

## 20:30 BRUXSELS TALKS

### FICTION AS A METHOD, FICTION AS A FORMAT, FICTION AS A SPACE FOR PARTICIPATION

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Article abstract

On the 23rd of January 2020, a radio talk show of the future, 20:30 Brussels Talks, took place in Brussels. With guests and artists from the year 2030, it discussed how the transition to a climate-proof city had happened since 2019. In this article, we present and frame the development of the show and provide insight into the participative creation process. The radio show exemplifies (a) how future fiction can be used as a tool to evoke change and (b) how the participatory development of futurist fiction can be used as a method to trigger imagination and conversation on what citizens want for our cities. We argue that there is an opportunity for researchers to explore fiction as a method, as a format and as a space. Foresight practitioners who want to create engaging stories may find inspiration in the body of knowledge of arts-based research and the arts.

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## 20:30 BRUXSELS TALKS: FICTION AS A METHOD, FICTION AS A FORMAT, FICTION AS A SPACE FOR PARTICIPATION

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**Ellen Anthoni** is a Fonds Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek funded PhD candidate of SoMeTHin'K, Social, Methodological & Theoretical Innovation/Kreative, KU Leuven. She holds a master's degree in Sociology and has a background in design. She is a (pr)academic, partly inside and partly outside of academia. She has 8 years of experience as a trend researcher, youth expert, future fantasizer and art director, and is on a mission to build better futures, based on insights in and together with the next generation. Her PhD is about "the potential of participatory futuring and futures

storytelling for change” in which she researches how to shape an urban culture in which citizens take up an active role in sustainable development processes by co-creating and spreading stories of preferable futures through the city. She is co-founder of BrusselAVenir, a non-profit organisation that makes futures stories, with and for the people of Brussels, on topics such as climate, diversity, youth and culture.

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**Jessica Schoffelen** holds a master’s degree in Criminological Sciences and a PhD degree in Audiovisual and Visual Arts. She teaches qualitative art and design research methods. She has collaborated on numerous research projects, ranging from large-scale quantitative research concerning public perception of the Belgian justice system to small scale participatory action-research concerning slow mobility. She coordinated the training program TRADERS (FP7, Marie Curie Multi-ITN) on how designers and artists can enable participation in public space. During her 12-year appointment as a researcher and teacher in the arts and design university college LUCA School of Arts, she developed strong expertise in participatory design research, interaction design, smart cities and open design processes. Currently she applies this expertise in the Research group Inclusive Society in the University Colleges Leuven-Limburg.

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respond to emerging social challenges, whilst remaining sensitive to quality control and empirical grounding. Her perspective is multimodal in nature, combining numerical, textual, sensory and/or arts-based research data to study complex social phenomena. She specializes in arts-based, place-based and multisensory designs as well as qualitative evidence synthesis as a meta-review technique.

**Abstract:** On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of January 2020, a radio talk show of the future, 20:30 Brussels Talks, took place in Brussels. With guests and artists from the year 2030, it discussed how the transition to a climate-proof city had happened since 2019. In this article, we present and frame the development of the show and provide insight into the participative creation process. The radio show exemplifies (a) how future fiction can be used as a tool to evoke change and (b) how the participatory development of futurist fiction can be used as a method to trigger imagination and conversation on what citizens want for our cities. We argue that there is an opportunity for researchers to explore fiction as a method, as a format and as a space. Foresight practitioners who want to create engaging stories may find inspiration in the body of knowledge of arts-based research and the arts.

**Note:** This article should be read in conjunction with 20:30 Brussels Talks: A Script for a Future Fiction Radio Show, in this issue, written by the same author team.

**Keywords:** experiential futures; Experiential Futures Ladder; fiction; participatory research



The diversity, multilingualism, multi-city nature and institutional complexity of Brussels, the capital of Belgium, make it an interesting lab for the exploration of futures of cities. Brussels is the most cosmopolitan city of Europe, and after Dubai, of the world (International Organization for Migration 2015). Thirty-five percent of the inhabitants of the Brussels region are foreigners and 71 percent is of foreign origin (Statistiek Vlaanderen 2020). Brussels largely represents a citizen population “in transition” (De Rynck 2018). Different migration waves have turned the previously (Dutch-French) bilingual city into a multilingual environment (Janssens 2013; Witte and Van Velthoven 2010). Brussels’s Capital Region comprises 19 municipalities, including the City Centre (called Brussels), forms an enclave in the Flemish Region and is part of both the French and the Flemish Community of Belgium, although it is separate from the Flemish Region and is part of both the French and the Flemish Community of Belgium, although it is separate from the Flemish Region and the Walloon Region. It is the capital of the European Union, hosts a number of EU institutions and is home to numerous international organisations, politicians, diplomats and civil servants. Brussels is the richest region in Belgium in terms of GDP per capita (Eurostat 2018), but despite the wealth generated there, the actual living standard for most people in the city is low. Half of those who work in the city do not live there, and one out of three Brusselèirs lives under the poverty line (Englert et al. 2019). Despite its multicultural nature, its social texture is quite fragmented into an agglomeration of unconnected bubbles. It is a region where social polarization is evident and is manifested spatially. Invisible boundaries do exist between the poor districts, the mixed neighbourhoods and the affluent areas of the city, reflecting its cultural and socio-economic patterns (Deboosere et al. 2009).

In the context described above, the team of BrusselAVenir, a non-profit organization, explores storytelling and co-creation of new myths to trigger imagination and conversation about the city of Brussels. Every six to nine months BrusselAVenir works on one particular topic. They crowdsource questions from citizens about Brussels in ten years’ time and select one question to work on. Together with citizens, entrepreneurs, experts and creatives, BrusselAVenir imagines preferable futures in answer to this question and spreads them as stories through the city. The small team from BrusselAVenir facilitates the process. For every step, they work closely together with organisations that know how to involve the different communities in the cities. The co-created stories can be positioned as experiential futures within the broad field of futures studies (see Anthoni et al. 2020). Experiential futures entail “the design of situations and stuff from the future to catalyse insight and change” (Candy and Dunagan 2017, 137).

In this article, we discuss the development of an “experiential futures” radio show, which was an event that was live broadcasted and later spread as a podcast. The

scripted show is an answer to the research question: How will everyone thrive in a climate-proof Brussels in 2030? Fiction is used in this practice in a threefold way: as a method, as a format and as a space. In the participatory process BrusselAVenir used fiction writing and role playing in a fictional future setting as methods to gather input for the show. The radio show was designed as a fictional format and transports the audience to a fictional space, Brussels in the year 2030.

## **Problem Statement and Objectives**

One of the problems in the further development of the area of experiential futures is that authors seldom document and share their process, whether due to time pressure or perhaps due to preferring that the work “speaks for itself” (Candy and Dunagan 2017). By laying out the participatory development of the radio talk show of the future in and about Brussels, we aim to exemplify how research, fiction, and radio construction are used outside of academia in a very intuitive and fast-paced way as a means to tap into societal trends, social movements and the daily concerns of people. We also aim to inspire researchers and changemakers to explore existing participatory futures methodologies to build new narratives in the form of fiction as a way to engage citizens in taking up an active role in their city. Co-developing new narratives, authentic visions, and intelligent strategies allows for a sense of natural ownership and commitment, which can lead to collective foresight with an understanding of shared challenges and a common vision for change, and can call forth commitment and action (Ramos 2006, 2017). Furthermore, the integration of experiential methods throughout the co-creation process – using techniques from improvisation, play and meditation, enhances embodied, multi-modal, and holistic explorations of futures (Kuzmanovic and Gaffney 2017). In this study, we shed light on the participatory nature of the process, providing a transparent audit trail of the approach developed to reach the stage of live broadcasting and how different voices were taken into account. We end with a critical discussion of some of the choices we made in order to inform those who wish to adopt our strategy.

## **A Participatory Approach to Creating Future Fiction**

The development of 20:30 Brussels Talks had four core phases; a conceptualisation phase, a participatory workshop phase, the design phase for the radio show and the script writing. We outline each step in the process (see Figure 1).

# Figure 1

## Timeline of the process



## Conceptualisation Phase

In March 2019, we distributed an online form and asked people on the streets what they wanted to know about the climate in Brussels in the year 2030. Out of all the crowdsourced questions, we chose one that recurred a few times and that was relevant according to the problem analysis that we had done up until then: “How will everyone thrive in a climate proof Brussels in 2030?” It is urgent for cities to transition to “green,” climate-friendly initiatives can increase inequalities (Markkanen and Kraavi 2019). The “yellow vests movement,” a protest movement for economic justice initiated in France in October 2018 and afterwards in Belgium, sparked from exactly this tension: endeavours towards ecological transition that, however, do not account for their negative impact on ordinary citizens. How can the transition towards a green city be an opportunity for all? We framed the question as a societal problem in a way that it was understandable, and accompanied it with a collage of the elements that were to be explored (Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*Collage about the research question*



First, we mapped expert and factual knowledge through desk research and by interviewing experts in the field of climate change, social justice and Brussels. We used international, national and local reports on climate change, on social inclusion, and reports on the intersection of these two, as well as resources on the specific context of Brussels and global trends that will impact Brussels. We bundled our research results in

an online article, in which we tried to make the problem understandable for the citizens of Brussels (see Figure 3).

### Figure 3

#### Extract of online research dissemination

Dear Brussels,

Let's be clear. We can't ignore it anymore. **Scientists have confirmed. Our planet is warming up.** Humans are responsible for it. **And the consequences are serious.**

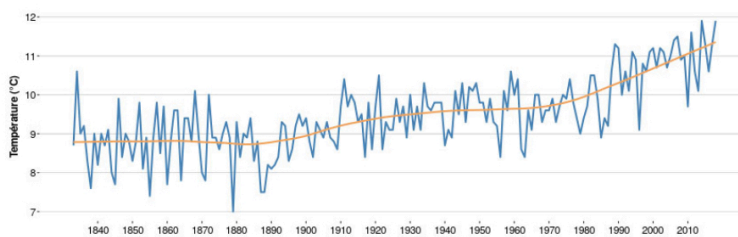
For those who are still sceptical: the proof is in the numbers, and more specifically the ones from the reports from the IPCC.

- ▼ The planet has warmed up **1° since 1880.**
- ▼ **95%** of the climate warming is caused by **human activity.**
- ▼ We can burn **1 trillion tons of carbon** before we run the risk of causing dangerous climate change.

Eh wait, **climate what?** So this doesn't have to do with recycling my trash? **This movie refreshes what it's all about...**

And what about **Belgium?**

On the Belgian climate website (FR/NL) we learn that the yearly average temperature in Ukkel is 2,3° higher than in the pre-industrial period.



☰

GLOBAL CHANGES IN ANNUAL AVERAGE • GLOBAL WARMING CH

Global Warming Changes in Annual... 1960

**Strengthen your climate ambitions!**

The people have taken to the streets in large numbers to demand more ambitious climate action from the government. As scientists, and on the basis of scientific facts, we declare: **the climate activists are right!** It is now essential to have the necessary discussions and take collective action to speed up the transition to a carbon-neutral society. As an individual, you can already make an impact by eating less meat and reducing air travel, but more than this, it is now the time to take far-reaching, structural measures in order to limit the impact of climate change on our lives and societies. Doomsaying, but in order to limit this way can we live and societies doomsaying, but

**IPCC SPECIAL REPORT ON GLOBAL WARMING • IPCC SPECIAL REPORT ON GLOBAL WARMING**

1. The Earth's temperature has risen by approximately 1°C since 1880.
2. Virtually all of the warming since 1950 is due to human activities.
3. Already we are experiencing more frequent and intense heatwaves, droughts, heavy precipitation, and sea level rise. If we continue to emit greenhouse gases at current rates, we can expect even more frequent and intense extreme weather events, and sea level rise will reach 1-2 meters by 2100.
4. It is crucial to limit global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels to avoid the most dangerous impacts of climate change. We have a limited time window to do this.

**Pathways to 1.5°C include a steep decline in coal, increased energy efficiency, the use of a wide range of technologies, and behavioural changes.**

*Locally confirm structural emissions*

*Which scientists? And are they reliable? The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is the United Nations body assessing climate change studies and providing advice. Their reports are extensively reviewed. In our humble opinion, if they are not to be trusted, who is?*

Based on the desk research, expert interviews and two Research LabAVenirs (discussed next), we published a “vision article” in the form of a short narrative of moments that take place in a week in 2030 (see Figure 4). Observations of the day are alternated with events that explain what happened in the transition towards this situation. The writing became a collage of projections of 2030 (global trends and local trends), fictive future facts, tension points and potential future solutions. It illustrated a



collective shift of values, appropriation of solidarity and support, along with drastic lifestyle changes and the transition towards them, and later served as the basis for the script writing.

## Figure 4

### *Part of the vision article*

Monday, 7 October 2030

Today marks the start of the new school semester. In recent years, overarching heat waves have made it difficult for children to go back to school, causing summer holidays to be longer than before. The heatwaves have become an incredibly disruptive and difficult problem for many people in society. The worst case was the summer of 2024, when several people, mostly the poor and elderly, died in Brussels because of them. At that time, it was said that Brussels was one of the greenest cities in Europe. Unfortunately, this was not true for everyone. A lack of green shelters and a poorly designed information system for Brussels' diverse citizens led to a series of unfortunate events that were directly caused by climate change. The city struggled to keep its basic services functioning, as foundational economy workers were among the ones who suffered the most during the heatwaves. To cope with these issues, *a socio-ecological fund was established in 2026*. The fund's first initiative was to focus on street lights. By installing infrared sensors, street lights now only turn on when someone passes by. Gradually, existing lights were also replaced with more energy efficient light bulbs. This saved a lot of money which was then injected into the fund to *support vulnerable groups by insulating their houses* throughout the city. This initiative also inadvertently contributed to *biodiversity restoration*, as more bats and owls began to visit Brussels at night. Today, throughout the city, we have *kiosks that emit cold mist during heatwaves and provide shelter* in case of excessive flooding. These kiosks are also used by local governments to *connect and interact with citizens by listening to their concerns* and providing them with information and useful tips on how to face today's challenges. This reimagining of citizenship has been crucial to combat climate change in the urban context.

## Participatory Workshop Phase: Fiction as a Method

During the conceptualisation phase, we organised two Research LabAVenirs (co-creation workshops). For the first one we had invited people from our network and experts on the topic. We presented the 13 participants the research we had done (see Figure 3) and imagined preferred scenarios for Brussels. These scenarios were further discussed with 15 citizens in the second Research LabAVenir, which was held within the context of an event on sustainability organised by a local university. Both the imagining

and the discussion happened through role-play, a way of using fiction within the research process. For the role-play we used FêteDivers, a persona tool that BrusselAVenir developed to represent the diversity of Brussels. By analysing data on Brussels – nationalities, communes, age, households, occupation and languages – we sketched 100 profiles and linked these profiles to real people. Based on an interview, we made a description of the person's daily life, his/her/their aspirations and worries, and relationships with the city and the future. Each participant of the workshop was given their own personality to read, followed by an embodiment meditation to let them empathise with their personality. Participants were then invited to express not their personal thoughts, hopes and fears, but those of their persona instead, which both created an enthusiastic dynamic and also led to more inclusive futures images, as it turned out that even for seemingly simple solutions such as riding a bike we had to take the diverse cultural backgrounds into account (not everyone is comfortable on a bike). All this input was used for the vision article (see Figure 4)

Taking into account the complex nature of the topic and our goals to disseminate this vision of Brussels 2030 to a broad audience of citizens and trigger action towards sustainable development, we aimed for a simple dissemination format for the vision. The vastness and complexity of an eco-social future had to be made understandable and relatable through storytelling. On the other hand, our research had taught us that media has a key role to play in the climate transition, so we wanted to demonstrate the role of media with the format and setting of the story. Within the team we ideated a radio talk show of the future. Radio is an inclusive medium in the sense that it is accessible for many people, and a radio show would allow us to collaborate with many people, since they could easily record themselves and deliver the recordings to us. We were also inspired by the 1938 radio broadcast of *The War of the Worlds* (Welles et al. 1938), one of the great stories of media history and an expression of an experiential future before the term even existed (Stevenson 2006). Radio is a relatively easy format for futures stories in the sense that you do not need to consider the visualisation of the future setting. Besides, it would allow us to do an offline live event, that would be live broadcasted, but could also be disseminated as a podcast afterwards. Both online and offline engagement are necessary to achieve greater and sustainable change (World Bank 2016), and having a media output that could be listened to over and over again would help us reach a bigger audience. We decided to partner up with Bruxelles Nous Appartient – Brussel Behoort Ons Toe (BNA-BBOT), an organisation that develops socio-artistic audio projects with citizens.

To gather input to design and script the show, we organised three Design LabAVenirs. The first closed workshop was with experts in media, radio, futures and climate to understand what the future holds for radio in Brussels and what eco-social radio in Brussels could mean. We used the futures triangle foresight method, a tool to

identify plausible futures, that emerge through pushing and pulling corners, representing drivers of the past and the present (Anthoni et al. 2020). We considered a multitude of mitigating factors that are likely to influence the evolution of the medium, such as contemporary industry demands, technological developments, the historical status of radio in Brussels, the local context and potential financial backing. When discussing the role of radio in the media landscape and the role of radio in Brussels in 2030, the participants brought in many interesting insights. For example, considering that the language issue and fragmentation in the city is amplified by old-fashioned media institutions and the media funding system, thinking further than existing technologies and concepts of radio could open possibilities to transcend culture and language, and make radio an intergenerational and intercultural learning tool. The participants emphasized that the diversification in, access to and interest in specialised and/or community related media channels would only grow, and that people will be drawn to listen to exactly that what they relate to. On the other hand, radio could also connect people within their own community, within the city, with the rest of the world and even with other planets. The input from this LabAVenir was used to write out the scenario for the radio show evoking the concept of the “Station Cooperation”: a platform where hyper local radio stations share topics and content, chosen with and shared by citizens, with a rotating host, spoken in a multicultural dialect or all the languages of Brussels.

The second Design LabAVenir was open, as part of a program event on the transition to a socio-ecologically sound society. 20 attendees showed up for our workshop. Again, through a role-playing game we imagined the lives of citizens of Brussels and how they would develop over the next ten years, based on our visions presented as a week in 2030 (see Figure 4) and some triggering questions. The persona tool allowed each participant to empathize with how this citizen would experience the transition to an eco-social city. At the end of the workshop, the participants performed their stories in a fictional radio set up, as their future fictional selves. A couple of fictional characters that could be invited into the radio show were brought to life. The positions of the participants were reflected in these characters and formed the basis for the storyworld of the radio show.

The third open Design LabAVenir attracted 18 participants, including experts and professionals in media, radio, futures and climate as well as citizens. We presented the work of our first workshop (the futures triangles) and did a world café to co-create the set-up, guests, audience and the content elements of a radio talk show of “Station Cooperation” on the eco-social transition. It was emphasized that the people on the show, as well as the hosts, needed to be representations of the audience, and that active participation through phone calls, surveys, social media and interviews with people on the streets was necessary. Citizens, local artists, universities, and organisations had to be content creators in collaboration with the team of curators. The



tone had to be spontaneous and humorous, and the show had to be easily accessible on all kinds of media channels. Translation apps would make it possible to listen to the show in the language of preference, although we imagined, as well, that most people in 2030 in Brussels would be bilingual. An open mic was seen as crucial, playing with sound fragments from history and the present was suggested, as well as the idea that local artists could book their own broadcast slot on the show. This input led to the actual design of 20:30 Brussels Talks: a weekly show aired on the Station Cooperation at 20:30, a live show where people could participate and watch in the studio, and would also be made available later as podcasts.

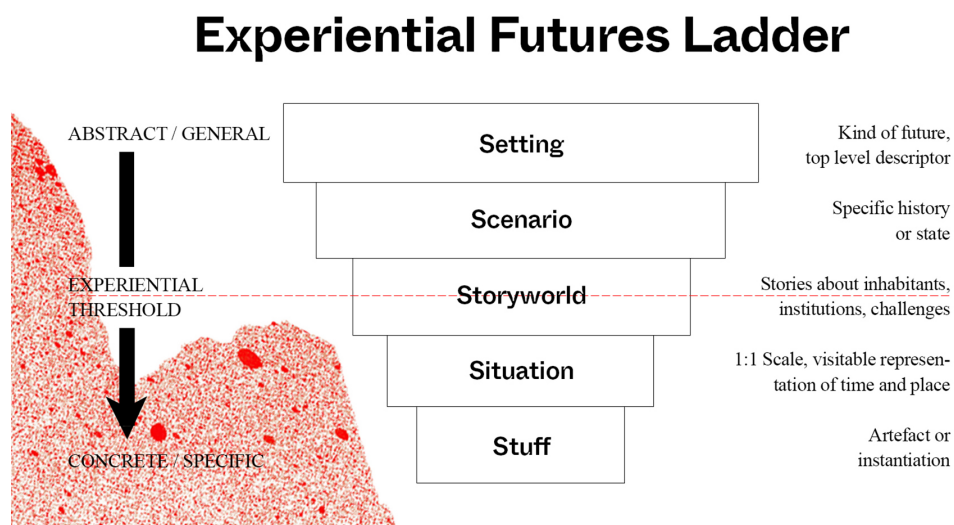
## Design and Scripting of the Radio Show: Fiction as a Format

### Design

To process the data, we collected through the workshops mentioned above and through complementary desktop research, we used the Experiential Futures Model of Time’s Up (2019), based on the Experiential Futures Ladder from Candy and Dunagan (2017). The ladder (see Figure 5) is a framework for moving from abstract concepts to concrete manifestations of futures in diverse media. Similar strategies are used in filmmaking. Science writer Steven Johnson dubbed this “the long zoom” that usefully evokes the way we must move from systems thinking at a grand scale to the detailed

**Figure 5**

*Experiential Futures Ladder after Time’s Up version (2019), based on Candy and Dunagan (2017)*



minutiae and marginalia that make up lived experience (Johnson 2006; Candy and Dunagan 2017). The ladder helped to give form to the dissemination of our visions for Brussels 2030: an eco-social radio talk show. We briefly sketch the different steps below.

**Setting.** The work of BrusselAVenir is on the future of Brussels, more specifically the Capital Region of Brussels. As a setting, the kind of futures we chose to discuss story was a near future, ten years from now, to make it more relatable for citizens.

**Scenario.** The scenario, or the specific narrative proposition and sequence of events (Candy and Dunagan 2017) was represented by the research question on the preferred future for “a climate-proof Brussels in 2030”. This formed the scenario part of the ladder. Our visions article, in the form of a week in Brussels in 2030 (see Figure 4), was the basis for the scenario. Additionally, in the three Design LabAVenirs, we dived deeper into the role of media in the transition towards an eco-social future of Brussels, since we were working towards a radio show. Below are some fragments from the scenario.

We are in Brussels in 2030. A lot of hard work has been done and Brussels has almost reached the goals that were proposed by the Paris Agreement. Besides, Brussels has put social justice at the core of their climate action planning. They made sure that the process was inclusive, by engaging a wide range of communities and stakeholders. Policy development was focused on fairness and accessibility. The benefits of the action taken is as equitably distributed as possible. All this is materialized in solutions.

...

We had never imagined so much could change in Brussels in the last ten years. It demanded a collective shift of values, appropriation of solidarity and support, along with drastic lifestyle changes. The turning point was back in 2019, when it became clear that climate change is, above all, a question of social justice.

...

Since last year, every community with its own identity has its own radio station that best represents them. However, each of these stations link to one cooperation of shared programming and a shared channel, called “The Station Cooperation”. Here they share topics and content.

**Storyworld.** Time’s Up (2019) described this level of the Experiential Futures Ladder as those moments, considerations and steps where the basic setting and the specific scenario become fictionalised with characters, widened with institutions and filled with challenges and hopes of the characters in the proposed future, written into the setting and the scenario. Based on the input from the storyworld LabAVenir (the second

Design LabAVenir), we created character sketches for the fictional characters (see the example of character development for Joséphine below). For the actors who would play their future selves, we jointly developed a future storyline for their lives. For the stories about the local institutions that we wanted to implement in the script, we gathered ideas throughout the whole participatory phase and put them in a list.

Josephine Albert was born in 1963, and is 67 years old in 2030. She lives with her partner in a small apartment in Anderlecht and has been working her whole life as cleaning lady, assistant, caretaker, often combining jobs, but now, she's retired. She suffers from a chronic illness and has financial difficulties. Luckily, she has a good relationship with her daughters, so she can rely on them. It's hard for her to think much about the future, to imagine or plan her next steps in life, because she is struggling quite a lot. Her view on climate: in general, she thinks it's good that there are initiatives that improve the quality of life of people in Brussels, and she believes that these initiatives should be there for all people in Brussels. There are too many initiatives that are expensive and only for the rich. The big climate protests are not really her thing; she thinks children should just go to school or they can protest on the weekends. Her view on Brussels: her main concern is the fact that there's a lot of inequality in Brussels, and people live in their bubble without looking at or caring about others.

**Situation.** The circumstances of encounter (Candy and Dunagan 2017) was a live radio show in the café of a Flemish cultural institution, broadcasted on the French speaking local radio, on Thursday evening at 20:30, 23<sup>rd</sup> of January 2020. We described the show as you can read below and created a storyboard.

For "20:30 Brussels Talks" on 23 January, 2030, the topic is about eco-social transition, where we scrutinise the transition of the last 10 years. It has been 10 years since Brussels Capital Region launched its programme "social cohesion meets green utopia" as part of the ambitious climate transition plan. The show takes place at Beurscafé, and will be broadcast on BX1+. Blinking lights at the door frame and a voice that says "welcome to 2030," formed a "gateway to the future."

...

You hear an AI voice curating the news from different communities in Brussels around the topic of eco-social transition.

...

The discussion is facilitated with an audio fishbowl method. There are four core guests (citizen, influencer, expert, politician), however, they can be interrupted by open mics with a beep sound. Open mics are phone calls from the people of Brussels; they can call with questions, statements or disagreements.

**Stuff/Artifacts.** “Stuff” are all of the artifacts, decorations, costumes, props, and other physical, digital, or aesthetic assets needed to execute the “situation” (Candy and Dunagan 2017). We have included both audible as well as visible stuff below, of which the latter was only seen by the audience that was present during the live show (see figures 6, 7, 8 and 9). The number of props were kept to a minimum and low cost, but they served as little hints to give the visitors the feel of being in the future. Much of the stuff was not explained explicitly, but all of it contributed to the transportation of the audience and listeners to an eco-social Brussels in 2030.

### ***Audible Stuff.***

- The jingles are made to create a real feel of a radio show, and also to highlight for BX1+ listeners that the show is not a production from them, but from BrusselAVenir and BNA-BBOT. The mood for the jingles expresses the mood of the show: voices of Brussels.

- Open mics are incoming calls from the audience in their language of choice; the objective is to get contributions from diverse audience members, and show that the enthusiasm of contributors can transcend language barriers

- Sound archives are audio fragments from the past, that help the listeners to make the connection between present and future. Sound is often overlooked as a benefit of transition and can illustrate meaningful change.

- Toby is a bot that gathers and fact checks the most important news from the different communities in Brussels.

### ***Visible Stuff.***

- At the entrance people are given the option to give consent to be filmed, or to wear a head cover or censorship glasses. Privacy issues are taken seriously in 2030.

- The organizing team wears face tape to avoid facial recognition.

- The radio show is produced carbon emission free and is made possible thanks to the audience who create energy on a stepper.

- Physical gatherings in a world of polarized voices make surveillance cameras needed in public spaces.

- There are many plants to neutralize the carbon emission of guests and audience. The organizers wear plant head pieces. Their white clothes are a symbolic sign of care for the climate and consider the albedo effect (the measure of the reflection of heat by white surfaces).

## ***Script Writing***

Designing the world for our radio show provided a good base for a coherent script. According to Ursula K. Le Guin “the touchstone to plausibility in imaginative fiction is probably coherence” (2005, para. 10) since the genre demands a suspension of belief to engage with worlds that differ from our own (Zaidi 2017). Writing the script for the radio show was only one part of the whole production phase. Script development happened in parallel with the search for and management of contributors and actors, the set and experience design, the communication about the event and the logistical preparation. The team of BrusselAVenir took the lead in script writing, proposing the script to our partner BNA-BBOT, the actors and contributors, and then implementing their feedback into the writing process.

We had to fill in the two segments of the show (before and after the break), which we linked to two different topics. The first topic was the status of the transition to a climate-proof Brussels, in which we explored which socially inclusive actions made the transition to a climate-proof city happen and what challenges were still laying ahead, starting from the transition point of the rise in climate activism in 2019. This involved the changing relationship between humans and their environment, solutions to make people’s voices heard, the evolution of climate activism, community gardening, education and transportation, and the place of futures thinking and storytelling in society. The second topic entailed the challenges in terms of inclusivity, such as a rise in climate refugees, housing issues versus health implications of temporary housing and the need for green spaces, employment policies and the role of media in the representation of newcomers.

We divided the tension points, future facts, and personal and institutional stories that we wanted to fit in over the two parts. All of these were a combination of fictional evolutions of what exists today and things we envisioned, often inspired by best practices or evolutions from somewhere else. While we really wanted to showcase a preferred future of Brussels, we had to add elements to make the whole more believable. To find actors and contributors, we contacted people from different generations, with different cultural backgrounds, having different mother tongues who had a link with the topic or radio format. Out of the 19 actors and contributors there were 2 younger than 10 years old, 2 between 10 and 20, 4 between 20 and 30, 6 between 30 and 40, 2 between 40 and 50, 1 between 50 and 60, and 2 older than 60. Eleven of them had migrant backgrounds or were foreigners; all of these eleven having another mother tongue, besides speaking one of the three official languages of Belgium. Those who were willing to act in or contribute to the show were divided over the two segments of the show. Some were cast in the debates, others in prerecorded audio fragments or artist contributions. Some actors played themselves in the future, while others played

fictional characters based on the content we had gathered during the storyworld LabAVenir. We imagined how the different characters would relate to each other, which frictions might come to surface in the debates. After sending the actors the script, we had calls with them. We told them about the future character they would play and listened to their points-of-view on the topic and the tension points and added those to the script. Bryn, for example, brought in nuance on the life of a refugee; Maya rewrote her part on the role of futures of education in society; Zaki added a lot of insights on how to lead newcomers to the labour market. We also discussed with the contributors

### Figures 6, 7, 8, and 9

*Plants on stage for Pauline Miko's performance (top), headpiece and stickers worn by the organizers (left), stepper to power the show (center), anonymity tools available for the audience (right).*



*Note.* Photos 6, 7 and 8 re-printed with permission by photographer Bram Goots.

what they could do. Some opted for an open-mic contribution, others for a science section. Some contributors wrote and recorded their contributions themselves, while others recorded what we had scripted for them. Through this process contributors and actors brought in more tension and arguments among the guests on the show, links to incidents and more contextual references.

There were two rehearsal moments to improve the fluidity of the script's dialogue and develop a time frame for each section of the show. We timed each segment of the dialogue and determined whether parts needed to be cut shorter, extended, removed, etc., to improve the overall realistic quality of the debate. During the rehearsals the actors dove into their (fictive) future selves, and we made changes to the script according to how they wanted their characters to be represented, and how their characters related to others. This way the roles got more infused with their personal beliefs and knowledge, and it gave the dialogue a more natural feel. While we did not follow any guidelines for the development of the futures aspect of the script and the show, we had agreed on a few things with the team beforehand. We did not want to be too explicit about the future setting of the show. We wanted to grab the audience's attention by presenting the future fictional show as if it was a normal radio show happening that day. We did not want to cause panic either, so we added elements that clarified the concept. References to time, events from the past, and news updates that were obviously from the future were added and repeated to remind listeners that the setting of the show was not 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2020, but 23<sup>rd</sup> of January 2030. Since the show was broadcasted live and listeners could tune in later, the title, the topic of the show and the references to the future needed to be repeated regularly. With a disclaimer at the end of each part of the show, we made clear that we were not imposing any futures and that the goal of the radio show was not to predict the future, but to trigger conversations.

As a last step, we translated the script in different languages, and added short summaries where needed. Throughout the workshops, we decided that the Station Cooperation should play an important role in dealing with the challenge of language divides and parallel cultures in Brussels and that it should be a medium where everyone could speak their own language and where the audience would be encouraged to learn new languages. We let the actors speak in their languages of preference and debate with each other as if they all understood each other. Besides French, Dutch and English, we added an open mic in Spanish. It was not made explicit, but we used the idea from the workshop that people would master the different languages enough to understand each other and that live translation devices would help when needed. The choice for a multilingual show was definitely a statement and also very defining for the outcome.



## The Show: Fiction as a Space

The full script of the show has been published in this issue as “20:30 Brussels Talks: A Script for a Future Fiction Radio Show.” The live event of the radio show (see Figure 10) was video recorded and you can watch the multilingual version with English subtitles, as shown in figure 10, here:

[https://era-av.library.ualberta.ca/media\\_objects/rb68xd280](https://era-av.library.ualberta.ca/media_objects/rb68xd280)

or listen to the podcast here:

[https://era-av.library.ualberta.ca/media\\_objects/9c67wn99q](https://era-av.library.ualberta.ca/media_objects/9c67wn99q)

On the evening of the live event, 120 people joined us in person and approximately 1000 listened to the broadcast. Later, the show was disseminated on 3 more radio stations, through a Facebook live event, via YouTube and in two parts of 45 minutes made available as podcast on Soundcloud and on the website of BrusselAVenir. We have reached more than 10000 citizens and counting. While we did a lot of communication through our own channels, we had the chance to announce the show on the day of the event on a Dutch speaking radio channel as well as on the French speaking radio station that broadcasted us live that same evening. Our partner BNA-BBOT spread the word about the show and the (re)broadcasts via their channels, and the venue where the event happened also promoted the show.

### Figure 10

*Video capturing of the full radio show on YouTube*





## Discussion

The success of the show can partly be explained through different dimensions of a co-creative process coming together – research work, a clear purpose on what we wanted to achieve, a performance in which form and content was balanced, and an audience that helped create the right atmosphere (Beck et al. 2011, 694). Based on feedback from evaluation forms, conversations with participants and audience, and internal discussions, we reflected on the many choices that we made along the way related to the role of scripting, the degree of participation and the level of boldness of the show's content, and to our goals of reaching the diverse audience of Brussels citizens.

The participatory process of BrusselAVenir, as described in this article, was a combination of methods taken from participatory futures research, participatory design, experiential futures, radio making and performance. The team of BrusselAVenir initially operated as activists, with limited awareness of the theoretical frameworks available that could support the processes. Along the way we learned about the growing field of arts-based research, research-informed theatre and community art (Beck et al. 2011, Gray et al. 2015, Taylor 2003) and we are implementing these insights into our ongoing practice. Although the core modality we chose for the show was radio, the live show in the culture house shared characteristics with performative traditions such as dramatic ethnography (Denzin 1997) and non-interactive ethnodrama (Rossiter et al. 2008, 132-139). Experiential futurists need a diverse set of skills, such as transmedia production skills and presentation skills to articulate foresight outputs into an attractive media form (Candy and Dunagan 2017). They further benefit from a transdisciplinary habit of mind. This allows them to combine radio show knowledge with knowledge frames offered in the field of research-based theatre.

To script or not to script? We had a compressed timeline to prepare and rehearse, unprofessional actors and a lot of rather technical content we wanted to share. This is why we opted for a script. The risk that actors would make coherence faults, that much of the content would not be used or be wrongly used or paraphrased, and that the timing would be hard to manage influenced this decision. Besides, the show would be live broadcasted, so potential interpretation faults would be heard by all listeners of the public radio. The impact of this choice on the dramatic structure of the play, the performers presence and physicality and the language of the performance was that the show, to some people, came across as unnatural and unspontaneous; the debates did not seem as “real” and did not achieve a level of entertainment. The little time we had for the interpretative process led to a missed opportunity to deepen

pedagogical and research commitments (Goldstein et al. 2014) and create a more engaging result.

More participatory or more professional? While the whole journey towards the radio show involved 5 co-creation workshops, most of the interpretive and creative writing work was done by the lead research team of BrusselAVenir (again because of the tight deadline). According to the three different approaches of developing research-based theater scripts, (collective, playwright-centred, and composite) (Lea, 2012), our process was a messy composite one. From the moment we started looking for actors, we decided that the show could potentially have a bigger reach if we could involve local influencers. Instead of actors, we invited artists, musicians, DJ's, opinion makers, entrepreneurs and friends of BrusselAVenir. We invited people based on what they were doing in their real lives and gave them a script inspired by them, but not fully co-created with them. Rehearsals turned into script discussions, and once we had agreed on the script there was not much time left to learn the script by heart and to own it. Ideally, we should have taken more time to immerse the actors in the topic and co-write with them. At the heart of a participatory aesthetic, both performers and audience members engage in moments of recognition, of being witnessed and validated (Snell 2013). It is through these moments of connection that participatory aesthetics are most affective (Gray et al. 2015). As Thompson (2011) says, the focus on the effectiveness of participatory projects and their social goals makes us forget that participatory projects also provide affectiveness through the art form. Involving a professional script writer, a professional director and professional radio makers could help to balance the richness and potential of a participatory aesthetic with the aesthetic of objectivity (Gray et al. 2015).

More bold or closer to our daily lives? Each step towards concreteness is both a choice and an imaginative leap. In the end we had to create a more detailed, textural, and emotionally engaging (Candy and Dunagan 2017) scripted piece with elements that were recognisable and linked to existing areas and organisations that connected the future script to the everyday life. We did get the comment that the ideas that we presented could have been bolder. Bringing in elements that shake people, or real-life interactions, could have made the script and show more exciting. The script was perceived by some as rather "politically correct," not having enough power to really disrupt people's thinking and evoke a response. BrusselAVenir wants to move people to positive action, that is why we showcased already existing alternatives and tried to sketch a bright future that seemed possible and doable rather than totally disruptive. How to achieve an optimal balance between the possible and the very imaginary should be explored further, for instance by building a stronger collaboration with experienced storytellers.

The choice to make the show multilingual was a bold one; an experiment and a statement to show that multilingualism is the norm in a hyper diverse Brussels in 2030, and that a multilingual broadcast on a French speaking radio and live from a Flemish cultural institution should be possible. Switching between different languages, made the acting manoeuvre complex, and for many people of the live show, the radio and podcast audiences, it was a challenge to follow. This should be considered in the context of maximum outreach impact.

## Conclusion

The main goal of this article was to show (a) how future fiction can be used as a tool to evoke change and, (b) how the participatory development of future fiction can be a method to trigger imagination and conversation on what we want for our cities. We believe that our example of how to use a participatory research praxis and how to disseminate findings creatively and in public can inspire other social-behavioral scientists, and by extension, all those active in the area of creative research dissemination, socially engaged artistic practice and public outreach. For futures researchers and practitioners, documenting and sharing a process of the co-creation of experiential futures, and describing intellectual and creative options, choices and rationales, is a valuable contribution to the field of futures (Candy and Dunagan, 2017).

20:30 Brussels Talks contributed to the discussion of climate change as a social issue and provided a platform for a range of perspectives and a diversity of Brussels's voices. We believe it has been a rewarding and enriching learning journey for both the 105 people who participated in the process of creating this fictional storyline and the audiences that engaged with it. For most of the participants, it was the first time they had been asked to think about the future of their city and to think about their own or the life of another citizen of Brussels in 10 years' time. Contributing to a collective creative work was enthusing for them. The fact that it was all an experiment and that the outcome was socio-artistic, created a field of play and fun. It confirms what is stated in much of existing literature: that the arts are languages through which we think, communicate, and research and that they can be employed as forms of cultural critique (Leavy 2015, Norris et al. 2020). However, the real impact of the event should best be studied and confirmed with sound evidence from high quality evaluation studies.

What we illustrated through this study is that fiction is a method, fiction is a format, and fiction is a space for the future we envision for our city. It helps us to imagine brighter worlds and sheds light on the potential pathways to follow. This process cannot replace analytical research or strategic planning, but it can help people to engage with the future of their city and to develop convincing storylines for public

outreach purposes. On how to do that effectively and increase the aesthetic merit, futurists can find inspiration in the body of knowledge written on the arts.

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