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RESEARCHING A POSTHUMAN WORLD

Interviews with Digital Objects

Catherine Adams and Terrie Lynn Thompson

Researching a Posthuman World

‘Adams and Thompson bring us face to face with the riddle of the Digital, and the puzzling significance of the Posthuman. I warmly recommend this phenomenologically engaging text to anyone who wants to understand the wondrous world in which we live.’
– Max van Manen, *University of Alberta, Canada*

‘Adams’ and Thompson’s heuristics will enliven fields of inquiry and produce research buzzing with agency, in which humans are no longer the only ones that speak. I hope the potential of this timely text will find its way to research practices across disciplines.’
– Lucas Introna, *University of Lancaster, UK*

‘This concise and highly readable text is a welcome contribution to the project of posthumanism and building research practices aligned with contemporary cultural theory.’
– Sian Bayne, *University of Edinburgh, UK*

Catherine Adams • Terrie Lynn Thompson

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Interviews with Digital Objects

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To things

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction to Posthuman Inquiry

Abstract We reflect on the many digital and nondigital things that support and shepherd today's professional practices. Things are not inert objects, but vital entities implicated in the co-constitution and becoming of our everyday worlds. We forward posthumanism as a theoretical framework to address our twenty-first century situation. Actor-Network Theory, phenomenology, and related methodological approaches used throughout the book are presented. Differences between objects and things are considered. We propose interviewing objects as a way to give things a voice in research, and thus include them as participants in inquiry. Eight heuristics are introduced for conducting posthuman research.

Keywords ANT · heuristics · interviewing objects · posthumanism · phenomenology

Introduction

The digital is everywhere. In pockets and purses, on desktops and bedside tables; computing technologies also compose much of the invisible infrastructure underwriting our twenty-first century lives. Microsensors track and digitize human activities, algorithms manipulate the data generated, then feed us steady streams of information about ourselves and the world around us. Headlines wrestle with big data, massive open online courses, datafication, and quantified selves; bots, robots, and self-driving cars; augmented and

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virtual realities; viruses, worms, and cybersecurity; wearable technologies, ambient intelligence, and the Internet of Things. Ethical questions and social concerns abound—from internet addiction and cyber-bullying to identity theft and the digital divide.

This book is about the digital and making its effects and affects *visible*. Our aim is to provide researchers and other professionals with an approach for including digital technologies in their research inquiries, and thus make them available for critical reflection and ethical consideration. To accomplish this task, we begin by forging a new and more inclusive understanding of what it means to be human in an increasingly technologized and networked world. Our intimate and often ubiquitous relationships with all things—including the digital—must be reckoned with, human and nonhuman agency needs to be reconsidered, and the presumed neutrality of technologies in human affairs questioned.

We open this chapter by suggesting that posthumanism—a theoretical perspective that aims to address our co-constitutive entanglements with nonhuman entities—may offer a productive way to rethink digital technologies and their manifold involvements in our personal and professional lives. Posthumanism asks us to attend to and take seriously that which is most near to us, the everyday things of our world. Since the publication of Donna Haraway's *Manifesto for Cyborgs* (1985), posthumanist scholarship has been issuing fundamental challenges to how we envision the human subject and its relational surround (Badminton 2000; Braidotti 2013; Barad 2003; Graham 2002; Hayles 1999; Wolfe 2010). Posthumanism is not about relinquishing our humanity and letting machines take over. Rather, it seeks to correct some of the anthropocentric biases that have dogged humanist perspectives. One such bias is the belief that we are autonomous beings who are unambiguously separated from our tools, or even our earthly surround.

We then introduce the two main methodological approaches referred to throughout this text, both of which align with posthumanist principles. The first is a sociomaterial perspective that draws on Actor-Network Theory (ANT), Science, Technology, and Society (STS) studies, and anthropologist Tim Ingold's (2000, 2012) more-than-human discernments. The second is founded in the practical phenomenology of Max van Manen (1997, 2014) and gathers insight from philosophy of technology, postphenomenology, media ecology, and critical media studies. In advancing these two approaches, we briefly address some of the methodological and philosophical overlaps as well as the unresolvable tensions between them. In the

process, we uncover some of the strengths and weaknesses that each brings to exploring and describing our digital and thingly involvements.

We invite human and social science researchers to explore a different approach to inquiry. We call this posthuman way of researching, *interviewing objects*. Object interviews explicitly include *nonhuman* things as important participants at a research site. Via a set of eight possible heuristics, we suggest that not only subjects but also objects may be interviewed, given a voice, and thus make them available for critical analysis. Interviewing objects is a way of speaking with things. Although our primary interest is supporting the work of posthuman researchers and their practices, we suggest that our eight object interview heuristics may also provide readers with a fruitful way to query the diverse range of digital (and nondigital) objects found in the midst of their professional and personal lives. In this way, it may be possible to make more ethical and responsive choices regarding the use of specific technologies.

What we are proposing is not always an easy shift in thinking. Interviewing *nonhuman objects* demands significantly different ontological assumptions and epistemological understandings than interviewing *human subjects*. Unfortunately, little guidance has been offered so far on how researchers might translate the insights of posthumanism into tangible, theoretically sound research practices. In our own research and teaching, we have found that interviewing objects provides an excellent way for researchers and professional practitioners to explore posthuman ideas and to gain insight into the otherwise hidden effects of the digital in their own and others' lives. We encourage readers to try out these heuristics in their everyday practices—whether at work, at home or in the midst of a research project.

Theoretical Framings

The Posthuman

What does it mean to be—or to become—posthuman? For some, the term evokes futuristic images of cyborgs like Captain Picard as "Locutus of Borg" in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, an organic-inorganic collective of human and machine. For others, the posthuman is found in Neo of *The Matrix*, wired directly to the hallucinations of virtual reality, and oblivious to his bleak real-world situation (Herbrechter 2006). For others still, posthumanity is made visible in the prosthetic art of Stelarc and his human-computer interface experiments that breach and complicate our fleshy

boundaries, portending weird hybrid humans, or even the obsolescence of the human body.

Such fantastic images and speculative portrayals also raise some of the key questions that posthumanism poses. The dystopian television series *Black Mirror*, for example, confronts us with possible futures where some of our society's most cherished binaries, like the separation between public and private life, have been undone by digital technologies. Recent films such as *Ex Machina* (2015), or even classics like *Blade Runner* (1982), similarly ask us to question our most closely held understandings of what we mean by human. Who is more human—Rachael the bioengineered android or Deckard the human replicant assassin? What happens when a machine is made of flesh and blood? Can a machine be more human than a human? How will we tell the difference? Lines blur. Separations that we have taken for granted unexpectedly dissolve and form uncanny "inhuman" hybrids. In such moments, our either/or, binary thinking is dealt a blow and slinks away or, dazed, tries to reassert itself in the face of unanswerable questions.

The posthuman does not mean that we are no longer human, that we are becoming inhuman, or even that we are destined to cast off our flesh and blood bodies (Hayles 1999). Rather posthumanism is about revisioning the human *beyond* some of the anthropocentric constraints of humanism, and about questioning and transgressing some of our most prized dichotomies of thought: subject and object, public and private, active and passive, human and machine.

> A posthumanist account calls into question the givenness of the differential categories of "human" and "nonhuman," examining the practices through which these differential boundaries are stabilized and destabilized. (Barad 2003, p. 808)

Posthumanism attempts to stand outside of or arrive before such binaries and strives to discover ways to "talk . . . about the social-and-the-technical, all in one breath" (Law 1991, p. 8). This is necessary because, as Nigel Thrift (2005) declares, "what is inside is also outside." Today we find ourselves on the cusp of a new understanding that has been provoked by "the changing nature of materiality [and] new infrastructures which question our usual concept of mediation" (p. 231). Provoked by ecological crises and early feminist studies, posthumanism found a sure footing in the digital. The digital is encroaching on and penetrating our flesh, infecting all aspects of our lifeworlds, and has thus inaugurated persistent questions

about our relationship to nonhumans and the "more-than-human" world (Abram 1996, p. 7).

Posthumanism involves reconceiving who we are as human beings in relation to the other-than-human world that we inhabit. Because of continuously fluctuating and unstable boundaries between ourselves and our material surroundings, posthumanists prefer to talk about "human becoming" rather than "human being." Too, posthumanism comes in multiple flavors and emphases (Roden 2015). For example, Jane Bennett's (2015) vital materialism "attempts to depict a world populated not by active subjects and passive objects but by lively and essentially interactive materials, by bodies human and nonhuman" (p. 254). Others have announced the imminent death of the posthuman. Claire Colebrook (2014), for example, situates the posthuman as a necessarily provisional theoretical figure who tells us less about life in the future and more about its extinction in the Anthropocene.

Central to the posthuman thesis is that we humans are and always have been hybrid or heterogeneous creatures:

> Humans have always lived in a hybrid environment surrounded by artificial and natural objects. The artificial and the natural are not separate realms, nor are artificial objects simply instruments with which to conquer the natural; instead they constitute a dynamic system that conditions human experience and existence. And precisely because the artificial is constantly developing toward greater concretization, it demands constant reflection on its singular historical condition. (Hui 2016, p. 1)

Our evolution is supported by, and is contiguous with, the development and use of our technologies and built environments. Posthumanism addresses our intimate and co-constitutive entanglements with our technologies as well with the natural, pre-given world and its creatures. Crucial for our purposes, it asks us to attend to the everyday things of our world in a new way.

Posthumanism involves an emphatic turn towards nonhumans:

> Humans do not exist alone . . . they exist in a world, one replete with things. To transform the human through a thought of being-in-the-world is to likewise transform the world, and so long as the hard, philosophical work of transforming the conception of the thing in that world remains outstanding, nothing changes at all. To change the "subject" while retaining the "object" is to change nothing. (Mitchell 2015, p. 12)