The Council of Europe and IEEEL publish a joint report on "The Metaverse and its Impact on Human Rights, the Rule of Law, and Democracy"

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The report entitled "The Metaverse and its Impact on Human Rights, the Rule of Law, and Democracy", jointly developed by the Council of Europe and the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) Standards Association under the Council of Europe Digital Partnership and launched at the EuroDIG (European Dialogue on Internet Governance) Conference last June, is now publicly available for download.

The report examines how the metaverse could reshape our societies and the associated benefits, risks and challenges. Drawing on insights from over 50 international experts, the report underscores the need for a human-centric approach to metaverse development.

The term "metaverse" has transitioned from literary fiction to describe an emerging set of technologies aiming to build a vast, interconnected network of real-time 3D virtual worlds and environments. The vision of the metaverse imagines it as a unified virtual universe, integrating all digital worlds, including gaming platforms, alongside and in connection with the physical world, allowing an unlimited number of users to navigate seamlessly between them. A key aspect of this is the reliance on new forms of human-machine interfaces, which bridge experiences between the real world and virtual spaces through extensive and advanced data collection and processing.

The report is intended to guide policymakers and stakeholders through the complexities of the evolving landscape of virtual realities. It enhances their understanding of the metaverse's potential applications and benefits, while also addressing the risks associated with its development and use. The report explores the implications for human rights, the rule of law, and democracy, which the Council of Europe will continue to assess to promote relevant policies. It represents the initial step in considering how the Council of Europe can contribute to developing legal frameworks for this emerging technology.

To protect human rights, the rule of law, and democracy, the report concludes with several areas for consideration. It calls for developing a shared understanding of the metaverse, mapping its ecosystem, technologies, and

stakeholders, and creating inclusive frameworks to assess its impacts on human rights for example as well as assessing environmental risks. Shaping the metaverse's future should involve diverse stakeholders and reflect shared values. Ensuring accessibility, safety, and inclusion for vulnerable groups is essential, alongside prioritising children's rights through age-appropriate design. It also highlights the need to address challenges in enforcing the rule of law, particularly in relation to proprietary content and control over user access.

Key decisions that need to be made at this early stage centre around several unresolved questions, including:

- What are the terms used to describe the metaverse and what is understood by them?

- How much can the metaverse impact our lives, societies and the values we live by, and if that is so transformative, what are the societal values on which we want to base the design of the metaverse?

- How different is the metaverse in the issues it brings from known technologies and environments such as previous iterations of the internet, AI, gaming and social platforms? What can we learn from the way issues in these areas were addressed?

- Are existing legal frameworks enough to safeguard human rights, the rule of law and democracy, or are new ones needed? Should we move towards international regulation or other global governance models and are regional or domestic regulation and approaches enough? Can the metaverse self-regulate, or is hard law needed? And, if the answer is both, for which areas is what approach more appropriate? Should regulation be technology-specific or principle/outcome/risk-based?

- What do jurisdiction, supervision and enforcement look like and what are the roles and responsibilities of governments, technology and platform providers and users themselves?

- How can we build an inclusive, democratic and responsible metaverse that does not violate, but rather promotes, the exercise of human rights, the rule of law and democracy?

These questions lay the groundwork for ongoing discussions about how to responsibly develop and govern the metaverse.

The Council of Europe is building upon the report's findings to advance its efforts. Under its terms of reference for 2024-2025, the Steering Committee on Media and Information Society (CDMSI) is currently developing a feasibility study that explores the challenges and implications of content and behaviour moderation in

immersive realities (XR technologies), with a focus on the rights to freedom of opinion, thought, and expression. The study will assess whether, and to what extent, existing legal frameworks – such as the European Convention on Human Rights, Council of Europe standards, and other European regulations – are adequate to address these concerns, or whether new measures are necessary.

The Metaverse and its Impact on Human Rights, the Rule of Law, and Democracy

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