Call for proposals

International conference
From the Closed Internet to Infinite Metaverses?
The future of technological mediation in journalism and the media

Paris, 7 Mars 2023

> *" The road from the closed world of the Ancients to the open world of the Moderns has been traveled with surprising speed: barely a hundred years separate Copernicus'* De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium *(1543) from Descartes'* Principia Philosophiae *(1644); barely forty years from these* Principia *to Newton's* Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica *(1687). This speed is all the more surprising given that this road is difficult, full of obstacles and dangerous passages or, to say it more simply, that the problems posed by the infinitization of the Universe are too deep, the implications of the solutions extend too far to allow continuous and constant progress."*
> (Alexandre Koyré, ***Du monde clos à l'univers infini***, 1973[i], p.14)

After 70 years of cyclical ups and downs in global economic development, current environmental, social and political transformations suggest that we are facing a shift from closed worlds to an infinite, multiple, emerging, dynamic and creative universe. The relations between subjects and objects, as well as our representations of these relations in the digital domain are now strongly driven by the Internet and its interfaces - often with a playful component. In particular, the underlying impacts associated with the digitization of lifestyles lead to new challenges for social actors to educate[ii], inform[iii] and govern[iv]. Just as A. Koyré (1953) pointed out the presence of "obstacles and dangerous passages" linked to modernity and the emergence of a public sphere governed by civil law, science, technology and the arts, we are today faced with major challenges to the consolidation of more open, solid and sustainable models. **The aim of this conference is to explore and reflect upon the future of technological mediation for journalism and the media**. Its scope is interdisciplinary, between Humanities[v] and Social Sciences[vi], Economics[vii] and Law[viii].

As evidenced by the *Brazilian Journalism Research*[ix] journal's latest call for papers and the Media Party 2022 hackthon[x], the relationship between journalism and decentralized virtual realities raises both old and new questions, at the intersection of entertainment and information, commercial and public interest. The impact of digital technologies on newsrooms, journalism as a profession and the

media sector more broadly has been studied for several years. Reviewing this literature in 2014, A. Mercier and N. Pignard-Cheynel[xi] put the French context into perspective. A few notable examples include *Réseaux*'s special issues on online press (2010) and information pluralism and the internet (2012), that of *tic & société* on the transformations of journalism (2012), and *Cahiers du journalisme* on digital journalism (2011). In line with these works, this conference addresses what is currently described as "High-Tech Journalism"[xii], "Augmented Reality Journalism"[xiii] or the "Gamification of Journalism"[xiv]. **We are therefore seeking address the possibilities (and challenges) offered to information professionals by virtual, connected and immersive environments.** How do gamification and the metaverse establish a new paradigm for news professionals? How are they changing the production and distribution of information? What opportunities do decentralized technologies present? Could the blockchain help curb false information[xv]? Is audience validation the key to validating the gamification of journalism[xvi]? Can this be a new business model for media organizations?

Gamification and metaverse,
More than trendy expressions?

Gamification can be described by three characteristics: the user co-authors a playful experience (1), by manipulating technically accessible features (2), using networked digital data (3). In this sense, the metaverse accentuates these characteristics by creating a "virtual world[xvii]" capable of centralizing all daily activities (work, education, health, sports) and evolving in the absence of the user. In other words, it could be "an immersive ecosystem where interpersonal relationships are linked to the creation of monetized content allowing for entertainment, communication and information in a fluid and seamless navigation between digital platforms"*[xviii]*. In these descriptions of a new virtual and unified world, one can trace back the utopian narratives of the early days of the Internet, which are frequently renewed according to the Web's evolutions (the end of geographical and cultural boundaries, the information highway, the new Habermasian public sphere, etc.[xix]). It is no coincidence that the term "metaverse" originates from the science fiction genre of literature and lies at the intersection of creative industries and academia. Philip K Dick and Daniel Francis Galouye introduce the concept without naming it, in *The Simulacra* and *Simulacron 3* respectively. For William Gibson, the "cyberspace" introduced in *Neuromancer* (1984) is a virtual world, while Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (1992) finally introduces the term. On the media side, *Canal+* launched *Le Deuxième Monde* (literally the Second world) in 1997, but this first virtual world was quickly overtaken by the global phenomenon Second Life (2003)[xx], a new digital space which successfully attracted brands[xxi] and French political parties[xxii].

The metaverse is not a "browser window", but a place to exist (online and offline, simultaneously[xxiii]) and especially to centralize different aspects of life. Platformization[xxiv] has led users to an intense multiplication of themselves on various media and formats[xxv], as evidenced by the various profiles, pages and accounts operated by most individuals today. A single platform is not enough, despite Big Tech's best efforts to centralize ever more tools in one place. Facebook, for example, has become a platform for connecting with friends, organizing events, creating discussion groups with strangers, buying and selling goods and services, playing games, watching videos and consuming news content. According to Anne Helmond, Facebook is characterized by its "drive to make external web data platform ready[xxvi]" in a dual movement of decentralizing platform features while centralizing data. On the other hand, users rarely limit themselves to Facebook and are present on other social networking platforms offering similar functionalities. This multi-positionality therefore goes beyond the logic of complementary usage.

While it cannot be defined by a specific technology, the current development of the metaverse benefits from the democratization of Internet access, the miniaturization of equipment and the recent consolidation of cryptocurrencies, combined with the expansion of social networking, online games and immersive virtual reality[xxvii]. The concordance of these factors contributes to a certain maturity of the current market[xxviii], so much so that in October 2021, Mark Zuckerberg announced the recentering of Facebook around his vision of the metaverse, even renaming the company Meta[xxix]. There are three elements to how this episode can be interpreted. First, it demonstrates the changes in the global economy due to digital transformations, what G. Schwartz calls the "iconomy"[xxx]: technological changes in relation to the media, journalism and the "knowledge society". Second, it testifies to the accentuation of infomediation processes[xxxi], illustrating the acceleration of three mechanisms above all: the transposition of certain aspects of social life into data (datafication), the transformation of online activities into commodities (commodification), and the selection and personalization of objects (curation)[xxxii]. Third, Zuckerberg's presentation reminds us that the metaverse is not yet here. It still in the making, being built by the largest (American[xxxiii]) companies in the field - Amazon, Apple, Microsoft, Nvidia - which dictate the agenda. In his article for *Time* magazine, Matthew Ball draws attention to this side of the issue: "It's not difficult to imagine how different the internet would be if it had been created by multinational media conglomerates in order to sell widgets, serve ads, or harvest user data for profits"[xxxiv]. Contrary to over-enthusiastic narratives, can the metaverse be seen as a trojan horse for the further commodification of the online realm, based on blockchain technologies and NFTs?

In addition to economic and geopolitical questions, the metaverse also raises other concerns, in relation to the environment (a), the protection of personal data (b), and freedom of expression and content regulation (c). First of all, the metaverse is energy-intensive[xxxv] and thus, as for other digital infrastructures[xxxvi], it stimulates risky energy cycles. Second, it leads to a concentration of power and wealth through the accumulation of personal data[xxxvii] in various forms (productive, financial, social, symbolic and environmental). Finally, the metaverse also renews current debates around the governance and regulation of platforms, particularly in terms of content moderation (disinformation, hate speech[xxxviii]), and trust and safety (terrorist exploitation[xxxix], foreign interference).

Is a public, common[xl] and open metavers possible?

The University of São Paulo (USP) is the first public academic institution in Latin America to receive an NFT (Non-Fungible Token) to integrate with other institutions o USM Metaverse (United States of Mars) [xli]. In other words, USP now has its own "land" to build an immersive space for interaction between users (students, professors, researchers, visitors) - called University Blockchain Research Initiative[xlii] (UBRI). In this context, **this conference marks the launch of an international cooperation project** around the creation of an interdisciplinary research-action network between the Center for Interdisciplinary Analysis and Media Research (Carism) at Paris-Panthéon-Assas University and the School of Communication and Arts of the University of São Paulo (ECA/USP). The project is supported by the Institute of Iconomics in Paris, the Institute of Advanced Studies in São Paulo (IEA/USP), the international movement Games for Change Latin America (G4C) and the Mural agency (Brazil).

The goal is to open a space for **discussion on the place of journalism and media in Web3. How can we prepare for the arrival of this new technology? What place will the media hold in this universe?**

Three strands of research questions emerge:

- **Interactive and alternative narratives**

Gamification is already used by journalists in the construction of interactive digital narratives: *Rue 89* created a multimedia fiction-reportage on the reconstruction of Haiti after the 2010 earthquake[xliii]. The *Financial Times* developed The Uber Game, an interactive experience designed to inform the public about drivers' working conditions and raise awareness on the gig economy[xliv]. The *New York Times* used 3D technology to address social distancing during the Covid-19 pandemic[xlv]. These examples are still on an *ad hoc* basis, leading us to question how gamification and the metaverse can be used by the media: are all topics transposable and in what way[xlvi]? Is it a new business model, at the crossroads of media and creative industries[xlvii]? In this sense, the *GAME* journal recently published a call for papers for a special issue on "Interactive Digital Narratives: Counter-Hegemonic Narratives and Expression of Identity"[xlviii], to examine the place of minority narratives. Other questions still pertain to inequalities marking the production and distribution of information, for example questions of identity[xlix], the relationship between Global North and South[l] in the metaverse and issues of disinformation.

- **Audience and reception**

This axis addresses the reception experience and the relationship between users, designer and device[li]. Firstly, in a society characterized by the multiplication of the self and by multidimensional media, it is a matter of **questioning the capacity of users to manage a complex digital identity**, or their Media Literacy. Does acquiring new digital skills become a condition for the reception of media content? How can the participation of the public as co-author be interpreted? What types of interactions, resistances and detours are possible? Is the metaverse compatible with new forms of identity, of open and free, public and moderated conversations? Secondly, issues tied to **the relationship to health[lii], the body[liii] and the self-image[liv] can be explored**. Screen time crystallizes in a way the discussions related to the modes of participation in an immersive environment. Does it revive media "effects" studies, in a bio-socio-creative logic? What are the links between health and body that can be fostered by digital technologies in societies marked by algorithms and artificial intelligence?

- **Changing practices and professional groups**

When he launched Meta, Mark Zuckerberg also announced the hiring of 10,000 people in Europe to work on the creation of the metaverse[lv]. This last axis deals with the way professional groups are metamorphosed[lvi]. First, **the appropriation of journalistic practices by other professional groups** (computer scientists, engineers, designers) can be questioned from a deontological point of view. Is the role of these professionals still established? What skills will future journalists need to acquire? How are journalism schools adapting their curricula to gaming, Web3 and hence the metaverse? This also covers the "branded content" aspect of journalistic work, following the example of YouTube, which "sets highly commercial standards for content production at a global scale[lvii]". Secondly, this axis also calls for a reflection on **how professional media organizations are adapting**: how do public and private media invest in the development of this technology? Here, we encourage interventions from professionals to testify to the transformations and negotiations underway within the sector.

How to participate

Abstracts should be send to jaercio-bento.da-silva@u-paris2.fr and schwartz@usp.br before November 16, 2022. They must include:

- A title;
- A proposal of maximum 3,000 characters (including spaces), complete with the object of the presentation, its disciplinary, theoretical and methodological orientation, the research question(s) addressed and main results;
- A short biography ;

We welcome proposals from all relevant disciplines: Media and Communication Studies, Sociology, Economics, Law, Semiotics, Cinema, Anthropology, History, Philosophy, Art, Computer engineering, etc. The conference will be held in English and French. Beyond the three proposed research axes, all proposals which fall within the scope of the conference will be sent to the scientific committee for a double-blind peer review.

Working schedule:

Diffusion of the call for proposals: Octobre 2022
Proposal submission deadline: 30 November 2022
Notification of acceptance: on the week of 5 January 2023
Publication of the programme: 15 January 2023
Conference: 7 March 2023 in Paris

Organizers

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