

Center for Transformative Media (CTM) Annual Festival Media in Motion II: Shaping AI for Critical Creative Futures

**Thursday, October 29th
Northeastern University Snell Library**

Artificial intelligence (AI) has permeated every dimension of contemporary life, and its influence is perhaps nowhere more visible than in contemporary media. From the algorithmic systems that determine what news millions of people see each day, to the AI-powered surveillance and smart city technologies reshaping how urban life is monitored, narrated, and understood, AI is profoundly shaping society. At the same time, scholars, practitioners, and citizens alike are critically and creatively shaping how AI is developed, understood, and used. Media scholars interrogate its cultural logics, historical precedents, and social consequences; practitioners experiment with its possibilities, push against its limits, and develop new forms of storytelling and civic engagement; and everyday people navigate, contest, and reimagine the role AI plays in their communities and lives.

Media in Motion II: Shaping AI for Critical Creative Futures explores how AI shapes and is shaped by creativity, knowledge production, and civic life. Rather than viewing AI simply as a technical tool, the symposium adopts a sociotechnical lens to examine how it functions as a cultural form, transforming urban spaces, storytelling, journalism, community engagement, social interaction, public discourse, and democratic participation. Participants will engage with both AI's possibilities and its disruptions.

This festival will bring together scholars, artists, and practitioners from peer institutions, media industries, and the Northeastern community, featuring presentations, panel discussions, hands-on workshops, a film screening, and an exhibition of interactive media artwork. Participants will leave with a richer understanding of how we can be active agents in shaping AI — and how, in turn, it will shape our critical and creative futures.

PROGRAM

Wednesday, October 28

**5:00 - 6:15 p.m.: Media, Technology and Ethics MS program inaugural lecture
Media in Motion II opening talk**

SNELL 350

Tarleton Gillespie (Microsoft Research)

Question. Answer. Repeat.

While the forms that generative AI take are already many and still emerging, the "prompt-response" interface common to many GPT and image generation tools is currently preeminent, and has played a formative role in the public's encounter with these technologies. This structure of interaction invites the user into a specific form of ritualized sociality with AI and with the data corpus on which it is trained.

The prompt-response form is intuitive and yet was not inevitable; it is in one sense accidental, and in another a nearly foregone conclusion. Delivering generative AI to the public in the form of a chatbot may be the original sin of this latest AI revolution, or one of them. In this talk, I will trace the antecedents of this form over the history of the web, search, and social media, considering how interaction with AI has been prefigured by this familiar form as an acceptable way to interact - with massive amounts of data, with the intelligence of the crowd, and with the powerful corporations that gather and exploit that information. I hope to highlight what was already set in motion decades before generative AI ever emerged, and what alternatives might have otherwise been possible.

Thursday, October 29

8:30 a.m. - 9:00 a.m.: Breakfast and Welcome

SNELL 160

9:00 a.m. - 9:15 a.m.: Introductory Remarks

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Adriana de Souza e Silva (CTM Director)

Ben Knapp (Dean, College of Arts Media and Design)

Brooke Welles (Senior Associate Dean, College of Arts Media and Design)

9:15 a.m. - 10:00 a.m.: Keynote

SNELL 160

Nick Tandavanitj (Blast Theory)

Something to Play For

Blast Theory makes interactive art that can ask a lot of its audience. In *Kidnap*, participants entered a lottery for the chance to be abducted off the street and held captive for 48 hours. In *A Machine to See With*, a series of phone calls turned a walk through the city into the opening scene of a heist movie, leading participants to the door of a real bank. And in *My One Demand*, participants are invited to share their lifelong regrets with a room full of strangers at the cinema. In this talk, Blast Theory artist, Nick Tandavanitj, presents the whys and hows of creating artworks that invite audiences to put something of themselves at stake. He introduces key projects and turns to recent work with AI and large language models to suggest the opportunities and risks they bring to this form of work.

10:00 a.m. - 10:30 a.m. : COFFEE BREAK

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10:30 a.m. - 11:20 a.m.: Parallel Sessions: Panel + Workshop

SNELL 160	SNELL 350
Panel Interdisciplinarity and Inter-Institutional Collaborations in the Age of AI Ellie Abrons (University of Michigan / Digital Studies Institute) Eric Gordon (BU / Center for Media Innovation and Social Change) Loretta Lees (BU / Initiative on Cities) Dan O'Brien (Northeastern U. / BARI Center) <i>Moderator: Adriana de Souza e Silva</i> (Northeastern U. / Center for Transformative Media)	Workshop Making Play Matter Nick Tandavanitj (Blast Theory)

What does it take to build a research center that genuinely bridges disciplines, institutions, and the worlds of research and practice? This panel brings together directors of CTM partner research centers and institutes to reflect on how they approach inter- and intra-institutional collaboration, interdisciplinarity, and translational research in their own contexts. Each director will have five minutes to introduce their center and share their experience, followed by an open discussion moderated by CTM Director, Adriana de Souza e Silva. The panel is designed to be generative rather than formal – an opportunity to think together, in public, about what makes this kind of work possible, and to model exactly the collaborative spirit we are all advocating for.	This workshop explores how ideas from Nick's keynote might apply to the audience's own projects and practice. How to make space for audiences in your creative work? How does participation unfold over time? And how do you know when it's working? Nick Tandavanitj will ask participants to bring a project or project idea, and reflect on these questions using perspectives drawn from his work with Blast Theory. The workshop will also turn to AI - discussing its limits and where it genuinely changes what's possible for participatory in creative participatory work.
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11:20 a.m. - 11:30 a.m.: BREAK

11:30 a.m. - 12:20 p.m.: Parallel Sessions: Panel + Workshop

SNELL 160	SNELL 350
Panel Who Reads the Machine's Charts? Data Narratives as Civic Epistemic Infrastructure in an AI Media Ecosystem Gregor Aisch (Die Zeit) Enrico Bertini (Northeastern U.) Paolo Ciuccarelli (Northeastern U.) Jason Forrest (JFA)	Ph.D. Students Panel Algorithmic Futures: Doctoral Students At The Forefront of AI and Creativity Arun Asthagiri (CAMD IMD Ph.D.) Dana Bullister (CAMD IMD Ph.D.)* Alayt Issak (CAMD IMD Ph.D.) Oluwatomilade Olarinde (CAMD IMD Ph.D.) Uttkarsh Narayan (CAMD IMD Ph.D.) Mahsa Nasri (CAMD IMD Ph.D.)

When we talk about AI and data visualization, we usually ask what AI can do for the chart: generate it, recommend it, automate it. But as AI produces the charts, maps, and data stories moving through journalism and civic life, visualization and the surrounding narrative become something else: the surface on which the public reasons about, trusts, or is misled by machine-made evidence. It is civic epistemic infrastructure, and AI is rebuilding it, changing how these visual narratives are made as much as how they are read. Treating visualization as an argumentative form, not a neutral tool, this panel asks what a machine-made data narrative claims, what it leaves out, and how communities might become authors and auditors of visual evidence, not only its readers. Across newsroom practice, community data, the cognition of uncertainty, and critical design, it asks how visualization can support democratic reasoning, and what it would take to shape it ourselves.	<i>Moderator:</i> Monica Storss (Northeastern U.)* This panel brings together the early career researchers and artists working at the forefront of AI and creativity to explore how artificial intelligence is reshaping the forms, processes, and possibilities of media practices. Participants will briefly introduce their work and how they are engaging AI across contexts—as material, collaborator, interface, system, and cultural infrastructure. Brief lightning presentations will be followed by a moderated panel discussion, with opportunity for audience Q&A, addressing the evolving relationship between AI and creativity, directly from the practitioners working at the vanguard of algorithmic experimentation. How might AI generate new artistic and media forms rather than simply automate existing ones? What new literacies, aesthetics, practices, and gaps are emerging? And what responsibilities accompany them? Together, the panel asks what it means to co-create with algorithms in the AI era, and what kinds of creative futures practitioners and algorithmic tools might actively shape.
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12:20 p.m. - 1:40 p.m.: LUNCH + EXHIBITION

SNELL 350

1:40 p.m. - 2:30 p.m.: Parallel Sessions: Panel + Workshop

SNELL 160	SNELL 350
Panel	Screening and Panel Discussion

Between Coach and Cop: GenAI and the Future of Fundamental Skills Instruction in Creative Fields Meg Heckman (Northeastern U.)* Dan Zedek (Northeastern U.)* What happens to creativity when the foundational skills that underpin it – writing, editing, composing, designing – can be approximated by a machine? This presentation will draw on a new qualitative study of journalism writing instructors to explore a tension reverberating across creative and quasi-creative disciplines: How do educators teach students to value process, develop professional judgment and build creative confidence when GenAI tools offer a seductive shortcut to the finished product? The findings suggest that instructors are instinctively reframing their roles from gatekeepers to coaches, but are doing so in isolation and without coordinated support. How can organizations like CTM and CAMD help find a way forward?	Reflexive AI Cinema: <i>Cabinet of Cognition</i> Jennifer Gradecki (Northeastern U.)* Derek Curry (Northeastern U.)* Jason Donati (Northeastern U.) This session pairs two short AI-generated films that reflect on the technology itself. In <i>Cabinet of Cognition</i>, Jennifer Gradecki and Derek Curry trace the concealment of human labor from the 18th-century Mechanical Turk to the contemporary gig economy, in a pseudo-historical narrative co-authored with a language model conditioned to write like Borges and produced entirely with open-source AI. In <i>One Small Request</i> (In the style of...), Jason Donati follows a simple request to an AI assistant into a surreal odyssey through hidden infrastructures, environmental collapse, and imprisoned artistic icons, by turns satire and cautionary tale. Both films foreground their own construction, using generative tools to expose the human labor and material costs these tools obscure. Following the screening, the three artists will discuss their approaches to working critically with AI, the reflexive strategies their films share, and what artistic practice can reveal about these systems.
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2:30 p.m. - 3:00 p.m.: COFFEE BREAK

3:00 p.m. - 3:50 p.m.: Parallel Sessions: Panel + Workshop

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Panel	Workshop
XR-Learn 2035 Mery Alper (Northeastern U.)* Eileen McGivney (Northeastern U.)* Declan Qualter (U. College Dublin) Rachel Farrell (U. College Dublin) This panel discusses a new collaboration between Northeastern and University College Dublin on how emerging technologies like AI and XR can transform secondary school classrooms. Through international exchanges and workshops, we are connecting expertise in emerging technologies from CAMD with UCD's expertise in secondary school teacher preparation to understand how to create a more effective and engaging learning environment for all students using cutting-edge technologies. In this session, we will present the work conducted to date and plans for the future, reflecting on how AI can enable educators' creativity if designed well. We will also present the benefits and challenges of an international collaboration between the US and EU.	Claude Can't Count: A Workshop on GenAI and Primary Source Research Meg Heckman (Northeastern U.)* This hands-on workshop from Prof. Meg Heckman's Lost Bylines Lab invites participants to test the capabilities (and confront the limitations) of commercially available GenAI tools like Claude, ChatGPT and Gemini for analyzing primary source documents. After learning about Prof. Heckman's experience using Claude to explore a recently digitized archive of 1950s syndicated medical columns, participants will experiment with their own historical materials and discover firsthand where these tools shine (qualitative pattern recognition, thematic clustering) and where they fall apart (counting, consistency, citation accuracy.) Attendees will leave with a practical, researcher-tested framework for integrating GenAI into archival and historical research workflows – and a healthy respect for what the machines still can't do. Will be suitable for students, faculty, staff and community members.

3:50 p.m. - 4:00 p.m.: BREAK

4:00 p.m. - 5:00 p.m: Closing Keynote + Workshop

Jonah Brucker-Cohen (Lehman College / City U. of New York)

Talk Over-Computing the Everyday: Tactical Media, Critical A.I., and Urban Interventions As artificial intelligence (A.I.) and automated datasets increasingly govern our physical environments and digital realities, this talk explores how critical media art can subvert these rigid systems by deliberately injecting alternative logic, friction, and "over-computation" into everyday objects and urban infrastructure. By examining some of my critical A.I. projects like "HomeMade", "SavrAI", "Subtask", "Clockwise", and "Expression of Memory", I will analyze how re-contextualizing machine learning datasets exposes the biases, labor dynamics, and absurdities of automated decision-making. Moving into the urban landscape, I will connect this theme of software and object-based interventions to larger public data projects such as my "Average Citizen", "Crossing Algorithm", and "Unequal Weather" projects in order to challenge the homogenized narratives of the corporate "smart city." Together, these connected projects demonstrate how granting everyday artifacts and municipal data streams more complex, poetic, or counter functional computation can shift our relationship with technology from passive consumption to critical interrogation.	Workshop Critical Extension Hackathon Ever look at a website or data set and feel it's completely missing the point? Welcome to The Critical Extension Jam, a fast-paced, collaborative space where generative AI handles the syntax so you can focus on your ideas, ethics, and vision. If you can describe it, you can build it. We're creating custom Chrome extensions that leverage public data to inject real-world context into daily browsing. Take your project anywhere: Climate & Environment: Expose corporate greenwashing or display real-time emissions data, Urban Infrastructure: Map transit delays, housing data, or accessibility gaps, Civic Data: Reshape city budgets, health stats, and government reports, Social Friction: Counter algorithms, unmask misinformation, or alter timeline ads. Whether you want a serious civic tool or a satirical overlay, this is your playground. What to Bring: No coding experience needed—just a laptop with Google Chrome installed. Come ready to prompt, experiment, and prototype!.
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*** CTM affiliated faculty / student**

5:00 p.m. - 7:00 p.m: Closing Reception
SNELL 160

Organizers:

Adriana de Souza e Silva (CTM Director)

Claire Ogden (CTM Communications and Administrative Specialist)

Evelyn O'Donoghue (Former CTM Administrative Coordinator)

Dana Bullister (CTM Fellow)

Sutanuka Jashu (CAMD Ph.D. program in Interdisciplinary Design and Media)

Yuvraj Chawla (CTM Designer and Video Producer)

Co-Sponsors:

Center for the Arts

Center for Design

Institute for Information, the Internet, and Democracy

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