

Overall, the paper suggests that platform organizations will not thrive equally in all areas of society, nor will they invariably supplant other forms of organization. A field perspective highlights the differential rates and limits of platformization by explaining why some fields are particularly susceptible or resistant to reorganization around platform architectures.

#### **B.4: Understanding the Metaverse: theoretical, empirical and critical challenges for a new(?) internet age**

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#### **Critical Questions for the ‘Metaverse’: Provocations for a cultural, technological, and scholarly phenomenon**

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According to mainstream narratives, the era of real-time rendered virtual worlds that can be synchronously and persistently accessed by large numbers of people is drawing close. Such ‘metaverses’ are for now still the feverish pipedream of tech companies and venture capitalists, and their exact shape, content, and meaning are therefore still undetermined. Moreover, rather than a clear endpoint, the ‘metaverse’ is a vision or imaginary that is used to mobilize enormous resources towards deepening and extending the current paradigm of digitalization and datafication. It is thus likely that an increasing amount of human activity – both professional as well as leisure-related – will take place in such virtual spaces, and that the paradigm of ‘big data’ is about to be expanded with massive amounts of new and varied data that capture even more (corporeal, sensorial, spatial, and temporal) information produced by and about people as well as their interactions as these unfold in virtual spaces over time.

Much like the rise of ‘big data’, the emergence of the ‘metaverse’ gives rise to important questions, particularly for the social sciences and humanities. First, the significant challenges and benefits of collecting and analysing data on the activities of people in virtual environments as well as of conducting research on the companies, platforms, and infrastructures that enable and control these environments need to be addressed. Second, critical questions need to be asked about how the transition of increasing amounts of human activity to virtual environments may, on the one hand, lead to the creation of better tools, services, or public goods as well as empowered communities and political movements, or on the other hand, exacerbate ongoing harms and inequalities, such as the loss of privacy, state/corporate surveillance, suppression of speech, precariousness of labour, and algorithmic profiling.

As a currently emerging yet uncertain and rapidly developing socio-technical phenomenon, it is of crucial importance to avoid utopian or dystopian rhetoric and to critically interrogate – in advance – the potential challenges, drawbacks, and benefits that might emerge as

metaverses are being developed, who gets access to metaverse data and to what ends this will be put to use, and how these developments might transform or even limit the nature of scholarly research.

From the perspective of media studies, critical data studies, and science and technology studies, this paper discusses first the promises and pitfalls for collecting and analyzing data about and in 'metaverses' as well as the various technologies that are likely to underpin both the development of metaverse environments as well as research on metaverse activities. Second, we discuss how these developments might contribute to the further 'datafication' of human practices and interactions as well as the 'quantification' of research methodologies across the social sciences and humanities. Both these sets of issues are addressed through a series of questions/provocations that each address a distinct tension between metaverse data and the scholarly production of knowledge about 'metaverses' and the assumptions, biases, promises, and consequences that underpin their development and use.

## **Existing to Exit: The Metaverse as Libertarian Escape Fantasy**

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The aim of this paper is to stimulate discussion for how we can develop a critical understanding of the political philosophies, ideologies, and corporate narratives of the Metaverse. This paper will provide one entry point in this important discussion by situating it within theoretical debates that existing network architectures and platforms are not fit for purpose for enacting specific visions of a decentralized internet architecture, particularly one that will be developed through spatial computation and geographically distributed in 'hybrid' space (Saker and Frith, 2019). I contribute to this question by arguing that it is necessary to critically unpack how the Metaverse represents a particular manifestation of 'exit' politics that coalesces around escape fantasies of tech elites, in this case, through decentralized web architectures that ostensibly represent a new kind of territorialization for financial capital (Craib, 2022; Rushkoff, 2022; Simpson and Sheller, 2022; Smith and Burrows, 2021). I examine how right-leaning (neo)reactionary and libertarian ideologies are embedded in Metaverse fantasies of disruption, specifically by manufacturing a new kind of digital enclosure that intensifies user surveillance for commercial exploitation, and surplus extraction through rentiership (Andrejevic, 2022; Sadowski, 2020). The paper will first provide some theoretical ground work concerning the ways that political ideologies of sovereignty are 'baked into' digital infrastructure, often in ways that advocate a 'post-political' philosophy of technocratic computation that align with right-libertarian Silicon Valley culture (Bratton, 2015; Fuller and Goffey, 2012; Golumbia, 2016; Smith and Burrows, 2021). From there, the paper will draw on critical discussions of 'platform realism' and 'Extinction Internet' (Lovink, 2022a, 2022b; Stiegler, 2019) to reflect on how the Metaverse is positioned as an alternative to the platformization of internet infrastructure by and handful of monopoly powers (Helmond, 2015; Helmond et al., 2019). Finally, I argue that Metaverse predictions of centralization and decentralization are contingent on the ways that discourses of 'reclaiming' the internet are situated within specific political and economic contexts. In this case, the Metaverse as