I will reflect on

different uses of the bell symbol in virtual environments, focusing on its role as a symbol and its embeddedness.

Let's start with push notifications. These are messages sent by various apps, companies and social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram that serve as reminders of important events, news updates or other information. Often marked with a bell icon of various designs, they are part of the *notification infrastructure* and can only be sent with the user's permission (→ Kommunikationskanäle). However, this bell icon can also be used maliciously. It can deceive or alert users, acting as a lure that can lead to spam emails, clicking on infected links or falling victim to mass marketing scams. The bell icon is often associated with subscriptions, particularly on digital platforms such as channels or newsletters. In recent years, online content creators have encouraged users to subscribe verbally and with accompanying gestures, such as »don't forget to subscribe to my channel«. Subscribing is similar to bookmarking a favourite channel or newsletter, making it easily accessible and showing support. The bell icon also plays an important role in alarms and reminders through applications such as alarm clocks and calendars on phones and computers. It is increasingly used to alert users to natural disasters. Many electronic devices with reminder and alarm functions also display the bell icon prominently on their digital screens. In addition, the bell icon has a practical function in volume control. It allows the user to adjust the sound level to lower, higher or mute, similar to the speaker icon on headphones.

As an object with a rich historical legacy, the bell is a universal symbol within the virtual notification infrastructure. It embodies a social materiality and is one

of the icons that represents an invisible, automated everyday practice in virtual life. Have you clicked a virtual bell today?

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Bete, rote

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Virtualität und Essen (in der Universität)

Ernährung erfordert täglich das Treffen von vielfältigen Entscheidungen, die durch das Angebot von Essen (mit)bestimmt werden, wobei solche Angebote stets angenommen oder abgelehnt werden können (vgl. Meyer 2021: 52). Zu solchen Entscheidungen zählt also auch, *wie* man sich ernährt, wobei eine Zunahme einer veganen Ernährungsweise bzw. die Annäherung an einen veganen Ernährungsstil zu verzeichnen ist (vgl. Statista 2023). Diese Entwicklung bleibt auch von universitärer Seite nicht unberücksichtigt. »Neu unter den Top-Mensen präsentiert sich in diesem Jahr die rein vegane Mensa *Rote Bete* des Akademischen Förderungswerks Bochum [Herv. i.O.]« (Bollag 2023). Die auf dem Campus der Ruhr-Universität Bochum eröffnete *Rote Bete* ist als »vegan-freundlichste Mensa 2023« (ebd.) von PETA ausgezeichnet worden. Durch die Auszeichnung von PETA eröffnen sich respektive der Virtualität verschiedene Vor-