

Do you KNOW WHERE you Live? Critical Adaptation

by New Models (Caroline Busta & Lil Internet)

For this talk, we would like to take a look at how the topography of criticism has changed since the start of this millennium with the rise of digital, algorithmically-determined communication. We hope, by the end, to have established a common mental image of how contemporary criticism currently flows and dictates how we think.

Our interest in the topic of criticism stems from an experience we likely share with many of you: the implosion of legacy media structures over the past two decades with the shift from top-down publishing and broadcasting to a decentralized distribution of social media, which has, of course, completely altered the terms of attention and, ultimately, cultural power.

It's our belief that to speak critically about culture today, one must first understand the "physics" of contemporary media: the laws that govern the traction, speed, and visibility of an idea piece of content. During the 2010s, these laws were primarily dictated by the interface design of social media platforms: character limits, gamified incentives (likes, follows, retweets), recommendation algorithms, and the basic design choices of how text and image appear.

From these physics, which influence every aspect of communication and behavior on the platforms, nth order effects emerge. These include our own cognitive and emotional responses—releases of dopamine, cortisol, adrenaline, crowd dynamics, and peer pressures of all kinds—which, multiplied across society, promoted the recent surge of right-wing populism and the mis-/dis- and malinformation boom. But all of that is outside the scope of our conversation.

It's our feeling that, even though most people are now more or less aware that "social media can be corrosive" or that, as Shoshana Zuboff, Achille Mbembe, and others have argued, contemporary media turns its user base into a lucrative, unpaid labor force, we do not have a common map of how what we make (as artists, writers, critics,

publishers, academics) actually exists within today's field of media.

Many of us who grew up in the West likely have an image of the public sphere in our minds that resembles Jürgen Habermas's conception of it: a social formation emerging in the 18th century that is (to cite Habermas scholar Nancy Fraser's benchmark 1990 essay "Rethinking the Public Sphere") "conceptually distinct from the state: a site for the production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical of the state." And since the public sphere is also, in principle, distinct from the official economy, "it is not," Fraser notes, "an arena of market relations but rather one of discursive relations; a theater for debating and deliberating rather than buying and selling."

We know that this "theater for debating and deliberating" is enormously important to the rise of what we call the "art world." As Thomas E. Crow wrote about the 18th-century 1785 Paris Salon [image: the Paris Salon as captured by Pietro Antonio Martini], "it brought together a broad mix of classes and social types [...] where exhibitions were thus faced with the task of defining what sort of public it had brought into being." We know that it was in this context that the art critic emerged, and that the art critic's task was ultimately to triangulate artworks with the zeitgeist of its public viewers, and whatever contemporaneous political/economic conditions the critic deemed important. In this way, the critic would assign value, which would anchor further debate about the value of certain signs and aesthetic moods, and, quite often, that of individual artist/dealer/critic/collector personas as well.

But this model of the public sphere was contingent upon a particular form of media. We often call this "legacy media" or "20th century media" but really, we're talking about "linear" or "unidirectional" or "top-down" media. Whether print, radio, or TV, this was, more or less, the working model for media until the early 2000s.

If we were to draw a structural diagram of the "public sphere" in

2022—which is to say, in the age of 24/7 digitally-networked global media—we might end up with something like Benjamin Bratton's 2010s diagram of "The Stack" as a more useful model. In other words, the public sphere no longer exists in a shared physical room, or even in a shared informational stream, but as layers of physical and digital containers and protocols that silo everyone while nevertheless constituting a common digital apparatus.

planet where geographic, historical, and cultural differences are subsumed by individual freedom untethered from local realities. More literally, the cloud does physically exist within populated places in the form of data centers and cable hubs, but is deliberately left unlisted on public maps. The cloud is not a physical common space, nor is it a digital commons.

OK, but we digress!



In Bratton's model of The Stack, media is fundamentally not linear—it is holographic, or perhaps even just a kind of amorphous slime or lubricant that allows information to be transmitted across its layers. In turn, there is effectively no longer any "main stream." Rather, the release of content is now completely dispersed. The metaphor of a dam is useful here. In order to generate power, a dam needs to create force. To achieve this, the dam requires two essential things: a constant supply of water and an altitude drop. But most content now—content being the water in this analogy—follows rivulets that never feed into the large media reservoirs. Rather, it is reabsorbed into the ground, or evaporated to be stored and circulated via the so-called cloud, where it can be precipitated or de-virtualized by anyone at any time.

But linear media's power started to visibly atrophy by the early 2010s, as smartphones became ubiquitous and web2 social media platforms began to prioritize their mobile apps.

[Image: 2012 media] As we know, these were the conditions that gave rise to the citizen journalist—think Tahrir Square and Occupy Wall Street—individuals who, with a smartphone in hand and 3G-enabled Instagram, Twitter, and

Facebook, had everything necessary to self-publish their own small streams.

As the 2010s proceeded, many legacy media outlets (and the brands that continued to purchase their ad space) upheld a belief that their official attention zone was the only one that their audiences/consumers would truly respect. But, of course, this grew less true with every passing day. As attention fractured, readers were increasingly likely to first encounter a piece of legacy media reported—and re-editorialized by another user—on social media.

Despite this, the aggregate of legacy media and social media platforms was nevertheless thought of as a virtual public sphere. But if we take Habermas's conception of the

public sphere—i.e., as a place where private individuals come together to debate matters of the state and the economy, unencumbered by their professional identities—a fundamental problem arises. In 2009, Twitter instituted the blue checkmark verifying the identity of public figures. Public figures—journalists, politicians, celebs—would then appear on social media in their official capacities. Now, this isn't terribly different from an IRL situation in which a celeb has, say, courtside seats at a basketball game. In that case, they are, by default, appearing to the world in an official capacity. But as "blue checks" started using social media as their primary venue, private persons were also nudged to engage in their professional capacities.

We may wonder why an elite journalist would start splitting their energy between legacy media and lowly social media sites. In part, it is because legacy media outlets (which soon started to feel their status slipping) favor journalists with larger social media followings due to the positive network effects that, in turn, drive subscriptions and newsstand sales.

But there is another reason

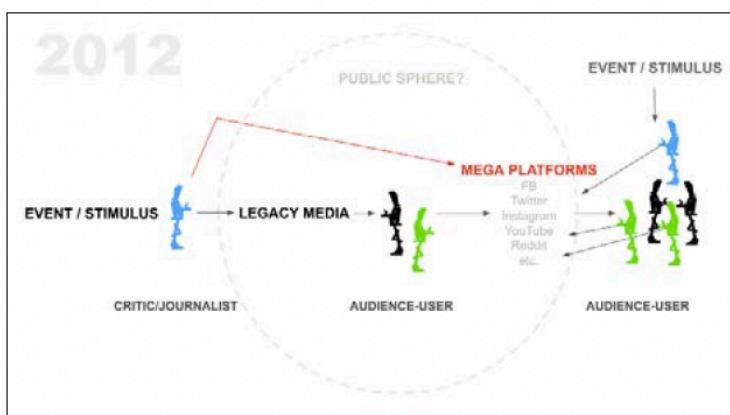
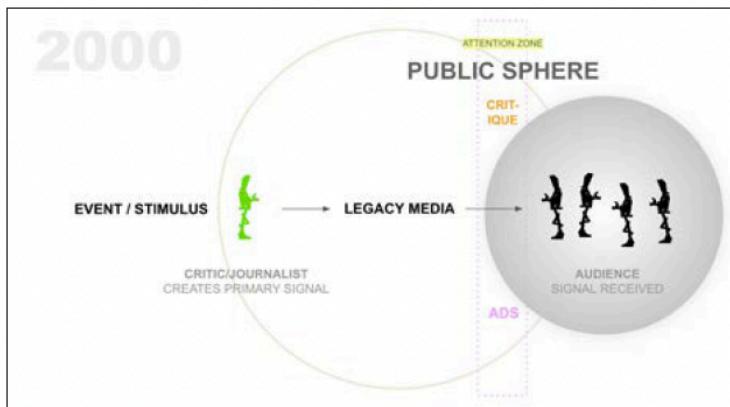
why professional journalists began spending more time on social media: a dramatic decline in journalist pay. In the 1960s, top magazines would give (adjusted for inflation) \$10/word for a premier feature. By the 1980s, Condé Nast would pay top writers (adjusted for inflation) \$6/word, meaning that a 3,000 word feature could bring in \$18,000.

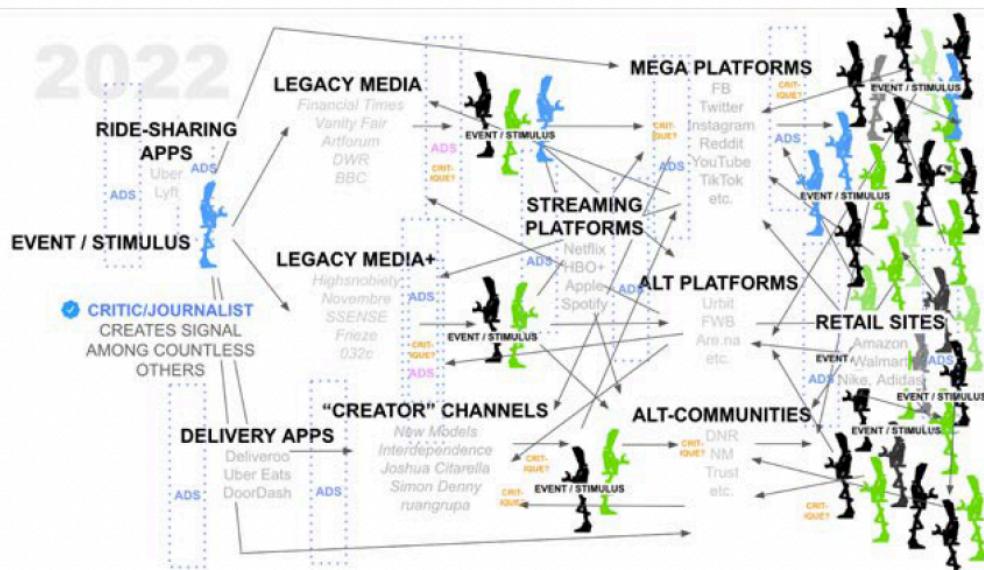
Let's say you write two major features a year. That's \$36K. And let's say you also teach as an adjunct professor, securing a combined annual income of some \$60K, a modest middle-class income, especially if you're living outside of New York or London and do not have kids. Today, top journalists publishing in the very top magazines receive about \$3/word. Most outlets pay far less. According to various articles addressing the devaluation of journalism, the going rate is about €25 per word (\$150 for 600-700 words). Many magazines, cash-strapped themselves, never actually pay, sending exclusive merch or promising list spots at high profit parties for their contributors instead. Meanwhile, the meritocratic creed that once governed professional success in academia has been hollowed out.

It used to be that "doing it for the money" was crass and writing in the name of "discourse" or because one "believed in the publication" (regardless of pay) was honorable. Following this code would lead to consideration for more secure teaching positions, editorial board seats, and other professional opportunities. But that economy, too, has changed.

In fact, over the past ten years, the entire system has broken down. In academic contexts, the pool of meritocratic rewards has dwindled. This is in part because of older generations remaining in their teaching positions longer, thereby opening fewer spaces for younger scholars; in part because institutions themselves have grown weaker in the wake of social media, so that being "validated" by these institutions is now less appealing; and in part because public funding for the arts has both contracted and been directed more narrowly toward particular social initiatives. Meanwhile, the low pay in other journalistic regions has led to a decline in quality, as good writers literally cannot afford to take on these assignments. This brain drain from the industry has resulted in weaker discourse and a pervasive sense that being a writer or journalist is not even a "real" job.

Given these changing terms, writers, looking to maximize their return on investment, started sharing their legacy media work to social media in parallel, engaging with commenters and other "blue checks" to grow the article's traction and their own algorithmic visibility—web2 platforms reward





engagement with greater exposure—in the hopes of being considered for other, more lucrative gigs.

By 2020, the flows of information, attention, and value could hardly be usefully mapped—at least, not using the linear arrangement that we started out with here. [image: chaotic slide with too many arrows]. In the coming months, we will share our work on how media structures might evolve in the near future. But for now, it suffices to say that, as media no longer functions linearly, neither can criticism.

The working title for the presentation that inspired this text was, “Do you know where you live?” We meant that in the sense that, before one can know where one stands—wo stehst du, Kollege? (where do you stand, colleague?)—one must first know where they live, and the physics for the world they inhabit.

(The line is an allusion to the 1973 painting by Jörg Immendorff, Wo stehst du mit deiner Kunst, Kollege? [Where do you stand with your art, colleague?], wherein the German painter points to the requirement to imbue one's work with political agency, rather than just aesthetic whim.)

If, so far, we aimed to establish the transition from traditional legacy (linear) to non-linear media,

we now want to consider: what happens to a piece of content or criticism as it flows through this holographic web?

As an example, let’s take the widely circulated image of two Just Stop Oil activists at London’s National Gallery. In the photograph, the activists have thrown tomato soup onto the protective glass of a painting, and superglued their hands to the museum’s wall. The painting is by Vincent van Gogh, and is the most famous of his 1888 Sunflowers series.

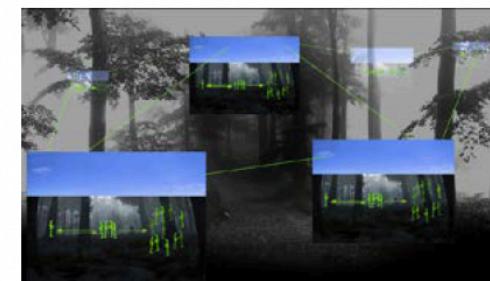
However, the Just Stop Oil action is not critiquing the painting, nor, really, accumulated wealth. Rather, it uses the iconicity of van Gogh’s Sunflowers to amplify its own public message, imbuing the message with maximally media-genic traction. Said another way, the activists are instrumentalizing (and thereby endorsing) the painting’s memetic power to fortify the visibility of their own Just Stop Oil message. We say this not to place judgment on the activists—we are asserting no opinion regarding their protest. What we find interesting is how well this scenario demonstrates the underlying truth of how criticism circulates today.

In a media system in which attention is deeply fractured,

high-recognition entities (whether iconic paintings, celebrities, or memetically significant sites) become a kind of public commons—algorithmically successful signs, capable of linking the informational/attentional silos of the largest number of users.

This principle underpins how Legacy Media and related entities have come to program their content. For instance, Beyoncé has been nominated for more than one thousand awards to date. Her awards even have their own Wikipedia page. At this point, she is the one giving credibility to the award-granting institutions. Her mere association (let alone physical presence) brings attention to these events and validates them as top-grade. Algorithmically speaking, Beyoncé is a “place.” As a hashtag or key word, she is a node for a data set that is shared by a large and diverse group of people.

In this formulation, the most “valuable” criticism for legacy media to publish is similarly that which is most likely to generate a public. In fact, legacy media has little choice but to lean into this attention/visibility dynamic so as to secure an audience (thereby validating its advertisers and sponsors its reason to exist). But we know that this is a very narrow, and ultimately



go.” Once compressed and posted, the most algorithmically successful critiques on social media act as scripts that can execute engagement. The more divisive or dramatic a critique is, the more engagement a piece of content will receive, and the more likely it is to spark a flywheel of algorithmic amplification. But compression often results in strange and unintended interpretations downstream. When an important and nuanced argument is reduced to an essentializing buzzword, it can be appropriated and redeployed to add emphasis or viral power to any unrigorous argument. We see this, for example, with the indiscriminate use of “decolonize” (e.g., calls to “decolonize Enlightenment thought,” which imply that Western powers single-handedly brought the Enlightenment into being) and in the inherent coloniality of, for example, the “LGBTQI+” gender framework when downloaded from the Anglophone-dominated cloud and applied to cultures that may already feature more fluid sexual identities,

and which did not ask for Western categories [ref]. How do you write LGBTQI+ in a non-Latin script? Let us just say: decolonizing the cloud seems like a very worthy project! Due to compression and its effects, criticism circulating on social media naturally leads to Sportpolitik—gamified debate, in which players lob essentializing and/or universalizing hot takes as a method of expressing outrage and flexing dominance over their ideological adversaries. The arena, meanwhile, is the orientation-less, timezone-less nowhere of the cloud, where the stands are filled with a numberless and often anonymous audience that is participating at will, without any real-world risk. When it comes to our Earth-bound reality, the public sphere as informed by legacy media has been downgraded. The commons we are now left with is a cloud state where nobody actually lives.

But a desire to escape these negative platform physics—and, by extension, the physics of

capital—has driven a growing sector of decentralized enclaves. [Image: migration to dark forest] Over the past five years, a vast number of channels have developed beyond the indexed “Clearnet” web. These private and/or semi-anonymous “dark forest” zones exist via platforms and apps such as Discord, WhatsApp, Telegram, Signal, and Substack, and have naturally become the online gathering places of the culture sector, from artist circles to collector/dealer networks.

But this move from “Clearnet” to “dark forest” has some challenges of its own, primarily in that it isolates communities from each other. There are not yet good pathways built among the dark forest zones. Nor does an economically sustainable model for dark forest media yet exist, one that could serve as an informational bridge among enclaves.

Amid all this undoing, cultural criticism could benefit from some re-building, particularly in regards to its own currency. Is there a way to create a signal powerful enough to have influence within the attention economy, without being warped by its physics? We think that there is. It’s a matter of prioritizing not just the generation of content but the establishment of a place; a place where people want to be after an alienating COVID lockdown spent alone in the cloud. Our project New Models is a place—a primarily virtual place, but we also devirtualize to show that the community does, indeed, physically exist.

While arts institutions are also physical places, they are typically not at liberty to move with the same

level of agility as we can—and so one of the most valuable things they can do is to support the organic dark forests that are their digital and geographic neighbors. This would mean looking for not just individual artists who fit certain bureaucratic social initiatives, but for artistic communities, which are very often organically diverse. Legacy institutions have real estate, and legacy media have the means of physical production. Connecting these resources to dark forest enclaves and helping to build physical networks among them could be one way of holding truly generative space from the cloud.

We might ask what the next era of media will be. Our hope is that we can think about communities as media; media that encourages us to find each other in physical space. By rebuilding a public sphere that is driven by communities rather than the cloud, perhaps cultural criticism can even regain the intrigue and influence it lost when it started to forget where it lived.

Text adapted from a keynote for The Future of Critique Congress at the Bundeskunsthalle Bonn, which took place on November 18th, 2022.

Caroline Busta and Lil Internet are co-founders of New Models (<https://new-models.io>), a media platform and community addressing the emergent effects of networked technology on culture. Busta was previously Editor in Chief of Texte zur Kunst, and an Associate Editor of Artforum. Lil Internet has worked as a video director (Beyoncé, Diplo, Vogue, Adidas) and music producer (Azealia Banks) and increasingly, as a pop media theorist.

Woher kommt der Strom für das Internet?

Für das Internet brauchen wir viel Strom.

Woher kommt der Strom?

Kraftwerke müssen unseren Strom erzeugen.

Viele Kraftwerke auf der Welt verbrennen dafür Kohle, Erdgas oder Öl.

Wenn Kohle, Erdgas oder Öl verbrannt wird, ist das sehr schlecht für das Klima.

Es gibt auch Solarenergie oder Windenergie und noch andere,

erneuerbare Energien. Solarenergie und Windenergie sind besser für das Klima.

2000

PUBLIC SPHERE

EVENT / STIMULUS



CRITIC/JOURNALIST
CREATES PRIMARY SIGNAL

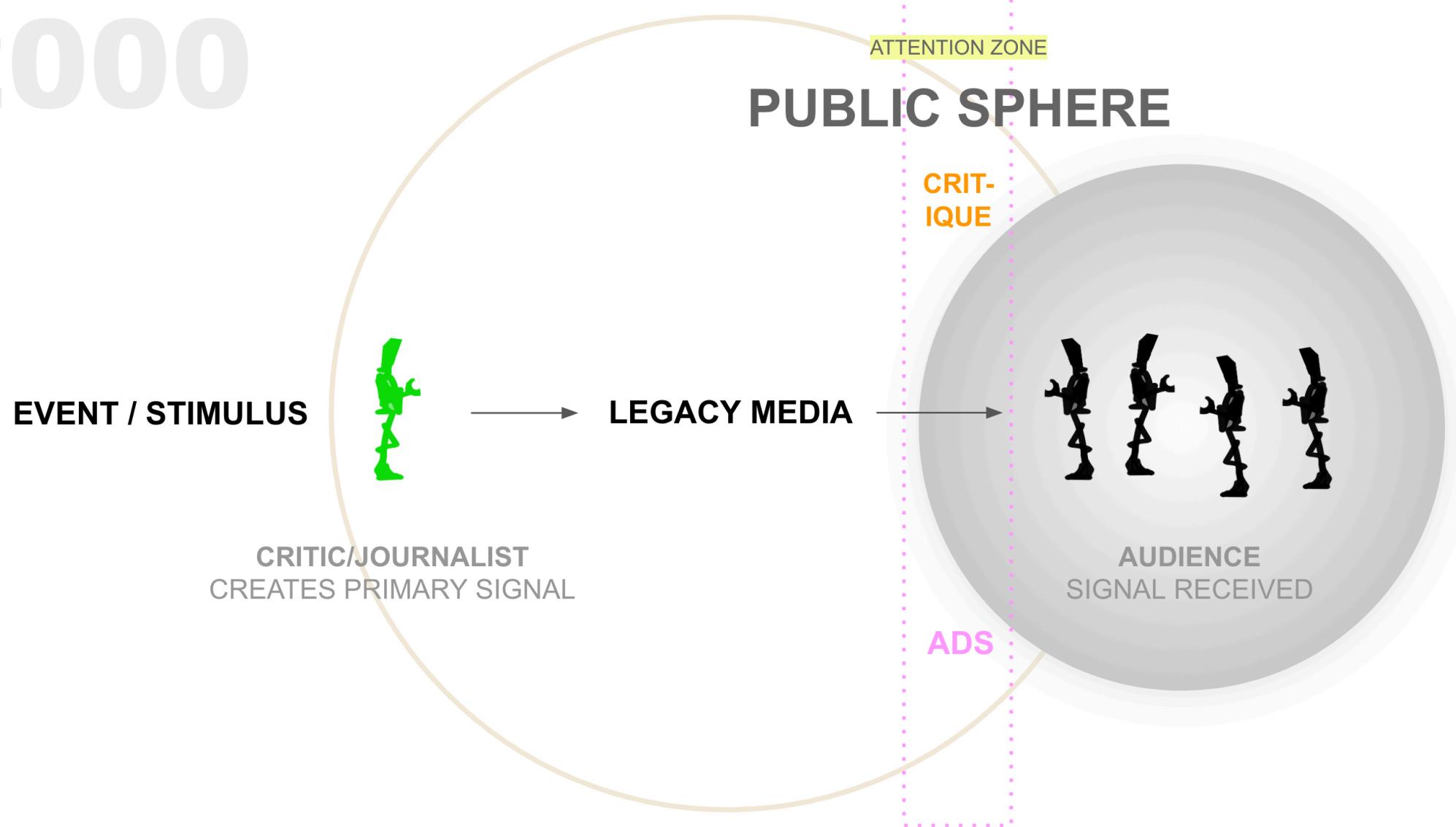
LEGACY MEDIA

*Financial Times
Village Voice
Artforum
WDR
BBC
etc.*

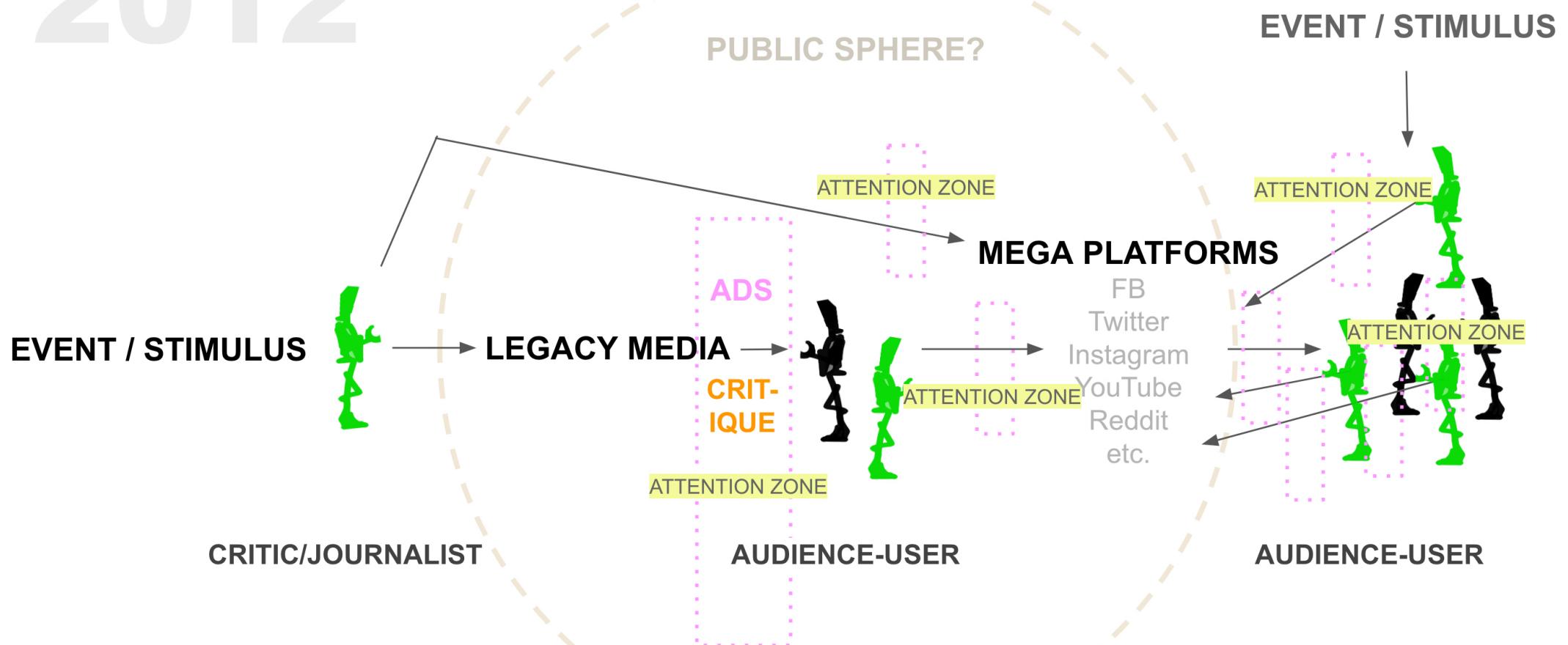


AUDIENCE
SIGNAL RECEIVED

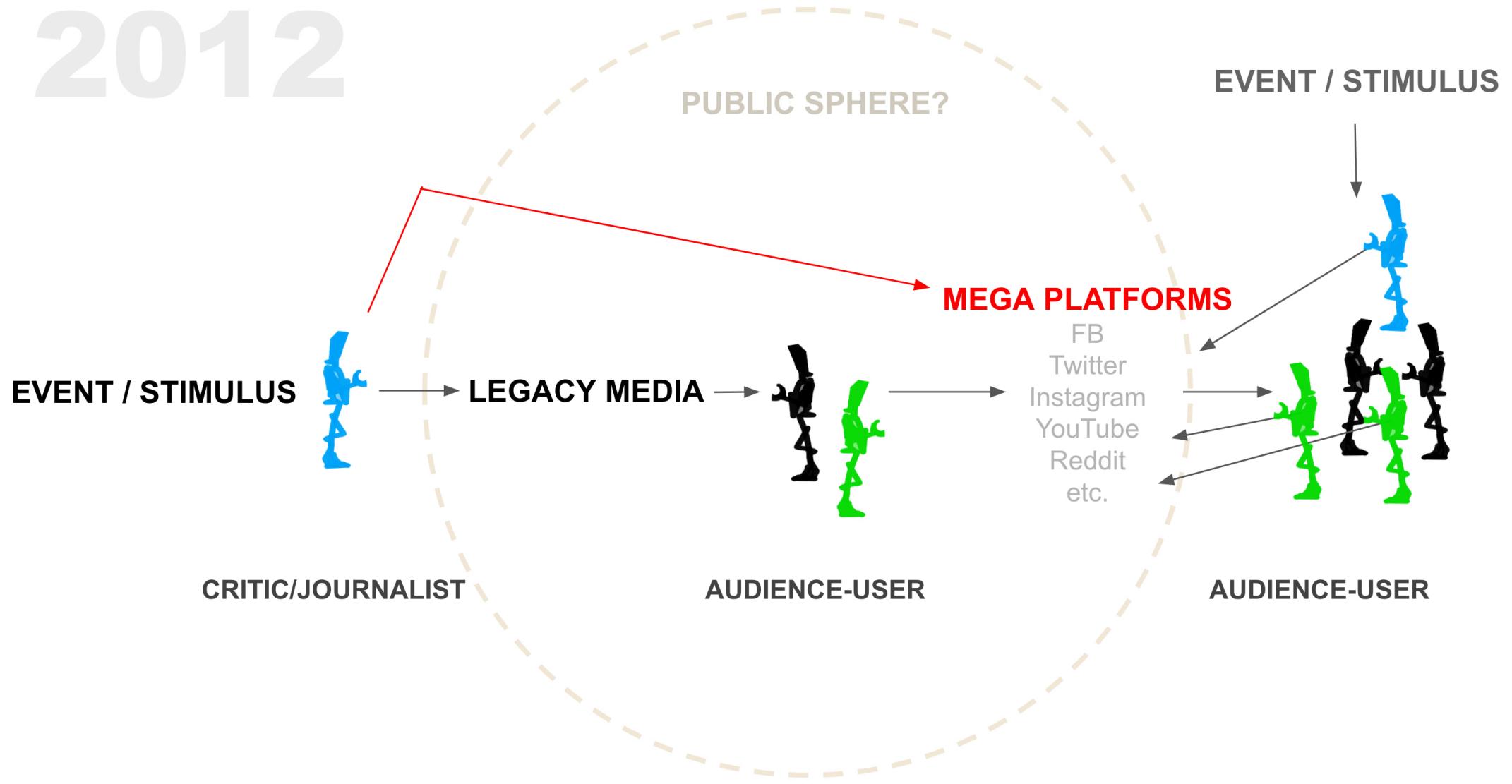
2000

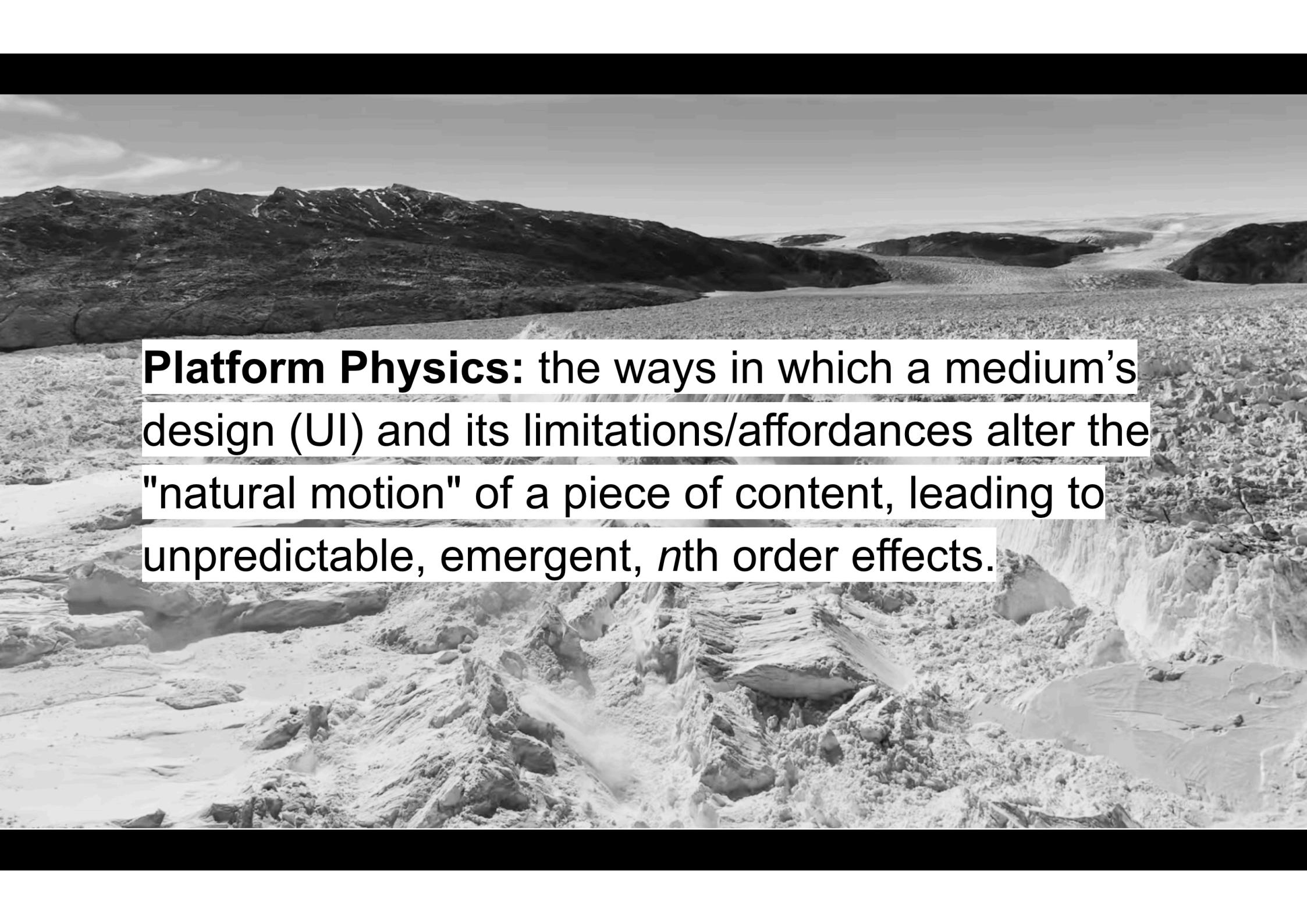


2012



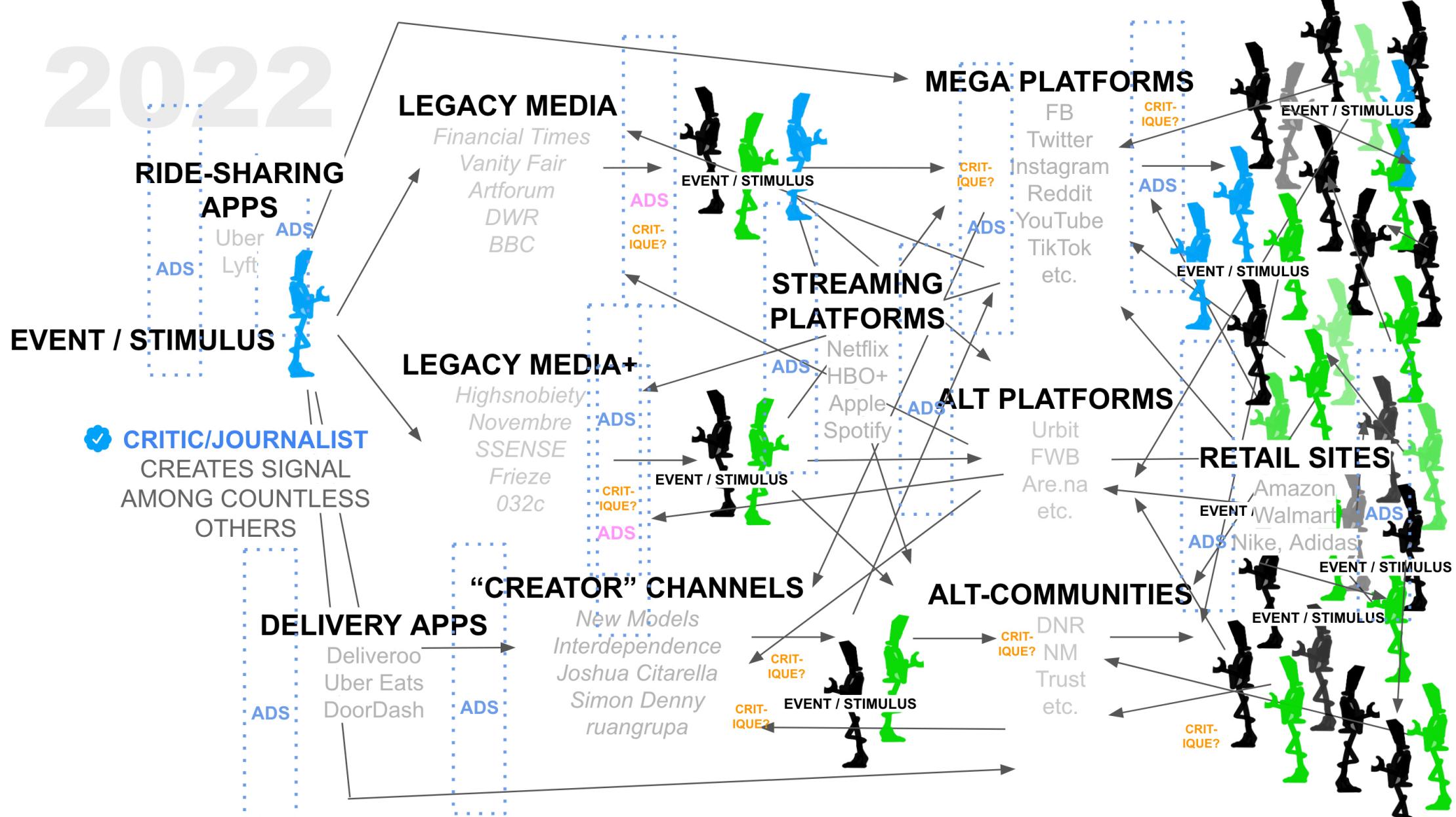
2012



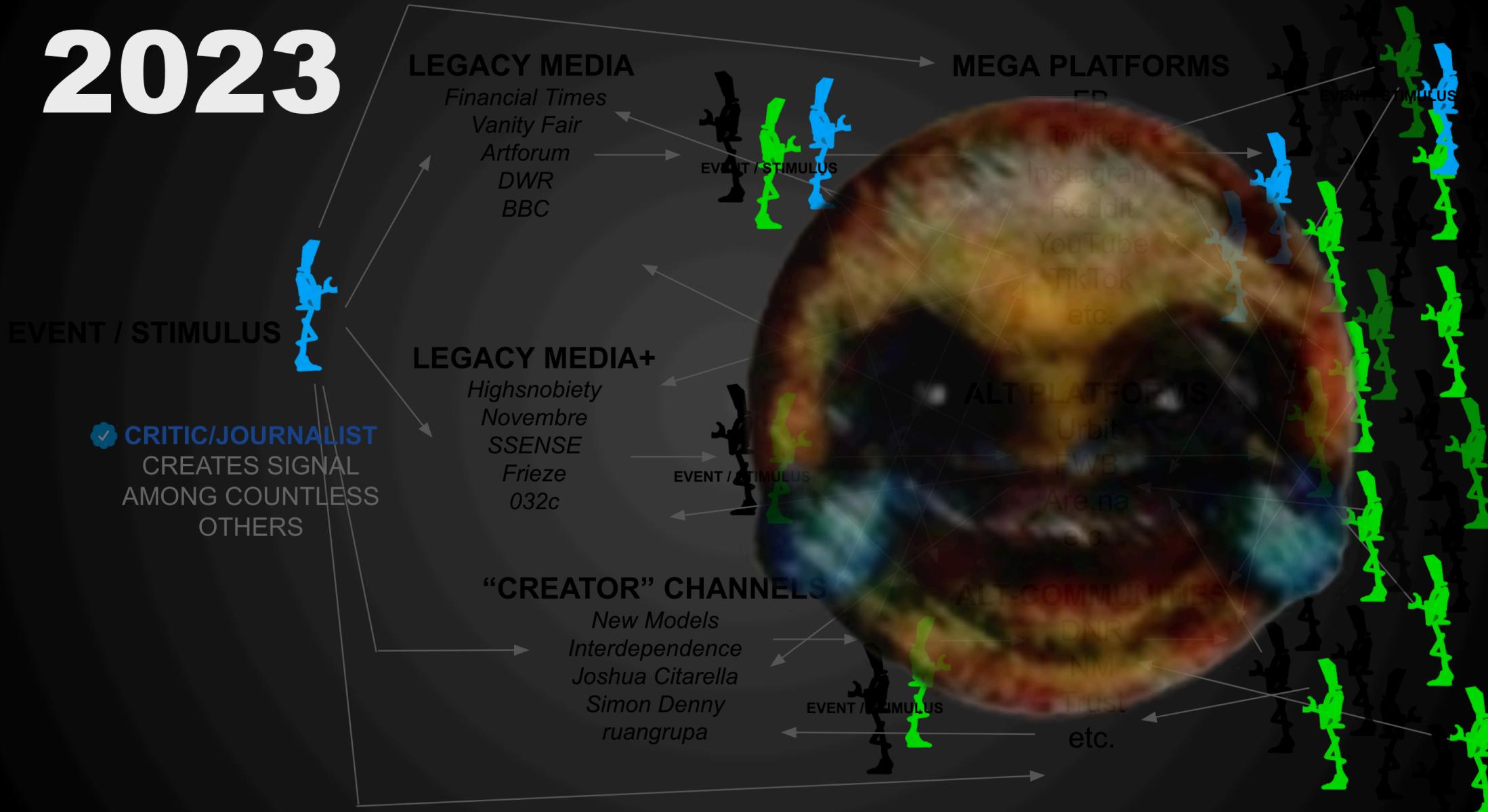


Platform Physics: the ways in which a medium's design (UI) and its limitations/affordances alter the "natural motion" of a piece of content, leading to unpredictable, emergent, *n*th order effects.

2022



2023



STIMULUS



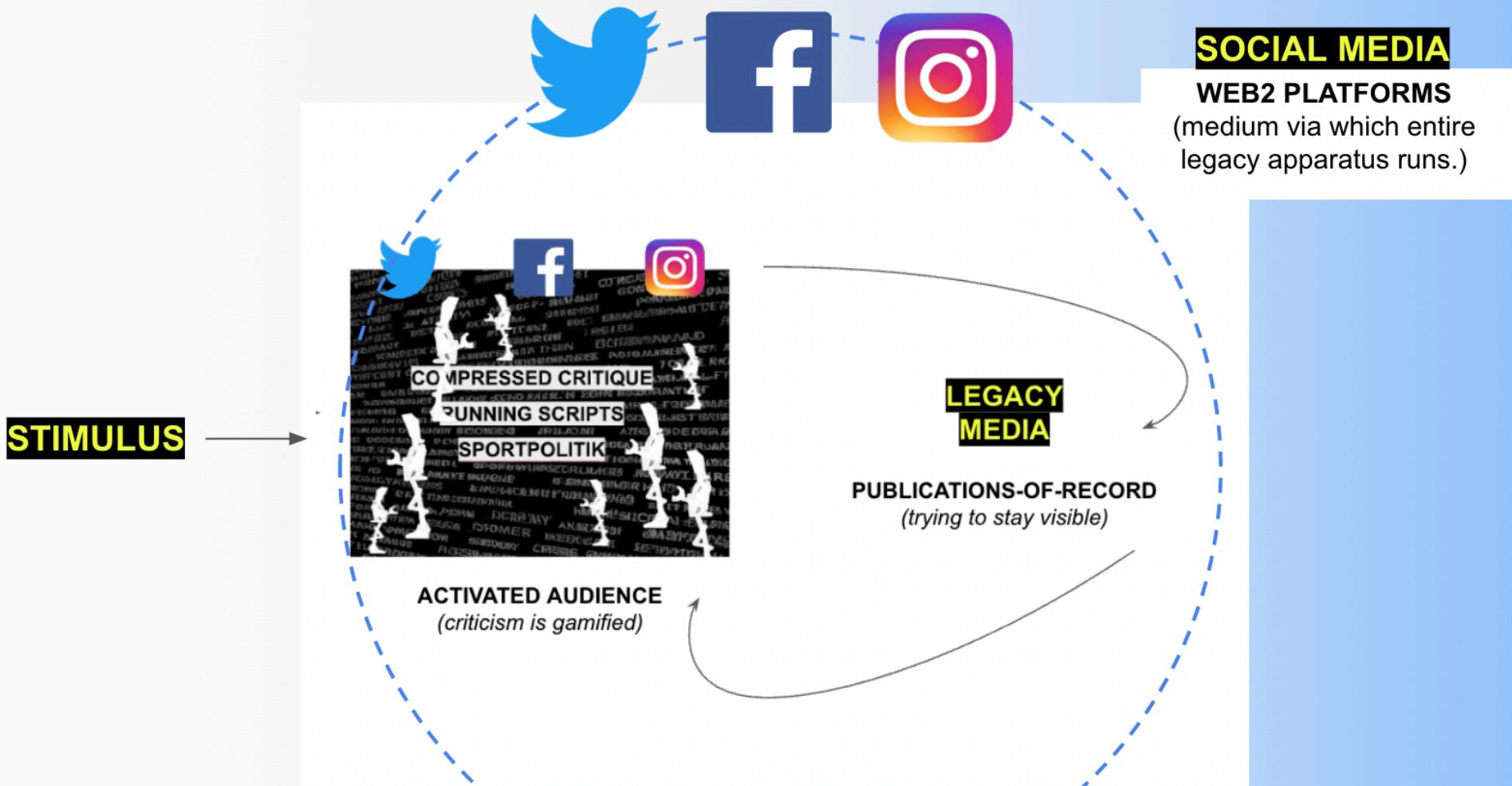
LEGACY CRITIC
(out of the loop)

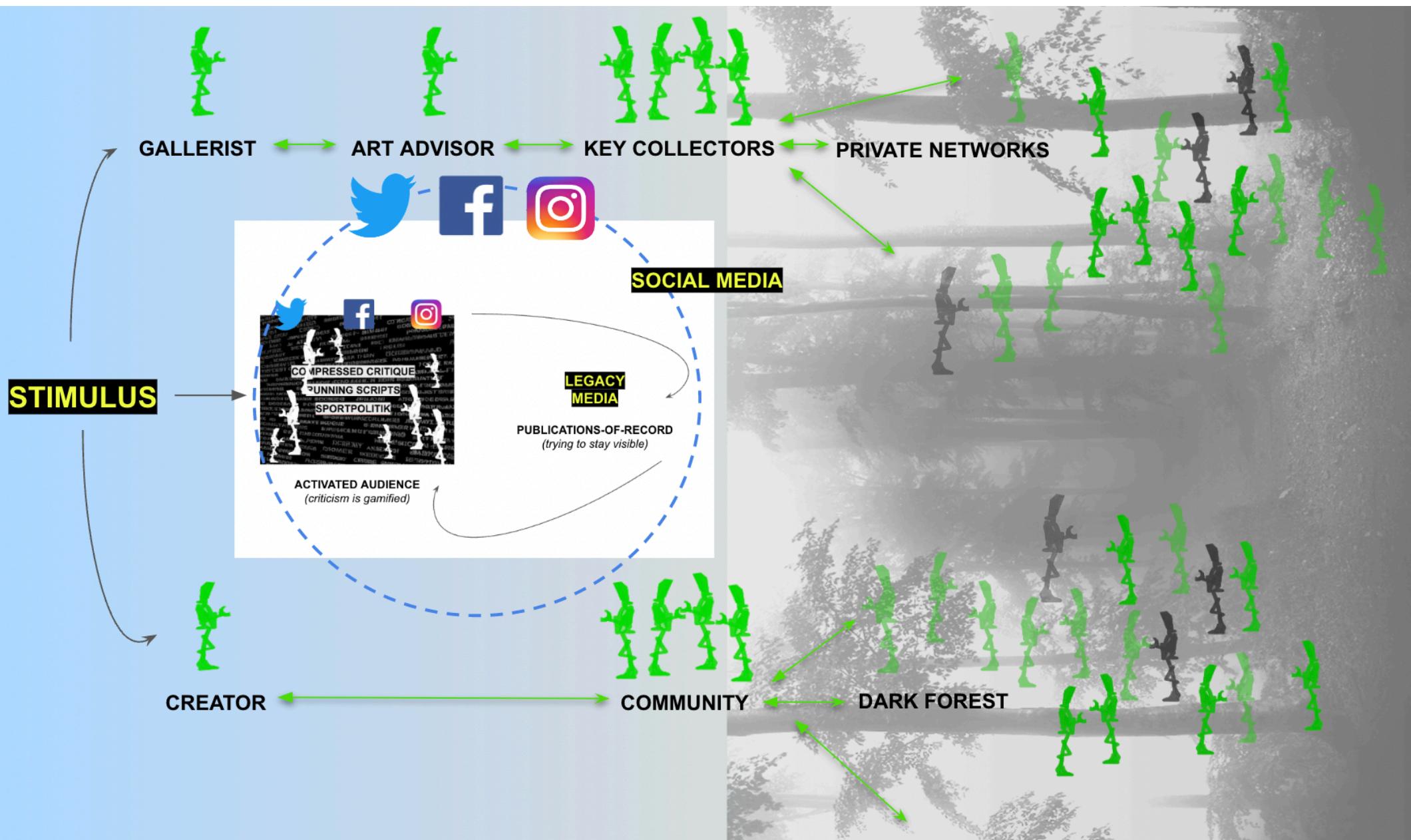


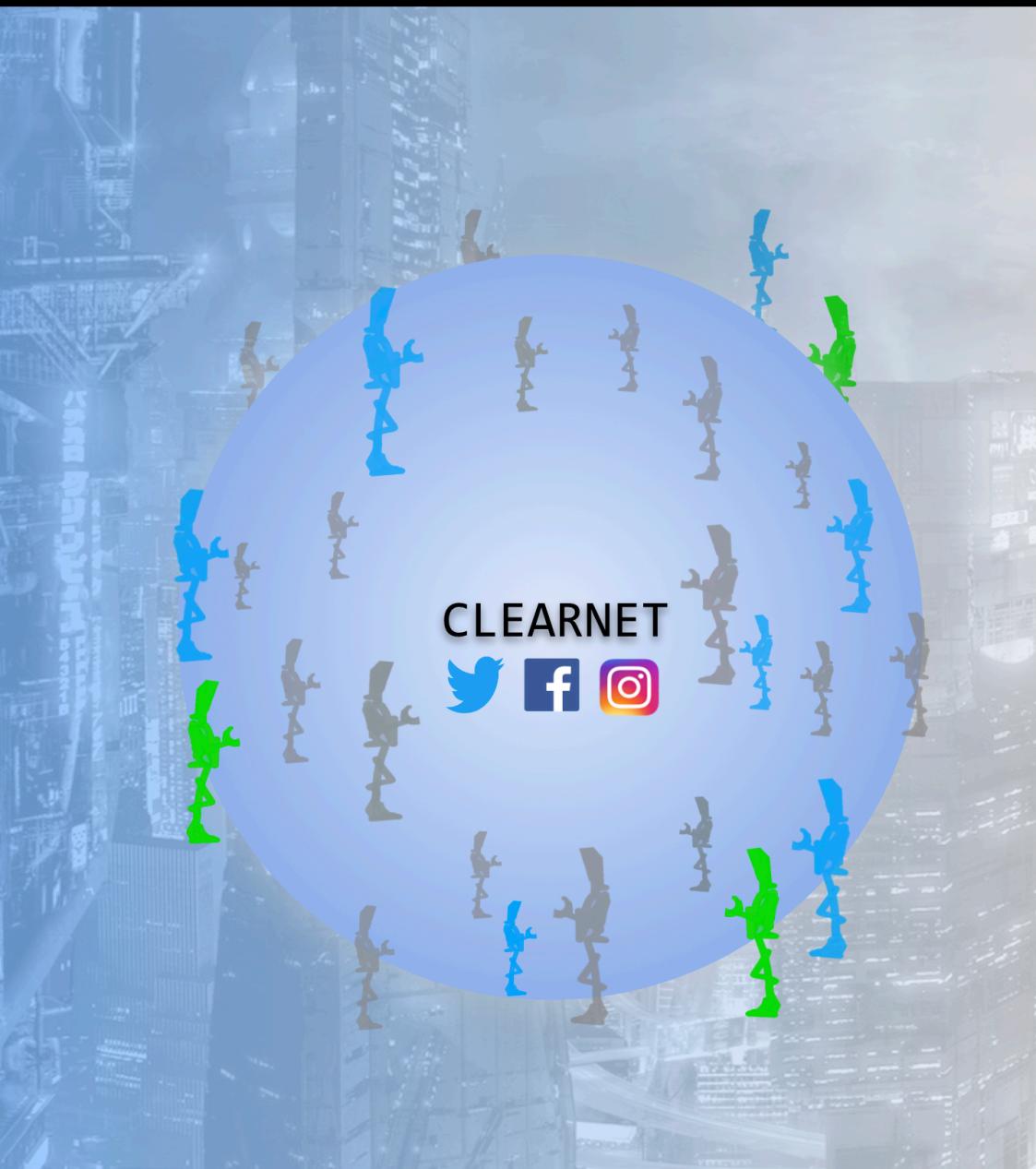
ACTIVATED AUDIENCE
(criticism is gamified)

**LEGACY
MEDIA**

PUBLICATIONS-OF-RECORD
(trying to stay visible)







CLEARNET



DARKFOREST

