Algorithmic Governance: fragments, feminism, and phenomenology in the age of online TV

A critical-reflexive audit for AI-assisted hermeneutic phenomenological research

RESEARCHER NAME

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PROJECT OR STUDY TITLE

Algorithmic Governance: fragments, feminism, and phenomenology in the age of online TV

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RESEARCH CONTEXT

The research design is entirely online using a Bennerian approach. Four rounds of interviews were carried out in the WhatsApp direct messaging context over a period of 15 months with seven participants. A diary app was also used with text-based tasks for the participants using open questions. A further small group interview was carried out online, again text based on a private Substack account. Researcher explication and a AI-assisted pre-supposition interview with the Researcher was carried out as a first phase. Critical reflective questions, in keeping with the tradition, were privately journal on by the Researcher and explored in a disclosive generative AI context also.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Primary hermeneutic phenomenology, with secondary phenomenon logical framework of feminist continuum thinking. Operationalised through Benner's (1994) systematic interpretive phenomenological methodology.

WHERE AND HOW DO AI OR ALGORITHMS ENTER THE RESEARCH PROCESS?

The research project adopt a human first approach in all cases of AI use and such the first use of AI follows the traditional written researcher explication as a human based activity, followed by an AI assisted pre-supposition interview supporting hermeneutic reduction (van Manen, 2014). Following this, the research process continues entirely absent of AI during the initial data collection through round one and two interviews and early diary task question formation. These stages remain entirely human, with critical reflective questions as a written process using journalling, and field notes. In the third and fourth round interviews, AI assisted critical reflective questions are added to the human written journalist process as a secondary stage after interviews. During interviews where particular challenges to the researchers horizon and affective state arises, and with the affordances of a text based context allowing for the activity briefly, AI was used to assist with researcher bias/leading checking. The latter being a skilled activity drawn from significant clinical experience and efficiency mindful not to disrupt the researchers presence in the interview.

Orientation

This record is grounded in five principles: human-first; disclosure, not generation; I–AI–Thou as the disclosive between; Gelassenheit (releasement); and audit as audire (to hear). Human interpretation, judgement and ethical responsibility remain primary. The record makes the pathway available for interrogation; it does not constitute an automated evaluation.

REGISTER I

Hearing the Phenomenon

How is the algorithmic phenomenon encountered and made meaningful within participants' lived worlds?

> Algorithmic governance in online TV is encountered through the participants personalised content homepage across the differing platforms that they usually view television through. Participants shared a range of meaningful concerns and understanding of the algorithmic encounter, despite it opaque nature, revealing commonalities with some of them literatures meanings, and additionally others that have not yet been discussed in the literature. Equally the differing horizons of each of the participants had commonalities and differences between each other. Paradigm cases provide provided important insight to this.

What has become visible through hearing the phenomenon in this way that might remain unavailable to technical, sociotechnical or predetermined forms of audit?

> The hermeneutic algorithm audit in this study allowed participants to reveal deeper common meanings and concerns as a valuable contribution to the existing algorithm audit literature that focuses on technical and sociotechnical aspects. This audit provided important understandings in response to the studies specific research question.

Where do participants' accounts unsettle, complicate or resist your existing understanding of the phenomenon?

> Throughout the interviews, I experienced frequent moments of feeling unsettled, feeling a level of resistance, or surprised as well as commonality with participants stories. My private human journalling was helpful with this, but the additional critical reflective questions with the AI agent allowed me to have greater levels of accountability and bring more visibility and understanding for my own explication of prejudice.

REGISTER II

Hearing the Researcher

PRE-UNDERSTANDING

What did I bring to this encounter already expecting, assuming, knowing or valuing — about the phenomenon, the research, and AI itself?

> My intention was to be as open as possible using my Counselling skills, but equally I came to the research encounter and the AI assisted critical reflective process with certain expectations around the experiences of the female TV viewer based on the existing feminist discourse and literature and based on the algorithmic governance literature. This was significantly challenged and changed through the HP research process.

DISCLOSURE

What do I now see, know or understand about my own pre-understanding that I did not see or understand before this encounter?

> That my own expectation of how algorithms are made sense of, the meaning making, there is greatly between participants in this study, not as conclusive, but revealing about common meanings and particular concerns that matter to these participants that I had not anticipated. A hermeneutic algorithm audit approach, in its first register, enabled new understandings to be brought forth including a contribution to the sources of commonality (Benner & Wrubel, 1989)

INFLUENCE / PRESSURISING

Where did I notice pressure toward particular language, framing, direction, pace, certainty or closure — and how did I respond to it?

> In the early stages of using the AI I definitely felt frequently frustrated and had to correct the wrong use of language, the AI defaulting to trying to explain or analyse. It's framing consistently struggled to understand the secondary framework being used in the project and required extensive skill training with the AI agent. I developed a natural need to notice when I became accelerated by the AI. This was one of the biggest challenges. Falling into fast and misdirected dialogue. I was also mindful that without very clear instruction the AI would inadvertently move towards closure based on what appeared to be its training imperatives. I noticed, I paused, I took time out. And I made sure that the traditional HP journalling was a greater percentage of my time than AI dialogue with critical reflective questions. I also took longer breaks intermittently in the process of the research to be completely free of AI. I also used regulating techniques from my professional therapy practice. What I call the human interval.

RESISTANCE / CHALLENGING

Where did I disagree with, correct, reject, redirect or leave aside an AI response? What does my resistance disclose about my own horizon?

> There were also times when I disagreed with or left aside an AI response that once I went to a period of human dwelling I could see that it was an area of my own resistance. But I think what it also disclosed to me was my commitment to the hermeneutic stance and openness, because I would routinely be willing to confront my own resistance and change and challenge my position.

TRANSFORMATION / REVEALING & DEEPENING

How has my pre-understanding changed through this encounter? What can I trace as my own interpretive movement, and what remains difficult to disentangle from the influence of the AI dialogue?

> My pre-understanding has changed in a significant way from a particular aspect of the feminist literature, and a particular expectation that I had about participant knowledge of algorithms has shifted. My own interpretive movement has remained strong throughout the research process and I feel that I successfully disentangled problematic influence from the AI dialogue. However, in the early stages this was more challenging particularly where the influence pressed on an anxiety about knowing an understanding more and more as a type of rabbit hole in my interpretive process.

INTERPRETIVE AUTHORITY

What interpretive judgements did I make in carrying anything from this encounter into the research, and on what human grounds did I make them?

> All of the interpretive judgements were made by myself, and what was carried through from the AI encounter was a deeper understanding of my prejudice. Even where the AI offered a different reading to challenge me, I utilise that only as a contrast not as a definitive interpretation. The human first principle was used throughout.

REGISTER III

The Communal Hearing

Where did AI enter this research, for what bounded purposes, and at what stages?

> AI entered this research in the initial explication stage, following the human first explication. The purpose was hermeneutic reduction and the outcome was assessed for its value in revealing my pre-understanding to a greater depth. I did not ask the AI to interpret the researcher presupposition interview. It was then used again in the latter rounds and stages of data collection as a critical reflective disclosive horizon - the AI-assisted triple hermeneutic - and skilfully and briefly during interviews as a bias check only.

What did AI explicitly not do? Where were the boundaries of its involvement?

> AI explicitly did not carry out any interpretive role. The boundaries of its involvement were a disclosive horizon for assisting the Researcher in exploring pre-understandings and prejudice throughout the research process alongside, and secondary to, the human traditional reflective processes for this.

For anything arising through an AI encounter that was carried forward, what was the subsequent human interpretive step?

> Subsequent human interpretive steps were carried out following the pre-supposition interview in the traditional way, human lead. And the critical reflective questions were followed by human based private journalling.

What examples make this pathway traceable?

> Written an examples from journals and field notes and AI chats are included in submissions for the reader/examiner to assess as an auditability presentation strategy.

What remains uncertain, contestable or unresolved about the role of AI in this research?

> The use of AI in this project was exploratory, given the novel and complex use of AI in hermeneutic phenomenology what remains contestable is whether AI in this research process diminished or reduced the necessary aspects of human dwelling in the research process and essential to this tradition.

What would you invite a supervisor, examiner, reader or assessor to question in this account?

> I would ask that it is considered whether the experience that I had as a Researcher of greater depth and insight as a consequence of greater revealing of my pre-understanding and prejudice, that supported a rigorous approach to skillful comportment, is secondary to the interpretive outcomes that were human lead in this project, such that the disadvantages outweigh the advantages. As the register I, an approach of a hermeneutic algorithm audit, to exploring and understanding the participants experiences of algorithmic governance contributes to the existing audit methodologies as intended.

Developed by Samantha Pay — The Human Interval

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