

Introduction: Posthumanism and Media Studies

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Posthumanism fosters a more inclusive and less hierarchical approach to our entanglements with both human and non-human elements. Posthuman theory, particularly as articulated by N. Katherine Hayles and Rosi Braidotti, has long been influential in media and cultural studies. Ferrando (2020) argues:

posthuman ethics invites us to follow on three related layers. First of all, as a post-humanism, it marks a shift: from universalism to perspectivism, from multiculturalism to pluralism and diversity. As a postanthropocentrism, it induces a change of strategy: from human agency to agential networks, from technology to eco-technology. As a postdualism, it requires an evolution of our awareness: from individuality to relationality, from theory to praxis. (147)

This Special Issue of the *Journal of Posthumanism* therefore asks, how does such posthuman perspectivism, pluralism, agentiality, eco-technology, relationality, and praxis, apply to the future of media and cultural studies? How might we understand the very concept of “future”?

Media is exploding at an ever-increasing pace across digital platforms, working with, through, and against new technological advances such as artificial intelligence (AI). These developments are also occurring during a time of global shifts that include pandemics and climate change. In light of these changes, it is the ideal time to provoke more conversations between media and cultural studies through posthumanism in more systematic and thoroughly developed methodological ways.

Several approaches have been proposed that align media studies with or explicitly draw on posthuman concepts. In 2021, *Posthumanism in Art and Science: A Reader* was published, making the argument that “aesthetic production is a vital part of posthumanist thinking processes, which thereby grow ever more urgently relevant to social and ecological problem-solving” (Aloi & McHugh, 2021, 2). Art, understood from this perspective, helps break free of established human-centred and anthropocentric forms of thinking by imagining and inventing new ways of understanding the boundaries of what it means to be human and by breaking down human/non-human binaries. Ecological-based thinking can also be leveraged to help think beyond these binaries, as Karpouzou and Zampaki (2023) argue in *Symbiotic Posthumanist Ecologies in Western Literature, Philosophy and Art*. One might even blend art and ecological thinking, as Karpouzou (2023) argues in her chapter that speculative fiction can help us imagine better futures that “encapsulate the mutual beneficial relationships between different lifeforms,” (100).

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Other recent studies have developed posthuman approaches to rhetorical practice that embrace a more broadly defined ecological approach. Boyle (2018) argues for rhetoric as a posthuman practice that focuses on “the exercise of tendencies to activate greater capacities,” where bodies are defined broadly and can encompass “a human body, a social network, pollination process, [or] a communication infrastructure,” (5). Rhetoric so formulated opens up persuasion, or the activation of greater capacities, to the larger ecological network that moves beyond the human. Wiley & Elam (2018) explore how we might understand the combination of humans and technical media as synthetic subjects. Using makerspaces as an example, they argue that the subject can be understood as the subject of composition (*agencement*), rather than the human or the technology involved in that process.

Elsewhere, Iliadis (2013) proposes that a shift away from a cybernetic understanding of communication as a process of pre-existing agents that transmit messages to one another could offer the possibility for the development of a new underlying informational ontology for communication and media studies, which would lend itself to new methods. Such ontologies and methods have been explored in relation to media studies through, for example, posthuman approaches to autoethnographies and subjectivities (Wilde, 2020; 2022). These approaches allow a reconsideration of selfhood beyond a static, fixed, individual, towards fluid, emergent subjectivities through rhizomatic entanglements with “others”. This allows perspectives that embrace the intra-dependence between entities, rejecting anthropocentric positions of mastery and control.

Monea and Packer (2016) propose a media genealogy approach that extends the type of work being done in media archaeology. In a special issue, they explore, through a series of interviews, how the work of several different scholars, across a range of fields are already undertaking scholarship that could broadly be considered a form of media genealogy. Examples include Peter Galison’s research on the standardisation of time and the emergence of scientific objectivity (Packer and Galison, 2016), Chris Russill’s work on how the ozone layer is perceived (Maddalena and Russil, 2016), and Mark Andrejevic’s early analysis of big data through the lens of power (Sylvia and Andrejevic, 2016).

Building on this genealogical approach, Sylvia (2019; 2021) has argued that posthuman ethics, ontology, and epistemology could be adopted in media studies through a more explicit embrace of affirmative approaches such as counter-actualization, modulation, and counter-memory. When combined, these approaches could offer the philosophic support, or undergirding, for a robust practice of posthuman media studies. Elsewhere, exploring the tensions and potential contradictions between the history of cultural studies and posthumanism, Cord (2022) asks, “can or should Cultural Studies and the nonhuman turn really be brought into the contact zone?” There are therefore a variety of possible responses and resonances between posthumanism and media studies.

Speculative Futures for Media Studies

For this special issue, we challenged contributors to explore, extend, and develop a posthuman praxis for media studies. This posthuman media studies emerges broadly from the work of theorists such as N. Katherine Hayles, Rosi Braidotti, Karen Barad, Gilles Deleuze, and Michel Foucault, and engages with the ethical, epistemological, and ontological aspects of posthumanism.

Posthumanism and media studies can, we argue, intersect in a variety of productive ways. Both separately and together these fields can help to foster a critical understanding of identities, human relationships, and society – and the nature of being in a mediated world. The critical posthumanism that we and our authors draw on specifically across this volume is anti-transhumanist discourse of



the variety wherein we see minds being uploaded to computers and living on in a post-flesh world. However, our entanglement with technologies, and our mediated existence, is a central facet to arguments from critical posthumanism that seek to destabilise boundaries such as human/machine.

In the contemporary (postdigital) moment, positioning humans as separate from their (technological) others or mediated selves is to deny, or diminish, a large part of our existence. Technologies mediate experiences, while posthumanism analyses the implications of living in a technologically saturated world and how that disrupts taken-for-granted assumptions of what it is to be human. Of course, humans have always been implicated with their media and technologies, but the media and technologies have changed. Now, the media and technologies we are entangled with not only implicitly call into question our human/non-human relations, they also offer ways to consider how different identities are represented and performed in mediated contexts. Thus, it is not only that playing a videogame, for example, calls into question the boundaries between self and other, between player and machine, but also that the content of videogames can present stories and narratives of these same complex identity structures. Media therefore plays a role in our subjectivation, through practices of identity figurations, media fandoms and cultures, and our positions as consumers, audiences, players, watchers, and users.

As Barad (2007, 49) argues, performative approaches challenge the idea that representations are separate from the entities they depict. Instead, considering things as performative focuses on the act of representing and its effects, as well as what makes those acts effective. It is in this way that media relations and representations shape both reality through also shaping the narratives we have and discourses through which we understand reality (such that disruptions can also be made between what is perceived as “real” vs. “not real”).

Meanwhile, from a new materialist perspective, we begin to see both the vibrancy of matter through our devices – the agency of smartphones, for example – as well as having to deal with the consequences of ever-expanding technological waste. Whilst “cloud computing” paints a pretty image of fluffy white pillows in the sky, the stark reality of server farms situated in the middle of the ocean begs environmental and economic questions around the cost of digital footprints.

The Anthropocene – a core consideration within certain strands of posthumanist research – is no doubt fuelled by expanding technologies, and our on-demand services are doing material damage to the physical world around us. Simultaneously, however, such forms of media globalisation are bringing us closer to certain forms of shared understanding and shared experiences, offering more diverse representations, and potentially more democratic practices that consider the ethics of whose voice is heard, whose story is told. These offerings might also move us away from anthropocentric perspectives, allowing closer, more accessible and impactful work that highlights the importance of non-human others around us.

There are therefore multiple tensions across posthumanism and media studies. Media texts, media relations, and posthumanism therefore all offer questions about who we are, and who we might become. However, much media is still made by humans, for humans, and continues to enact humanistic hierarchies of control and power. In this special issue, then, we are particularly interested in papers that propose new methods of inquiry and analysis within media studies, and that engage with the potential of an affirmative posthuman turn within critical and cultural theory. In light of these persistent human-centric structures, it becomes crucial to reimagine how media can evolve beyond these entrenched hierarchies. The affirmative posthuman turn offers a transformative lens, prompting a re-evaluation of not just media content but the methodologies and practices within

media studies itself. This issue, therefore, shifts our focus toward the potential of posthumanism to reshape media praxis, as explored in the articles that follow.

Posthuman Media Praxis

Mandy Elizabeth Moore kicks off this special issue with their article “We Have Never Been Acafans: Notes Towards a Posthumanist Approach to Media Fandom”. Moore uses this article to propose a theoretical vision for posthumanist fan studies, drawing on the idea that fan behaviours often call into question the traditional Western, humanist, subject in the same ways that posthumanist thought does. For example, Moore suggests that the fan invites the mediated Other into their sense of self, disrupting strict self/other boundaries and binaries inherent in humanist thinking.

From here, Moore argues for an understanding of fandoms as more-than-human, as emergent, and as phenomenon. These considerations draw on key theorists such as Karen Barad and Jane Bennett to articulate both the relations between fans and fannish media (media non-humans that have fans) as well as the relationships within fandoms along the lines of intra-active entanglements. Finally, Moore reflects on possible methodologies to explore fandoms in posthuman ways – including tracing specific material configurations and employing posthuman autoethnographies.

Moving to a medium specific piece, Andrea Andiloro’s article “There Is No Videogame: Nishida, Posthumanism and the *Basbo* of Gameplay” brings the philosophy of Nishida Kitarō³ into conversation with posthumanist thought, with a specific analysis of the game *Jetpack Joyride* (Halfbrick Studios, 2011). As Andiloro explains, Nishida’s work is not often talked about in posthumanism, yet his whole philosophy focuses on breaking down the divide between subject and object, using a blend of ideas from Zen Buddhism and Western philosophy.

Nishida’s (1936/2012) concept of *basbo* refers to an underlying, all-encompassing field where opposites like subject and object are unified, transcending dualism and emphasising the dynamic, relational nature of reality. It is this concept in particular that Andiloro applies to the field of videogames, utilising this and Nishida’s further work to argue that there is no such thing as *a* videogame, as a separable object, but that there *is* videogaming as an event apprehended within consciousness. This allows Andiloro to analyse gaming not as a dichotomous relation between subject/object or player/videogame, but as an emergence of unified consciousness.

Considering recent the recent TV series, *The Bear* (Calo et al., 2022-), Asilia Franklin-Phipps and Brett A. Varga’s piece “Bear(ing) Down: Encountering Posthuman Critical Media Studies through the (Re)tracing of Object and Embodiment” explores more-than-human relations in the show. The authors argue that, in *The Bear*, agency of objects is emphasised, with specific affects and effects that relate, amongst other things, to status within the human characters of the show.

Drawing on new materialism and Jane Bennett’s (2009) notion of “thing-power”, the authors highlight the entanglement of “subject” and “object” to demonstrate their emergent connectivity. To explore these connectivities and how they are encountered by the viewer, Franklin-Phipps and Varga each present a reading of *The Bear* that is framed through vibrant, agential materiality as depicted and explored within the show. They demonstrate how “things” in the show become characters in their own right, arguing that, ultimately, objects tell stories.

“Microfascism to Joyful Affects: A Posthuman Approach to Social Media Redesign” by J.J. Sylvia IV makes practical suggestions for interventions in social media design to prioritise joyful affects.

³ Here, per Andiloro, we follow Japanese conventions, indicating surname first and first name second.



Social media platforms, Sylvia argues, reward uniformity and penalise deviation from social norms through specific practices and affordances including algorithms and desires (and rewards) for connectivity (for example, chasing the follower numbers). In doing so, Sylvia suggests social media promote forms of microfascism, considered through the works of Deleuze, Foucault, and Braidotti.

To combat these microfascist desires, the author proposes micro-antifascist approaches, drawing on Baruch Spinoza's ethical and political insights around affect and micropolitics. Sylvia's call to affirmative, micro-antifascist action centres around social media redesign including the removal of algorithms, moving away from capitalist measures into nonprofit models, increasing community governance, and building features that promote great inclusivity. If such measures are taken, Sylvia suggests we can create opportunities for a profound transformation of social media into platforms for resistance and liberation.

Claudio Celis Bueno and Jernej Markelj offer a posthuman critique of AI in the form of large language models (LLMs). In "Towards a Posthumanist Critique of Large Language Models," they first engage with existing critiques, particularly those by Emily Bender (2024), which highlight the risks of anthropomorphizing LLMs. Bender's critique, centred on human exceptionalism, calls for maintaining a firm boundary between human and machine cognition. However, Bueno and Markelj argue that this anthropocentric critique is insufficient to address the deeper socio-technical and philosophic implications of LLMs.

They propose a posthuman framework, grounded in concepts such as general ecology, machinic agency, machinic surplus value, and cosmotechnics. This approach shifts focus from the individual human subject to a broader network of human and non-human actors, rejecting the hierarchical distinctions between humans, machines, and the environment. Their critique emphasises how LLMs operate as part of larger socio-technical assemblages and calls for rethinking technology not as an instrument of human control, but as part of a co-constitutive process that shapes both humans and non-humans. This perspective also seeks to explore new forms of engagement with technology beyond the capitalist imperatives of productivity and profit.

Rosa Stilgren's article, "Mutation Materialized: The Concept as Method," explores how concepts, particularly "mutation," can function as methodological tools within posthuman media studies and digital audio production. Building on Mieke Bal's (2009) notion of concepts as socio-material agents, Stilgren critiques the anthropocentric tendencies in traditional concept-ualisation, which fix concepts as static entities. Instead, Stilgren advocates for "concept-ing," where concepts are understood as dynamic, co-evolving entities and are affected by material practices.

Stilgren uses sidechain compression in digital audio production as a case study to illustrate the mutational potential of concepts. Sidechain compression, typically a tool for controlling sound dynamics, is examined as a process that can move between being a functional tool and becoming an aesthetic effect. The "mutation" here symbolises a fluid process that destabilises fixed categories like tool/effect, virtual/real, and linear/cyclical, opening new ways to understand media and technology as an alternative to the fixed, representational logics of traditional media studies.

In the article, "Digital Milieus: a Posthumanist Media Ecology for a Planetary Computation Era," Joaquín Moreira Alonso advocates for a posthuman approach to media ecology that moves beyond the traditional human-centred frameworks. He begins by revisiting Marshall McLuhan's (1964/2003) theory of media as extensions of human capabilities. While innovative, this traditional perspective still views media primarily as tools for human use, emphasising information transmission and human agency.

Moreira Alonso's posthuman media ecology instead recognises the mutual entanglement and shaping of humans, technologies, and the environment, highlighting their interdependence in the context of planetary-scale computation. Rather than media as extensions of mankind, he argues for an ecological approach in which we understand media and humans co-evolving through dynamic, interconnected processes of individuation.

To facilitate this, he introduces the concept of "digital milieus" to replace the traditional idea of media environments. Digital milieus encompass not only software and hardware but also cultural, geological, and political elements. In this context of planetary-scale computation, human agency becomes increasingly diffused as algorithms and non-human actors play more significant roles.

Conclusion

The articles in this special issue present a variety of new thinking, new methodologies, and new articulations between posthumanism and media studies. Collectively, they offer an opportunity to see the crosspollination of ideas: the themes that arise around the agency of the non-human in media, the rejection of anthropocentric thinking and focus, the proposals for new praxis. Media is, and has always been, a part of the human experience, and a posthuman ontological understanding acknowledges and embraces that entanglement. However, the work is not just to recognize it, but to move forward by crafting new practices that allow these media entanglements to unfold into more ethical, affirmative spaces.

As we look to the future of posthuman media studies, it is crucial to consider how these practices continue to embrace those that have historically been "othered" – whether they are human or non-human. Expanding diversity through our media practices offers a way to move beyond humanistic hierarchies and worldviews. However, this imperative must also be considered and carried out in relation to the material becomings of media, understanding the ecological costs. Promising work in this area is already underway. Projects such as SunBlock One, a solar-powered server designed to run the game *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios, 2011), where players monitor their energy consumption in real-time, are excellent examples of how media can engage directly with ecological concerns. This project, run by the Technoculture, Art and Games (TAG) *Minecraft* Bloc research group at Concordia University, illustrates how media can provoke both ethical engagement and environmental responsibility.

This special issue encourages more such provocations, urging the continued interrogation of onto-epistemological postdualisms and experimental practice. Moreover, it compels us to reflect on the material reality of our media systems and their entanglement with the Anthropocene. By focusing on these complexities, we can not only understand our mediated world more deeply, but also push toward more responsible, equitable, affirmative, and joyful futures for humans and non-humans alike.

Addendum: A Farewell

By all accounts, this special issue will likely be the final be the final issue of the *Journal of Posthumanism*. The chair of the Editorial Advisory Board for Transnational Press London, Ibrahim Sirkeci, has notified the journal's editorial board that he plans to cease publication of the journal due to time constraints. Unfortunately, he has decided not to move forward with our request to transfer the journal to a new publisher.



On behalf of the larger editorial board of the journal, we would like to thank all those who have made the *Journal of Posthumanism* a welcoming home for open-access, free to publish, peer reviewed posthuman research over the last several years. We are proud of the work done by the authors, editors, and peer reviewers that helped create such a strong journal from the ground up. Although our work will no longer continue on this particular journal, we are all looking forward to collaborating on new projects in the future which will continue to highlight the strong posthuman work being done across disciplines. Thank you to all of those who have contributed to the journal.

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