



## Evolving netnography: how brand auto-netnography, a netnographic sensibility, and more-than-human netnography can transform your research

Robert V. Kozinets, Daiane Scaraboto & Marie-Agnès Parmentier

To cite this article: Robert V. Kozinets, Daiane Scaraboto & Marie-Agnès Parmentier (2018) Evolving netnography: how brand auto-netnography, a netnographic sensibility, and more-than-human netnography can transform your research, Journal of Marketing Management, 34:3-4, 231-242, DOI: [10.1080/0267257X.2018.1446488](https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2018.1446488)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2018.1446488>



Published online: 27 Apr 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 9071



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 9 View citing articles [↗](#)



## **Evolving netnography: how brand auto-netnography, a netnographic sensibility, and more-than-human netnography can transform your research**

The basis of netnography is rather simple. It is grounded by the principle that the perspective of an embodied, temporally, historically and culturally situated human being with anthropological training is, for purposes relating to identity, language, ritual, imagery, symbolism, subculture and many other elements that require cultural understanding, a far better analyst of people's contemporary online experience than a disembodied algorithm programmed by statistics and marketing research scientists.<sup>1</sup>

The fundamental positioning of netnography as a research method, its marketing-oriented point of difference, relevant to digital humanities artists, library and information scientists, sociologists, cultural anthropologists, marketing practitioners and consumer researchers alike, is also rather clear. It is that the knowledge we gain from machine understanding of human experience is often sorely limited, and the ethics of the investigatory situation fraught, no matter how large the data set, how cleverly programmed the machine learning algorithms or how extensive the public surveillance.

We live in an age where magical storage and miraculous search wizards provide us with informational wonders beyond our imagination. A time when anyone, anywhere, can be woken from their sleep by the smartphone in their hand to participate in a brand-related discussion or share a selfie on demand. A time when brands are coming alive, with voices, faces, intentions, goals and their own bibles. A time when social media companies, like Facebook and Instagram, and Big Data processors, like Meltwater and Crimson Hexagon, appear to be offering marketing and research treasures that will reveal everything, betraying secrets long held and opening the pathways to complete monitoring and complex spirals of social control. In the face of this mountain of change, netnographers strain to loosen the bounds of research tradition and adapt to ever-evolving situations. They must each, in their way, seek a more experiential and more participative understanding of a shifting social realm. Evaluating, balancing and leveraging all of these other approaches, netnographers begin and end in the first perspective of a narrator on an investigative journey, but must open their worldview to encompass a world that continually careens and expands, altering course and transforming social lives on a daily basis.

To stay relevant, netnography must change. It cannot merely be the netnography of newsgroups and chatrooms or blogs and Twitter. The contemporary netnographer considers human connectivity to be transforming and transformative. As social scientists, we stand collectively on the edge of the precipice between where we were as book writers and newspaper readers, where we are as an interconnecting network of people, smartphones and increasingly complex information and computation systems, and where we are going next. We are peering over that chasm, looking into it and

chronicling how we are navigating it. Not only this, but netnographers are dealing explicitly with cultural realities in technocapitalist times, with situations in which access to cultural realities, and the ability to collect data, is legally – but perhaps not morally – under the control of very large and very powerful technology companies, protected by restrictive legislation and terms of service and use. As Carrigan (*in press*) puts it, we are witnessing ‘a new form of social science emerging concurrently with a new phase of capitalism (Bratton 2016; Srnicek, 2017). It is one which takes the “online order”, profoundly shaped by corporate actors, as the given foundation for a social science conducted within the boundaries of these established platforms and constrained by their ever-shifting conditions’.

In the midst of this dynamic and corporately configured space, netnographers seek knowledge about post-human times in a fundamentally humanist way. Perhaps, as the three articles in this issue suggest, they must seek this knowledge in a fundamentally post-humanist way, by, among other things including agentic objects such as bots, algorithms and intelligent agents in their purview, deploying a netnographic sensibility and using an auto-ethnographic introspective wisdom.

As netnographers ourselves, the three co-editors of this special section are embarked upon this same journey of discovery. Devising and working on this special issue was a part of the journey. We hoped, and fully expected, to fill an entire issue of the *Journal of Marketing Management* with articles that would push the boundaries of this growing method as researchers continually reposition it within the bosom of their own fields, the locus of their own interests and within one of the most dynamic industrial and social spaces ever created, a manifestation of globalisation, communication and information the likes of which the world has never before seen. Netnography is, after all, a child born of ethnography and the combined growth of all the processing power, being put to so many uses, from Artificial Intelligence (AI), to making everything intelligent in the Internet of Things (IOT), from amassing consumer generated materials to innovating within various forms of commercial social online community and advertising and access medium. And it is much more, after all, this is the age of big data and social media. From a tiny, marginal interest in ‘virtual communities’ (Rheingold, 1993) just 25 years ago, today’s social media is an undisputed game-changer, a massive global social experiment, blamed for altering the outcome of elections and redirecting the course of history, a mess of fake news and misinformation, the future of advertising and earned media and the basis of some of the world’s most powerful and profitable companies. It is no surprise that social media and data analysis topics are red hot, attracting record numbers of submissions and filling journals with new articles.

But, as you may have noticed, this special section on netnography is a bit thin. It is a section of the journal, rather than an entire special issue. As editors, we collectively pondered what the small numbers said about netnography, its present and perhaps its future. Was this a signal that interest in netnography was waning? Was it advance warning that social media had peaked? That qualitative research was yielding the last of its ground to the rising tide of quantification?

Probably not. Netnography has always been about quality over quantity. We did receive a relatively small number of submissions, it is true. But some were high-quality submissions, truly innovative in their approach and thinking. We had two other submissions on fascinating topics that would have required time-consuming revision in order

to be published and simply could not be revised in the timelines of this special issue, but which will no doubt be published elsewhere in the future.

What we saw, and what we see, is that netnography is an approach to social inquiry pursued passionately by a small group of innovative research leaders around the world. It has never been a mainstream technique, and probably it never will be. It is an approach on the margins, used by researchers working in specialised areas, to investigate specific types of behaviour and particular kinds of phenomena. However, it garners 119,000 results in a Google search, and almost 8000 citations in Google Scholar. The approach has always been respected, valued and acknowledged as useful. We are proud to have an opportunity in this special issue to highlight and present the work of these three excellent research teams to you. With the articles in this special issue, we highlight three important areas in the methodological development of netnography: auto-netnography, social media monitoring and big data, and object agency.

### Concerning auto-netnography

In anthropology and cultural studies, auto-ethnography (often also written in the hyphen-less form, autoethnography) seems to be enjoying something of a renaissance. With the publication of new methodological volumes and guides such as Muncey (2010), Denzin (2013), Adams, Jones, and Ellis (2014), Bochner and Ellis (2016), Hughes and Pennington (2016) and Pensoneau-Conway, Adams, and Bolen (2017), the approach of auto-ethnography has never been more vibrant or well informed. The netnographic offshoot, auto-netnography, began as a more introspective extension of netnography in the work of Kozinets and Kedzior (2009) as the participative elements of the original method were adapted to studying the more internal, micro-psychological adjustments for experiencing virtual worlds. Although there had been a handful of other papers based on the notion, and Kozinets (2015) developed the technique further and advocated for it as one of netnography's four core sub-approaches, auto-netnography required further methodological development.

So when we received the unique auto-netnography submission by Dino Villegas from Texas Tech University, we were excited by its fresh approach and new ideas. As a social media manager for a political campaign, Villegas' insights are grounded in a type of practice that most academics do not experience. His story of the campaign, contained in the research article, makes for an intriguing way to extend our knowledge of auto-netnography. Indeed, we were pleasantly surprised to see this paper develop and grow into a new development of auto-netnography that takes it into new managerial directions, such as 'brand auto-netnographies', which Villegas explains are 'studies from marketers – as individuals or group – [utilizing] perspectives where the I or Self is the brand persona not the person, with the goal [of the investigation being] to understand or modify the different dimensions of the brand personality' (Villegas, 2018). Marketing objectivity and the obsession with marketing science are currently incarnated in the fascination with abstract statistical overviews of social media conversations that turn richly emotional conversations and statements into simplistic readings of positive or negative sentiment. The idea that managers can and should develop their introspective and retrospective skills using netnography and social media participation is a valuable outcome that could open entirely new areas of inquiry in the field of marketing by

revaluing the often-derided import of managerial intuition. Developing the notion of brand auto-netnography may lead to important advancements in management practices as managers deal with the expanding importance of social media, influencer marketing and online brand storytelling in a way that helps them to balance overwhelming amounts of data with human cultural sensibilities.

Villegas' updating of our understanding of the method is substantial. Auto-netnography offers us opportunities to explore categories of participation and observation, emic and etic, management practice and academic reflection. As a way to include the lived experience of conducting netnography and build it into the conduct of our research, auto-netnography has become an important extension of netnography. From the perspective of axiology, auto-netnography preserves and valorises a human voice through its first-person perspective. On the pragmatic level of marketing and practice, Villegas' auto-netnographic story keeps returning us to the complexity of social media today, to their corporate imbrication, to their political ramifications, to their social linkages and to the need for collaborations between practitioners and researchers.

Indeed, auto-netnography draws our attention to the dissolving divisions between our private and professional lives, our research and our social beings and our needs to be entrepreneurial and passionate about our research work with our natural caution at letting our intellectual labour subsume our personal identities. These breached boundaries are required by the ethical conduct of netnography. But there are no clear divisions. No lines, only shades of grey. Instead of clear guidelines, guesswork. In netnography, as with some ethnography, we find ourselves mixing personal and informant's networks. We disclose ourselves. We use our social networks. In one recent study, Daiane found that her mother had become mixed in with her group of informants. This was somewhat alarming, but it was also useful reflexive material. Sometimes we might wish to deploy social groups of friends and colleagues to share their stories by employing social media tools, and we may, in the process, find that they provide some of the most useful and rich data for study. This is certainly not unfamiliar terrain for netnographers, and these paths have been well trodden by the auto-ethnographers who have gone before us. And so, echoing the growth of auto-ethnography, but in a far more modest way, auto-netnography builds and grows upon a humble base. In this effort, Dino Villegas' contribution will stand as a substantial one.

### **A netnographic sensibility from social monitoring dashboards**

What do we currently know about storytelling? What do we know about how storytelling happens in the realm of social media? In an earlier, more innocent time of newsgroups and chatrooms, Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry (2003) told us about how social media created the opportunity for consumers to construct a humanist narrative about the roles that brands played in their lives and to share them with others. Netnography was a way to map out the soulful journey of the personal brand through the realms of retro brand narratives, stories with characters, with opposition, with elaborate sets that situate it in time and space. Consumer narratives were not mere conversations in this view. Instead, these narratives became powerful cultural and social tales, allegorical myths about the true things in life, about our collective human experience.

The story-making ecosystem encompasses the sociotechnical ecosystem of media. This system is something that the programmers and data scientists in Silicon Valley struggle to discern, never mind understand. The best machine-learning algorithms in the world still find even the writing or understanding of childish stories to be a huge challenge. Yet some still trust machines to analyse narratives by chopping them into pieces and then sorting the pieces, like fish from the sea. Stories treated in such a manner may become leached of the subtle understanding of humanity, the ironies, the tragedies, the hopes and burning passions, become, in essence, mere lexical collections, like phonemes.

And yet one of the primary ways we interface with the reality of social reality as a set of observers, in companies, in consulting firms, in technology firms, is through dashboards created by Meltwater, Netbase, Sysomos, Salesforce, BrandWatch, Cision or Crimson Hexagon. When we consider the science fictional nature of these names, we might begin to discern part of the challenge of combining data from social media monitoring tools such as BrandWatch, Meltwater or Radian6 and then mixing them indiscriminately with the detritus that piles up on the silicon beaches of social media. The tide just keeps dumping it in: the garbage of everyday lived experience in an excremental culture, filled with information, misinformation, debate, deliberate deception, socio-ethnic-political-economic chest-thumping, desperation, anger, hope and fear. Piling up into gigantic archipelagos of plastic emotion and transcribed sentiment before we even realise how much of it we threw away. Constantly collected, saved for posterity, analysed as surveillance, flowing through the data stream. Because of this, more than anything else right now, the netnographer has become a historian, a cultural cartographer, a scribes of these times of industry and academe. We could call this a 'netnographic sensibility', a term as good as any, coined by Reid and Duffy (2018), and applied to that *je ne c'est quoi* that distinguishes netnography from social media content analysis. In their article, they explain and detail how that difference resonates with some of the same elements that distinguish between art and photography or between having an eye and a lens.

Reid and Duffy inform us in the article about how we must understand that culture is born, shared and revealed and that their idea of 'a netnographic sensibility is a way to approach the value of social listening research to provide holistic consumer understanding' (Reid & Duffy, 2018). Situated between netnography and social listening platforms and procedures, they conceptualise a theory-practice triangulation that provides 'a richer picture of sociality and culture with the researcher active as story interpreter' (Reid & Duffy, 2018). When using social monitoring dashboards, this rich image of interconnection and meaning is constrained by the abilities of the software. In the first case, software cannot understand visual images and video in the complex, holistic way that human beings do. This is important not only because of the visual nature of networking apps like Instagram, Pinterest, Facebook and Snapchat, because by some estimates about 80% of all Internet traffic is visual or video. Estimates of engagement suggest that posts with images produce over six times as much engagement as posts that only contain text. By being unable to fully analyse the deeper significance of images, social monitoring software and dashboards may be leaving unanalysed most of what is interesting and important.

Understanding the images of the day is a very netnographic activity. Emphasising the import of understanding images, symbols, photographs and videos is a key netnographic frontier illuminated by the netnographic sensibility. In social media, images are owned, licensed and transmitted for an instant, evanescent and ephemeral, or they might be archived permanently, aching to be forgotten. Images are a form of capital, of money, and of influence. Symbols can be legitimate, aligned with institutions in a way that suits political and cultural assemblages, that act as sets of language-meanings that mounts and tries to thrust themselves into the current historical moment. Images can also be used to stoke the energies of a network of desire, having others do their dirty work for them. They might consist of an emoji to use, a fragment of language to think, a micro-identity to momentarily inhabit and a mini-role to temporarily or experimentally don. But make no mistake. Images are powerful and important. Videos, selfies, photographs, avatars, infographics and other images nestle astride the beating heart of cultural understanding.

The second area where social listening platforms and dashboards, and most other forms of algorithmic social media analysis fall down is in the translation and connotative unpacking of language. To cultural anthropologists, linguists and discourse analysts, language is everything. Netnographic sensibilities are also linguistic translations. What is the language of the moment, of the platform, of the exchange? What are the social transmission's core values, encoded into language-meanings? What are the identities aligned with those languages, the masks into which people move, stay and transform? In what ways do they reinforce the extant social order and in which ways do they seek to disrupt it?

Social monitoring platforms work with dictionary-type systems that assign particular values to particular words. Even when they are driven by machine-learning algorithms, these systems still operate like big spreadsheets, allocating particular words into particular buckets, which are coded and then output into visualisations such as bar and pie charts, or sentiment-based speedometers that vary from red to yellow to green. However, language is highly contextual and vastly networked, and it draws deeply into history and locality. Terminologies change rapidly, and language is used in extremely playful ways, often for cultural purposes and to signal belonging in particular niche groups, as well as affiliation with particular perspectives, roles and identities.

Netnography is a chronicle. A netnographic sensibility is dialled into a time and location, socially and historically situated. A netnography written by you, today, will be quite different from a netnography on the same topic written by you one year later. Because it represents a very human constellation of experience, netnography is limited in its scope to particulars, to contexts. Online engagement is about existence here and now. Engaging online is now as natural as breathing air, as ephemeral, noncommittal and essential. The air of contemporary existence is contemporary culture, and the breathing is the inhale and exhale of online connection.

A netnography is a kind of selfie. Being a netnographer means saving a slice of social reality as it is reflected in your life and your thoughts. Just as it is required with a selfie, the image of the image-taker must be a part of the overall picture. The netnography is an exploration of a time in your life, a set of communications and a social situation, that will never again exist exactly as it does when you capture them. The netnographer saves the subcultural news and reports it back to the subculture, or the micro-subculture,

positioned in relation to whatever that broader based, popular, accessible, online gathering might be. Images and languages contain and express identities, and identities ground these mini-micro-subcultures. But as the reporting is happening, as the analysis is in progress, the culture and communications have already changed. New news has already altered things, sometimes radically.

The identity of the netnographer is as a scientific and communal double agent. Accept for your consideration that ethnographic identities inhere both within hardcore and casual manifestations. One website can be important one week and fade into obscurity the next. One topic can become significantly related to another of interest and then just as rapidly become irrelevant. Netnography must ever adapt to changes in practice, commitment and belief. A netnographic sensibility is both intimately emic, a donning of the mask, and objectively etic, an analysis of its rituals of use, origins and purpose. Purpose and goals are often conceptualised as key to the cognitive functionings of consumers, their behavioural heuristics. But deeper behind those disrupted product interests and disembedded purchase patterns are fires of passion for whom online connection is like a beating drumbeat, a musical backbeat, an attractive mate and a thrilling stage.

It is towards tighter readings of this reality of desire, the energy at the heart of the enterprise, the humanity within the various texts, tweets and images, that a netnographic sensibility would want to steer our productive and creative energies, our arts, our sciences, our humanities, our poetry, our video and our creative expressions. A netnographic sensibility is a sensitivity about how to story, how to fabricate our own story as a researcher or a team, a story like that of Diego Villegas, leading us to some appreciation of our own place in this time and this social world. And what we see on social media is reflections of ourselves, other people's selfies, other objects and other people, all telling stories, to which the netnographer adds her own.

Yet, just as Emily Reid and Kate Duffy's article in this special section informs us, contemporary netnographers must become more reflexive about the role of commercial proprietary software and selective algorithms. Being aware of them, without being overwhelmed by them, can be a challenge. As everyday life becomes increasingly digitised, increasingly turned into data (Hand, 2014), we learn some of the controversies surrounding big data and its uses. When using netnography as a marketing research technique, it is crucial to remember, as Ariztia's (2015) work reveals, that netnography becomes one of the multiple social and cultural processes that construct the consumer as a type of boundary object to connect brand managers with a type of mysterious other. The fact that this work has moved from advertising agency psychoanalysis to sophisticated big data algorithms does not alter its basic nature: the brand or product becomes a fetish object, invested by the method with suprahuman significance and granted in material form an abjectly needful power to change the material circumstances of consumers, such as those who quantify the self (Thomas, Nafus, & Sherman, 2018). In the face of this netnography can help us to avoid 'digital opportunism', as Reid and Duffy (2018) assert, because we must reflexively ask ourselves what we are assuming, thinking and doing, and, we would argue, why we are doing them. True, this may mean that netnography is not the quickest of methods. It is not push-button, nor is it cookie cutter. But netnography may still be valued as one of the most important and flexible ways 'to gain deep understanding into the rich nuances of consumer practices,



cultural contexts and socialities' (Reid & Duffy, 2018) in our world of complex contemporary communications, experience and information.

Here is what we must remember: that what we see as naturally emergent, spontaneously shared and unobtrusively collected manifestations of consumer behaviour data is actually a selection of content carefully curated for us and tailored to our taste and preferences by collections of human and non-human agents. We live in bubbles within filter bubbles which we, with reflexive understanding, must try to pierce and see beyond in efforts that are, in turn, ethnographically both illuminating and frustrating. Like it or not, as netnographers we must acknowledge that we are already dancing, if not with the devil, then with the machines.

### **More-than-human netnography**

'More-than-human netnography', by Peter Lugosi and Sarah Quinton, addresses the issue of how to adjust netnographic practice to the increasingly popular adoption of relational approaches in social research. By highlighting the role of objects, including technologies and technology-enabled devices, the authors invite researchers to account for these objects' agencies and their roles in shaping the focal phenomena of netnography as well as research procedures such as data collection and analysis. The authors utilise Actor–Network Theory as a theoretical device to help them assess the status quo of netnographic practice and its relation to non-human entities. The authors also tell us that other object-oriented ontologies such as assemblage theory, materiality studies and assemblage theories may help us to continue our reflections about the implications for netnography of shifting the focus to objects.

So much has changed about the social media space. Non-human actors are not theoretical constructs any longer, but an artificial element of everyday reality. As Kozinets (2018) writes, 'A recent industry study estimated that 52% of all web traffic is composed of bots. The same study found that 56% of those bots could be considered harmful – such as bots designed to attack and bring down websites. And another recent study conducted by our colleagues at USC estimated that up to 15% of all Twitter accounts are actually bots, rather than real people. That means that nearly 48 million Twitter accounts could be bots. What's even scarier is that bots never rest. Although they might only represent 15% of profiles, they may account for a disproportionately large amount of Twitter's traffic. And by all accounts, their activity is growing'.

Bots can sometimes be difficult to differentiate from human actors, although often they give themselves away. The issue might be connected in some ways to the old issue of people passing for someone they are not, except for two things. First, consumers' role playing often revealed as much about their identity and its fluidity as it concealed about their allegedly real identity. And, secondly contemporary bots are widespread and closely connected to marketing, public relations and promotions, topics of interest for marketing researchers. Brand management teams, for example, are increasingly making use of bots to generate reviews and chatbots to answer consumer questions. It is thus important that researchers account for the effect non-human action produces on consumers who may or may not be cognisant of the fact that they are receiving filtered content and/or consuming content produced by machines. However, Lugosi and Quinton recommend that we go much further than this.

Because of the rise of non-human agents such as bots, which impersonate human actors, and which spew misinformation of various kinds, netnographers must become adept at making decisions regarding what or who is posting, as well as what they are posting. Social media accounts must be evaluated when collecting data in a specific social network. And thus, in Lugosi and Quinton's important extension of the approach, they suggest that 'a more-than-human netnography' will 'seek to account for how computing "intelligence" is an actor in technologically-mediated sociality' (Lugosi & Quinton, 2018). Such netnographies would attend not only to human actors, their acts and meanings, but also to the netnographer's perceptions of 'the design and technological configuration of systems and sites' focusing on how they 'shift focus, foreground some activities and reward certain behaviours' and do so within particular systems of value and valuation (Lugosi & Quinton, 2018).

In fact, brands are increasingly employing bots and chatbots, in ways both obvious and sometimes deceptive, to add juice to their social media campaigns. When a bot likes and reposts the brand recommendations of other bots, in order to build credibility and legitimacy, and we see the outcome of this bounded system of review and advocacy, who should we trust? Who is human? Who is not-human? What is a consumer? What is a recommendation? Under such conditions, what does it mean to participate, really, in a more-than-human context? Does more-than-human mean a better way to network? Does it mean we need to trust more, and not less? To do so, perhaps particular information should be public in your research account. What should your research account even say? Perhaps a more-than-human netnography would involve the researchers programming bots and reflecting upon what returns to them through this medium.

These are the new normals of digital life. Perhaps netnography in the new normal means interacting with non-human agents, or programming non-human agents to write observational reports of their own, which are translated and interpreted in turn. Or it could mean that trying to mimic or animate non-human agents while they try to mimic us could be part of the new netnographic agenda. Researchers may need to create or curate algorithms and programmes, as well as content, given that passive, lurker accounts may not grant them with opportunities to engage with non-human, human and more-than-human informants and participate in the intermixing digital flows that interest Lugosi and Quinton.

These examples illustrate the exciting new complexity of netnographic practice and suggest frontier possibilities that require some degree of technical skill and algorithmic knowhow. Netnography might be improved when netnographers are able to peer into the black box of social media platform procedure and understand its workings. For example, netnographic researchers may need to manage multiple accounts (different projects require different profiles based on the argument above) and may also be required to keep up-to-date with changes in algorithms for each platform (e.g. Twitter now lets you choose whether you prefer to see newest content or tailored content). This technical understanding might depend upon the phenomenon of interest. For instance, it may be very difficult for researchers to surpass the agency of these objects and access content, profiles or behaviours that the networks and algorithms deem unworthy of attention. For example, it may be difficult for a netnographer to find highly niche interests using Google search engines which favour popular topics and sites, or to investigate unlinked sites on the Dark Web, perhaps those involving illegal or illicit behaviours and exchanges.

## In closing: netnography locating the human in the system

There is much to say, much to do and much to explore. These three very different articles about netnography open onto winding paths and wide open doorways, from politics to branding, management to monitoring, machine intelligences and agencies to bots and algorithms. A netnographic sensibility and auto-netnographic emphasis on technologically mediated sociality can help us to ask and to challenge the boundaries of our contemporary humanity. Is an Amazon Alexa, or other type of voice-activated virtual assistant, an agentic consumer agent, important to include in a consumer ethnography or netnography, as a close reading of Hoffman and Novak (in press) might suggest? What about other objects in the Internet of Things, or other artificial intelligence agents? And where do animal companions fit into the realms of social media? More than a curious consumer culture phenomenon, the popularity and large number of social media profiles dedicated to non-human entities, from animals (in 2018, *thedogist* had 3 million followers on Instagram) to floors (in 2018, *@ihavethisthingwithfloors* had 840 Instagram thousand followers) speaks to the intermingling of objects and humans, through objects and humans, in online social networks. Add in the disposability of content, the preeminence of video, the importance of ephemeral commitments, the dawning of the Amazon empire, General Data Protection Regulation, and its ramifications and the rise of augmented reality, and there are an almost unlimited number of novel topics for netnographers to explore and explain.

Not only are the subjects changing rapidly, but so are the tools we use to study them. In netnography, the tools are changing so fast that methodological evolution – such as the type featured and considered in this special topics section – can often only be done *post hoc*. And it is not a job for one person alone.

Some commentators at a conference one of us recently attended suggested that, although academics still consider themselves to be at the centre of knowledge production, they are actually now at its periphery. Business organisations with proprietary aims and profit-motivated goals own and control most of the data, most of the platforms, and most of the data analysis tools in the world – a situation that does not bode well for the future of open research. In order to do some of the kinds of netnography discussed in this issue, we may have to collaborate with large multinationals and the agencies that service them. We may need to crowdsource, in real time, the transformation of our netnographic approaches, globally, in networks composed of research-oriented business and business-oriented academe. The prospects for cultural consumer research may not be stable, or even sustainable, for those who resist such a call. Retreating to cosy and well-worn paradigms and topics in the face of a Cambrian explosion of technologically mediated sociality will not be good for marketing or consumer research scholarship. Lacking innovation and engagement, these academic fields will move further away from the centres of relevance, from the actions of business and the interests of those with research resources to invest.

Perhaps this issue is the beginning of that evolution. Perhaps it is the ending of an era in netnography's development. Perhaps it is the penultimate cry of opportunity. Whether these thoughts move you to action, or whether you remain fixedly doing what you have been doing, the world keeps changing, and changing in ways that netnography uniquely reveals and with which it grapples. Will you grasp this tool with the same acceptance you

gave to adopting smartphones, with which you will give to a voice-activated home assistant and with which you will invite inside the next and most convenient method to shop, communicate, get informed and be surveilled? Will you alter it, make it your own, build adaptations that help realise the promise of brand auto-netnography, a netnographic sensibility and more-than-human netnography? Probably not. But remember this.

What comes next is anyone's game.

## Note

1. Of course, computer scientists are having their day, currently. And there is no doubt that there are many macro behaviours and precise measurements which are handled far better using statistical methods operating on large decontextualised data sets than they are by human participant-observers. But that really is not the point of netnography, of this paragraph or of this special section.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## References

- Adams, T. E., Jones, S. H., & Ellis, C. (2014). *Autoethnography: Understanding qualitative research*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ariztia, T. (2015). Unpacking insight: How consumers are qualified by advertising agencies. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 15(2), 143–162. doi:10.1177/1469540513493204
- Bochner, A., & Ellis, C. (2016). *Evocative autoethnography*. London: Routledge.
- Bratton, B. H. (2016). *The stack: On software and sovereignty*. Boston, MA: MIT press.
- Brown, S., Kozinets, R. V., & Sherry, J. F., Jr. (2003). Teaching old brands new tricks: Retro branding and the revival of brand meaning. *Journal of Marketing*, 67(July), 19–33. doi:10.1509/jmkg.67.3.19.18657
- Carrigan, M. (in press). The evisceration of the human under digital capitalism. In I. Al-Amoudi & J. Morgan (Eds.), *Ex machina: Realist responses to post-human society*. New York: Routledge.
- Denzin, N. (2013). *Interpretive autoethnography* (2nd ed.). London and Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Hand, M. (2014). From cyberspace to the dataverse: Trajectories in digital social research. In M. Hand & S. Hillyard (Eds.), *Big data? Qualitative approaches to digital research* (pp. 1–27). Bingley, UK: Emerald.
- Hoffman, D. L., & Novak, T. P. (in press). Consumer and object experience in the internet of things: An assemblage theory approach. *Journal of Consumer Research*.
- Hughes, S. A., & Pennington, J. L. (2016). *Autoethnography: Process, product, and possibility for critical social research*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.
- Kozinets, R. V. (2015). *Netnography: Redefined*. London: Sage.
- Kozinets, R. V. (2018, January 10). Invasion of the PR-bots. USC Relevance Report. Retrieved from <http://annenbergl.usc.edu/research/center-public-relations/usc-annenbergl-relevance-report/invasion-pr-bots>
- Kozinets, R. V., & Kedzior, R. (2009). I, Avatar: Auto-netnographic research in virtual worlds. In M. Solomon & N. Wood (Eds.), *Virtual social identity and consumer behavior* (pp. 3–19). Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe.
- Lugosi, P., & Quinton, S. (2018). More-than-human netnography. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 34(3–4), 287–313. doi:10.1080/0267257X.2018.1431303
- Muncey, T. (2010). *Creating autoethnographies*. London: SAGE.

- Pensoneau-Conway, S. L., Adams, T. E., & Bolen, D. M. (eds.). (2017). *Doing autoethnography*. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers.
- Reid, E., & Duffy, K. (2018). A netnographic sensibility: Developing the netnographic/social listening boundaries. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 34(3–4), 263–286. doi:[10.1080/0267257X.2018.1450282](https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2018.1450282)
- Rheingold, H. (1993). *The virtual community: Homesteading on the electronic frontier*. New York: HarperPerennial.
- Srnicek, N. (2017). *Platform capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Thomas, S. L., Nafus, D., & Sherman, J. (2018). Algorithms as Fetish: Faith and possibility in algorithmic work. *Big Data & Society*, 5(1), 1–11. doi:[10.1177/2053951717751552](https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951717751552)
- Villegas, D. (2018). From the self to the screen: A journey guide for auto-netnography in online communities. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 34(3–4), 243–262. doi:[10.1080/0267257X.2018.1443970](https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2018.1443970)

Robert V. Kozinets  
*Marketing and Public Relations Department, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA, USA*

Daiane Scaraboto  
*Marketing Department, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Santiago, Chile*

Marie-Agnès Parmentier  
*Marketing Department, HEC Montréal, Montreal, Canada*