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35 Interviews with digital objects

Abstract: 'Interviewing objects' is a concept and method of qualitative research inquiry that includes nonhuman entities as active participants. It highlights the co-constitutive roles of humans and technologies in shaping social and cultural formations. Employing heuristics from posthuman theoretical perspectives, it documents and analyzes interactions between humans and nonhuman objects like digital technologies. The approach provides insights into the dynamic interdependencies and contributions of nonhuman entities to everyday practices and societal changes.

Keywords: posthuman inquiry, human–nonhuman interaction, Actor-Network Theory, postphenomenology, relational ontology

Introduction

'Interviewing objects' was coined as a counterpoint to the popular anthropocentric method of interviewing (human) subjects in qualitative inquiry. The phrase signals the intent to include not only human subjects but also *nonhuman* objects as active participants in human and social science research. Nonhuman objects are any material entities involved in a crime or law enforcement event, for example, a gun, credit card, or Apple AirTag, as well as software such as a digital app, facial recognition system, or social media site. In practice, 'interviewing objects' describes deploying a wide range of practical methods or 'heuristics' borrowed, adapted, and sometimes invented to aid posthuman and more-than-human research inquiry. The heuristics assist the researcher in attuning to the world of things, documenting human–nonhuman interconnections and relational correspondences, and analyzing the contributions of nonhumans to everyday practices, societal change, and cultural formations.

The word interview is from the Middle French *s'entrevoir* which means "to see one another, to meet" but also "to see indistinctly or in passing" ('Interview', 2023). While 'interviewing' is commonly understood as having a face-to-face meeting with a person, interviewing an object recalls a now obsolete definition which is "to look at (a person or thing); to glimpse or glance at (a person or thing)." Thus, in conducting an object interview, the researcher endeavors to catch glimpses of the object in action as it performs and mediates the gestures and understandings of its (human) employer, as well as involved others and things. In fact, an object interview is about interviewing human–nonhuman (subject–object) relational associations or assemblages as they unfold in everyday practice. For example, Actor-Network Theorist, Latour (1999) once asked: "Who or what is responsible for the act of killing … the citizen or the gun?" (p. 178). His answer? "*Someone else*"! (p. 179). Latour's *someone else* is a new hybrid actor: a citizen-gun, gun-citizen, or simply, a gunman. This hybrid relational configuration alters both entities; a person becomes a different subject by wielding the gun, just

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as the gun assumes a new role when held by a human, signaling a dynamic interdependency where each entity is transformed by the other's influence. To interview an object thus entails finding opportunities to observe, document, and analyze its active participation in everyday interactions with humans and other nonhuman entities.

Interviewing objects has special relevance for digital criminology. Researchers must increasingly grapple with the material contributions of digital technologies in the commission of and the investigation of contemporary crimes. Wood et al. (2023) point out that digital—and non-digital—technologies have the capacity to not only extend criminal agency and amplify harm but also *mediate* human experience and action in manifold ways (see Agency by Krasmann). Indeed, "it is impossible to think about a crime that does not involve any kind of materiality. Because who would the hacker be without a keyboard? Or the robber without a weapon?" (Hermansen, 2020: 24). To account for digital technologies' co-constitutive, co-agential, and mediating roles in crime studies, some researchers are turning to approaches such as Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and postphenomenology for assistance (van der Wagen, 2019; Wood et al., 2023). Such inquiries engage a variety of posthuman, more-than-human, and new materialist methods and theories to interview these newly admitted nonhuman research participants.

Interviewing object heuristics

As an approach to doing digital research, interviewing objects describes the deployment of one or more heuristics derived from posthuman theoretical positions and philosophical traditions, including Actor-Network Theory (ANT), postphenomenology, media ecology, and more recently, new and feminist materialisms, agential realism, and Indigenous theories of nonhuman agency. What binds these diverse philosophies and theories together is a shared commitment to a relational ontology beyond human-centric, Euro-Western substantive ontologies. Relational ontologies recognize that humans and nonhuman things generate and share agency in and through their relationships in the ongoing, lived contexts of their social, cultural, and historical worlds.

In *Researching a Posthuman World: Interviews with Digital Objects*, Adams and Thompson (2016) present a set of eight heuristics for interviewing and 'speaking with' nonhuman things. Earlier versions of the heuristics appeared in Adams and Thompson (2011) and Thompson and Adams (2013). The heuristics deploy "specific tricks" to coax digital things "to offer descriptions of themselves, to produce scripts of what they are making others—humans or non-humans—do" (Latour, 2005: 79). The first four focus on 1) attuning the researcher to digital things in the midst of their collaborations and correspondences with humans (and other nonhumans) and 2) generating posthuman qualitative materials needed for analysis:

1. *Gathering anecdotes*

   The researcher constructs 'anecdotes' or short, descriptive accounts of specific events as they unfolded, and illuminate how digital objects interact with humans

in everyday life. These narratives are detailed, specific, and reflective of real-life experiences, and focus on describing what transpired rather than explaining why. A posthuman anecdote aspires to 'reassemble and resemble' human interactions with digital objects, and as such, can provide insight into the co-constitutive, co-agential dynamics between humans, nonhumans, and their environmental situation. The primary 'interview' question here is: "Describe how the [digital] object or thing appeared, showed up, or was given in professional practice or everyday life. What happened?" (Adams and Thompson, 2016: 24)

2. *Following the actors*
   This heuristic encourages the researcher to get a sense of which actors matter as a specific practice is being enacted. In other words, who or what is acting, what are they doing, and how do they go about it? This is often a fun aspect of object interviews as one traces the moves and movements of both human and non-human actors. Keep in mind that the aim of this work is not to just generate a list of actors but rather to begin to get a glimpse of how these actors are assembling: Who-what seems to be the more powerful actors? Who-what is sidelined? Other heuristics will enable you to further untangle the negotiations and relations between actors and how they come together, mingle, animate, fall apart, and dissolve in an array of assemblages.
3. *Listening for the invitational quality of things*
   This heuristic recognizes that nonhuman things 'speak' to humans and to each other in unique and powerful ways. How a nonhuman's 'invitation' (suggestion, nudge, and even command) is 'heard' or perceived by a human depends on the affordances or possibilities for action or interaction offered by the digital object (Affordances by Wood and Arpke-Wales), as well as on the intentions or orientation of the human to their world. Here the researcher attends to the specific invitations a digital technology issues to its user, and the silent conversations and gestural actions that subsequently unfold between humans and nonhumans in practice.
4. *Studying breakdowns, accidents, and anomalies*
   As a technology is incorporated into our everyday practices, it tends to slip seamlessly into the background of our lives. But when that technology malfunctions, behaves unpredictably, or is unexpectedly missing, the taken-for-granted object suddenly leaps into focus. Posthuman researchers are especially alert to such 'breakdown' moments since they not only make the digital object in question apparent but, importantly, illuminate the dynamic web of human–nonhuman relations supporting the practice (before it was disrupted).

Having attuned to digital presences and absences and gathered preliminary posthuman data, the next four heuristics provide possible ways 1) to gently loosen and analyze the human–nonhuman entanglements at the research site and 2) to reveal otherwise hidden aspects of a digital object's participation in events:

1. *Discerning the spectrum of human–technology relations*
   In his postphenomenological analyses of different technologies, Don Ihde (1990)

uncovers different types of human–technology–world (HTW) relations structuring our everyday actions: embodiment, hermeneutic, alterity, and background. Embodiment relations extend and enhance our body's abilities (e.g., an automobile extends our legs). Hermeneutic relations position technology as an interpretive intermediary, reshaping and refining our understanding of reality (e.g., a thermometer translates hotness and coldness into a number on a scale). Alterity relations describe our interaction with technology as a distinct 'other' (e.g., a chatbot), while background relations acknowledge technology's silent shaping of our environment, influencing us without direct engagement (e.g., central heating). Understanding these basic types of posthuman/more-than-human interactions is valuable for critically examining how different technologies influence our actions, perceptions, cognition, and sociality in manifold ways.

2. *Applying the laws of media*
   Media ecologists understand technologies as environments that mediate and participate in the creation and transformation of society and culture. McLuhan and McLuhan (1988) devised a popular analytic tool, the 'laws of media,' to probe the breadth of a given technology's radiating effects and side effects on societies. The laws provide four more interview object questions: What does a technology enhance? What does it obsolesce? What does it retrieve from the past? What does it reverse into when we abuse or over-rely on it?
3. *Unravelling translations*
   Originating in ANT, this heuristic examines how different actors come to be powerful through specific actions with other actors. Focusing on translations enables the researcher to study the ways in which human and nonhuman actors come together (including how they enroll each other), how they negotiate and manage their interactions, what sorts of networks or assemblages take shape (or fall apart), and how these actor-networks change. Here the researcher dives into the politics of assemblages: in other words, paying attention to what actors do, their impacts on other actors, and the kinds of actions and ideas which circulate. Attention focuses on the multiple realities and assemblages that come into view. This includes 'collateral realities' (Law, 2011), that is, the unintended realities and the gaps between practices and what realities are enacted. The tensions in coexisting, not-always-harmonious networks can offer rich insights into sociotechnical practices and researchers will usually find multiple moments of translation (see Translation by Wilson-Kovacs).
4. *Tracing responses and passages*
   Breathing new life into Latourian actor networks, Tim Ingold (2012) reconceives the field of action as a "meshwork," that is, as a "co-responsive movement of occurrent things along their manifold lines of becoming" (p. 437). Here the researcher traces "the flows of energy and circulations of materials" (Ingold, 2012: 417) as actors thread their way through their world, "co-responding" with the things around them, wayfinding and improvising new passages. The process creates new meshworks. Attention shifts to the living ecology of "things thinging" (Heideg-

ger, 1971), which includes the movements and gestures of people and things corresponding with one another. Foregrounded is how entities and practices come to be and how things and people "become" in these practices.

Adams and Thompson's (2016) eight heuristics offer possible starting points for including digital things as meaningful research participants. Each provides a different sensitivity for recovering nonhuman contributions at the qualitative research site. Not all heuristics need to be applied; diverse situations and practices demand different heuristics or the invention of new approaches. Since these eight heuristics are drawn from different theoretical origins, overlaps, as well as contradictions, are expected. Thus, researchers need to become more familiar with the concepts and theoretical lineages behind these heuristics as they engage with them (see Adams and Thompson, 2016, and other references above). Much like a semi-structured qualitative interview, the posthuman researcher must be ready to adapt their methods in the field to "glimpse" the digital object of interest in its "dance of agency" (Pickering, 2013: 78) with humans.

Consider the complexity of criminology practices. There is a vast number of digital actors that are implicated in the perpetration of crime, assist in investigating criminal activities, are employed to enable citizen and community-based crime prevention, and are used to address justice and social justice agendas. Body-worn videocams, hate-based text and images, surveillance and tracking devices, predictive policing algorithms, Facebook, recidivism statistics, witness statements, ransomware, bots, and data dashboards are entangled with citizens, police, case workers, criminologists, victims, offenders, and IT specialists in places such as the street and in homes, courtrooms, police stations and vehicles, forensics labs, borders, and board rooms. Digital technologies encompass devices, networks, apps, code, algorithms, analytics, and increasingly sophisticated forms of AI and machine learning. The material saturation of digital criminology practices demands theoretical and conceptual frameworks and sensibilities that can make visible and critically reckon with how human and digital actors co-constitute the everyday practices, frame thinking, and ways of being in this particular field. Adams and Thompson (2016) position digital things as co-participants in research projects and even co-workers; a notion that resonates with van der Wagen's (2019) assertion that researchers should regard things as more important and active participants in studies of cybercrime.

A brief example. Wood et al. (2023) do not specifically reference 'interviewing objects,' but their work illustrates how posthuman heuristics may be mobilized in criminological research. Variations of '*Listening for the invitational quality of things*' and '*Unravelling translations*' (two heuristics listed above) are used by Wood et al. to construct a new framework for understanding how technology mediates violence. They show how attending to a technology's invitations assists the researcher to "analyze the particular way that the technology has contributed to conducting violence instead of functioning merely as a vehicle for that violence" (2023: 8). They also consider "the role design decisions might play in co-producing harm" (p. 8) to aid the identification of "strategies for ameliorating technology-facilitated violence that address the specific

technological element producing such harms" (p. 10). Such an approach could be added to the toolbox of heuristics for interviewing digital objects.

Wood et al. (2023) adapt Latour's notion of translation to clarify that "harm *translation* produces meaning rather than merely *transporting* it" (p. 11, italics in original). Wood et al.'s adaptation underlines the mediating, co-constitutive relationship between actors and the digital objects they employ. Recalling the basic amplification–reduction structure of all HTW relations (cf. Ihde, 1990), digital objects are understood to "alter the experiential and connotative landscape invoked in contemplating and pursuing these ends, amplifying certain experiential qualities whilst simultaneously reducing others" (Wood et al., 2023: 11).

Implicit in Wood et al.'s framework is the need for criminologists also to gather detailed posthuman anecdotes (Heuristic 1) when studying technology-mediated harm. In Wood et al. (2023), posthuman anecdotes appear only in roughed-out form (e.g., "Apple AirTags being used for unwanted tracking or Find My iPhone being used to track someone's movement surreptitiously" (p. 9)). Of course, the article is a theoretical proposal for reconceptualizing technology-mediated violence rather than a case study of a particular digitally enhanced criminal occurrence. The latter would require documented "detail [of] the causative power technology can exert in *co-producing* and *inducing* harms (p. 2, italics in original) and "accounting for the various relations that might exist between intentions (both users' and designers'), ends and technologies involved in the co-production of any harmful event" (p. 3).

Indeed, gathering and generating posthuman anecdotes is central to the research practice of interviewing objects. Without these more-than-human "reassembled resemblings" (Adams and Thompson, 2016: 31) of humans and nonhuman things in the entangled flow of their correspondences and collaborations, the researcher can only speculate on how the digital may be contributing to, mediating, and co-constituting technology-enhanced crimes and investigative practices. Posthuman anecdoting requires writerly practice combined with an orientation to the technology-saturated world that begins with noticing, wondering, and posing questions of and with the digital things involved in everyday events. In this way, "micro and macro analysis is meshed together to make visible layers, multiplicities, movements, the politics of assemblages, and presences/absences" of the togetherness of human-digital working and living (Thompson, 2023: 233). Such inquiry is a form of "slow research" (Law and Singleton, 2012): a deliberate lingering with the puzzles that emerge as the researcher untangles the flow of human and nonhuman assemblings.

Moving forward

Digital criminology research imperatives are evolving, driven by increased awareness of the powerful collaborations forged between human and nonhuman entities. The focus is not merely on the rising adoption of digital technologies but on understanding the profound changes these technologies are facilitating, mediating, and co-enacting.

The scholarly discourse is shifting from a deterministic, anthropocentric point of view to one that embraces more intricate, embodied, and material relationships and co-constitutions. More-than-human theories and methods offer new ways to include digital devices, data, and systems—from tracking devices and text messages with hate speech to body cameras and predictive algorithms—and explore their co-active role in shaping criminal activities as well as control and policing practices.

In this context, there is a unique potential for establishing new sociotechnical configurations, diverse political dialogues, and multiple realities. Focusing on the co-relational interplay of humans, objects, and systems could lead to a fundamental rethinking of what we consider 'real' and how we engage with it. Object interview methods offer a useful tool to scrutinize and disrupt digital narratives, proposing alternative ways of imagining our sociotechnical world. Similarly, the sprawling data infrastructures that govern our visibility and memory can also be reimagined (see Infrastructures by Grisot and Parmiggiani), countering the overly optimistic techno-utopian narratives that often dominate the conversation.

Object interviewing stands as a part of the larger postqualitative inquiry landscape aiming to bolster the credibility and political implications of more-than-human-oriented studies. Thompson and Adams (2020) have recently suggested three guiding principles to assess the quality of such inquiries. These include: 1) explaining or making evident how the researcher speaks *with* things, including critically questioning how their own digital practices affect the researcher and the work of research; 2) weaving and fusing human and nonhuman storylines; and 3) acknowledging the liveliness of posthuman research work to bring about different questions, practices, and therefore, realities. These dynamics are not meant as a definitive checklist of what constitutes a good posthuman/more-than-human account but rather to open a space for continuing to discuss these questions. They are also very good points to make explicit when writing about one's research, including methodology sections.

Conclusion

Interviewing objects is an approach to doing digital criminological inquiry that explicitly includes nonhuman entities as active research participants. It provides a set of eight heuristics or starting points for criminology researchers to 'interview' posthuman/more-than-human assemblages, e. g., the 'citizen-gun, gun-citizen' and other heterogeneous gatherings of humans and nonhumans. Such an approach "forces [the researcher] to abandon the subject-object dichotomy" (Latour, 1994: 34) and rethink the instrumental perspective that technologies are neutral objects.

Interviewing objects:

– Recognizes the co-constitutive relationships between humans and technology and the digital's amplifying effects in criminal activities as well as control and policing practices.

– Unsettles and shifts the gaze of the researcher beyond just human participants, enabling them to attend to, describe, and analyze complex human–digital assemblages.
– Affords the researcher opportunities to examine technology-supported practices as well as the morality, ethics, and politics of digital–human relations.

Suggested reading

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