

MED2028M: Media Research: Methods & Proposal Design  
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Technology is advancing and with it the notion of the human.  
At what point will we stop being human?

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## **The topic or area I wish to research**

The area I am interested in researching for my dissertation revolves around posthumanism and biotechnology. I am especially intrigued by the extent to which human beings will remain human. Several media texts predict a future of cyborgs and robots, or even a transition from the physical to the digital world. The scenarios range from creating human clones for “organ harvesting”, as in “The Island”, to using cyborgs as a new body, in “Surrogates”, to transferring our mind into the virtual world, as described in the novel “More Than This”. This implies biological as well as cultural changes, changes to the body and to society. I want to look at how the concept of the “self” will be transformed, how we will identify ourselves when we reach the stage of posthumanism – that is, if we reach it in the first place. There are also notions that suggest that human beings have always been posthuman. “One of the crucial requirements for the posthuman is that technology be approached first and foremost as a tool (Thacker, 2003, 77).” According to Latour (1999, 210f), it always has been. However Extropians believe that the transformation to posthumanism includes us transferring our minds into a more long-lasting body, that we will “upload” ourselves to become immortal (Moravec, 1998, 109f). We will reach the next phase of being human through advances in science and technology.

Technologies are already becoming faster and better by the minute. This is why computer sciences are starting to interlink with other sciences, such as bioscience. The bridge between these two sciences is called biotechnology. It is the use of computer technologies for research in life science. Thacker (2003, 73) points out that developments in this field will raise a number of questions: “What does it mean to

have a body, to be a body, in relation to a genome database? How is the notion of the body transformed when biotech research demonstrates the ability to grow cells, tissues and even organs in the lab? In biotech research, what happens to the referent of 'the human' as it is increasingly networked through information technologies?"

It is therefore important to look at relationships between human beings and machines, flesh and data, genetic and computer code (Thacker, 2003). The idea that we could one day use computer coding to code DNA is both intriguing and at the same time frightening.

Extropianism is a form of humanism that places science and technology at the centre of shaping the world. Progress in technology will mean progress in human beings. Yet to what extent can we change human beings and still remain human? What does it even mean to be human? How will we identify ourselves in the future?

There have always been fictive visions of our modifying our bodies to make them better, faster, stronger even immortal. The question however is, how realistic these concepts are. The representation of the posthuman being is often supernatural and unrealistic. There are all kinds of superheroes and villains who are able to transform their bodies with the help of advanced science and technology. On the other hand, there are Iron Man and Batman, who quite literally use technology as a tool. Neither of them experiences a change in their human bodies, but rather use advanced technologies to fight evil. And then there is mutation, as in X-Men and Spiderman. However, in X-Men mutation happens "naturally", it is part of human evolution and not caused by bio-, or nanotechnology. Ironically, at the same time society sees mutants as being non-human. It would be interesting to find out whether a human

being who advances with the help of technology is seen as being more human than someone who mutates due to natural causes. I imagine that when technologies are used, we control and are in control of the transformation, whereas in the case of a mutation we would not be able to control it.

We can then look at a different universe, the one described in Star Wars where we make the acquaintance of R2-D2 and C-3PO, who are both clearly not human but at times act more human than the people around them. This raises the question of what it actually means to be human. However, it is not only recent fiction that raises questions about posthumanity. In 1818, Mary Shelley wrote the novel "Frankenstein". It is about the scientist Victor Frankenstein, who creates a ghastly creature that is put together from a cadaver and reanimated with electroshocks. It is interesting that the creature is never given a name and therefore denied an identity, even though theoretically his body is fully human.

It seems as though it all depends on an experiment going right or wrong. Being human in modern society means that one's identity has to be recognized by others, which includes the differences one has developed compared with other individuals. If we reach posthumanism, however, if we are completely controlled by technology, can we still have the capacity to value others? Especially since we only assign functions, not human qualities, to technology (Meulen, 2010).

We identify ourselves through our body, the way we look, the way we dress. Transferring our minds into a new body means that we will still have a body to identify with. Events in our lives will change our outer appearance, make us

individual. What is interesting is what would happen if we left the physical world behind and uploaded our mind into the digital world. How would we identify ourselves then? What would make us individual and different from others? How would we reproduce? This brings us back to the basic question. What would make us human?

When it comes to new outer appearances, the concept of the “uncanny valley” will be of interest. “The concept of the uncanny valley has rapidly attracted interest in robotics and other scientific circles as well as in popular culture. Some researchers have explored its implications for human–robot interaction and computer-graphics animation, whereas others have investigated its biological and social roots. Now interest in the uncanny valley should only intensify, as technology evolves and researchers build robots that look human (Mori, 2012).”

I am aware that the area I am looking into at the moment is too broad. I will have to narrow it down to be able to argue my point.

**The premise or research question I will be using as starting point.**

Technology is advancing and with it the notion of the human being.

At what point will we stop being human?

This question will allow me to look at biotechnology, different forms of technology and how they are helping to change our bodies. I will have to question whether technology is in fact advancing and whether this implies that human beings are advancing too. I will do this by looking at posthumanism, meaning after or beyond humanism. I will also look at what makes us identify as human in the first place. This includes psychological and philosophical theories of the “self”.

### A literature review of 5 key academic texts

One name that has been mentioned throughout all of the texts I have read on posthumanism is **Donna Haraway**. Especially her “Cyborg Manifesto” has been quoted several times. While looking for a copy of it, I came across a different book called “**The Haraway Reader**”, which is a selection of her work including the manifesto. In her introduction, she writes:

“I firmly believe that we have never been human, much less man. That’s one reason I like to explore figurations that do not resolve into the lineaments of man, even when they seem born to do so. Nonetheless, in my view, people are human in at least one important sense. We are members of a biological species, *Homo sapiens*. That puts us solidly inside science, history, and nature, right at the heart of things (Haraway, 2004, 2).”

Haraway denies cyborgs any human traits. Cyborgs have no interest in community, relationships or a deeper meaning in life. They are a hybrid of machine and organism and not only exist in social reality, but are just as much fiction. At the same time, this is problematic in fiction because it takes away individual identity from the characters (Haraway, 2004, 7-45).

Donna Haraway’s reading will be important in that it is a feminist approach to cyberculture and offers a critical basis for further research.

**Rosi Braidotti** is important in the same way. She too is one of the key theorists in the area. Her book “**The Posthuman**” gives critical insight into posthumanism. She

questions whether human beings have always been human, and whether we are even fully human now. Reaching the posthuman stage “introduces a qualitative shift in our thinking about what exactly is the basic unit of common reference of our species, our polity and our relationship to the other inhabitants of this planet.”

(Braidotti, 2013, 1f) In other words, she argues that the posthuman helps us make sense of our identities.

As Thacker states in his article “Data Made Flesh”, Haraway’s and Braidotti’s ways of thinking often intervene with the overly utopic demands of Extopianists like Moravec and Kurzweil. My third key text will therefore be **Ray Kurzweil’s “The Age of Spiritual Machines”**. He talks about the growing intelligence of machines and the impact it will have on humankind. “Once a computer achieves a human level of intelligence, it will necessarily roar past it” (Kurzweil, 1999, 3) “We will enhance our brains gradually through direct connection with machine intelligence until such time that the essence of our thinking has fully migrated to the far more capable and reliable new machinery. Again if we find this notion troublesome, a lot of this uneasiness has to do with our concept of the word *machine*. Keep in mind that our concept of this word will evolve along with our minds.” (Kurzweil, 1999, )

The fourth key text I believe is of importance and will give me the background for continuing study is **Bruno Latour’s “We have never been modern”**. It is a philosophical text on modernism and the matter of being.

“Modernization, although it destroyed the near-totality of cultures and natures by force and bloodshed, had a clear objective. Modernizing finally made it possible to

distinguish between the laws of external nature and conceptions of society (Latour, 1993, 130).”

This text will hopefully help me separate notions between cultural and biological change, as well as illuminate why it is so difficult to define the human.

“The sciences multiply new definitions of humans without managing to displace the former ones, reduce them to any homogeneous one, or unify them. They add reality; they do not subtract it. The hybrids that they invent in the laboratory are still more exotic than those they claim to break down (Latour, 1993, 136).”

The last key text that I believe is fundamental for further research is James Curran’s “Media Power”. It is not as such about posthumanism, but rather about media today. Nevertheless, it will help me understand the way “new media” have changed our society to date, which I then can relate back to posthumanism.

“[Research] sheds light on the central role of mass communications in the making of modern society. It provides insights into the influences that shape the media, both past and present. It also offers alternative ways of thinking about the media’s relationship to society. An historical perspective provides a critical distance which can make apparent and clarify things that seem blurred when only viewed in a contemporary context (Curran, 2002, 3).” Using this book as a starting point for my research will allow me to develop an even more critical view of other texts.

### **The methods I intend to employ**

The methods I will use include more in-depth literature reviews of the 5 key texts, as well as finding further related reading. This would for example include other texts by the key authors, such as Latour’s “Pandora’s Hope”, suggestions from lectures, such



as “Convergence Culture” by Henry Jenkins and Cary Wolfe’s “What is Posthumanism”, and other related books, such as “Cyberculture, Cyborgs and Science Fiction” and “Representation of the post/human”.

I will also look at trade journals and case studies in the area of psychology, biology and philosophy, which will allow me to develop a better understanding of the concept of the “self” and our bodies. Nietzsche and his views on the “Übermensch” in “*Also sprach Zarathustra*”

I will look at policy documents to see if there are any regulations dealing with the development of technology. These will also show whether developments in that area are supported and government-financed. It will be interesting to see if posthumanism is an accepted fate and is already being regulated.

Focus groups and interviews will not be relevant, since posthumanism, biotechnology and the concept of “self” are quite specific areas that the general public will not have an opinion about.

### **A potential schedule of the research stages**

My starting point will be the 5 key texts to lay out a grid for my research. From here, I want to fill in the gaps and find answers to questions that might emerge. I will therefore use the summer break to read related books and journals on the topic, to further broaden my knowledge. The research will cover quite a wide range of areas around technology, biology, philosophy and psychology. In this way, I hope to get a better insight into the topic, which I can then use as a starting point for more specific research.

By looking at bibliographies, I will be able to find other, related texts that might help me narrow down the area I am researching even further. At this point, I will go back

to the key texts since my understanding of the theories will have changed. I will also evaluate their relevance and change them if necessary. I will start looking at policy documents so that I have facts and statistics to demonstrate points I will make in my argumentation. Having collected all my points, I will then be able to start writing my dissertation. Further and specific research might be necessary at certain points, as well as generally improving the argument.

**A consideration of any key ethical issues that may be raised by your research**

I do not believe there will be any ethical issues in the way I will research this topic or in the way I present it, since the topic does not downplay specific groups of people, as the human fate discussed involves all of humankind. While there may be arguments over the theory of evolution, no one knows what the future holds. Posthumanism is just another theory that implies certain changes in humanity.

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