The Metaverse and what it means for the future

In early 2004, Harvard University undergraduate Mark Zuckerberg created what we now know today as Facebook. Back then it was an online student directory showing users photos and personal information to others on the page. Although originally exclusive to be used by American universities, the platforms use became more widespread throughout 2004 and 2005, expanding to be used by high schools and companies all around the world. Then in May 2006 its access became even more unrestricted when it was opened to anyone aged 13 or older with a valid email address. The parent company of this platform, formerly known as Facebook Inc., has since established a monopoly on social media also owning WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook Messenger. As the COVID-19 pandemic compelled us to use social media increasingly to keep in contact with our friends and the rest of the world, questions were raised about Facebook's responsibility and accountability of having a global dominance on social networking.

Facebook rebranded themselves at their annual conference: Facebook Connect 2021[1]. During this Zuckerberg shares his ideas about the future of the social networking and presented idea of an embodied internet which he labelled: the metaverse[2].  He even goes on to state that '*…the metaverse will be the successor to the mobile internet*[1]*.'*

In this case study, I will be exploring the metaverse and the future that Meta Platforms proposes through analysis of their keynote speech[3], posted on their website[4] and their YouTube channel[1]. I will be talking about this keynote alongside *Remediation* (Bolter, J. and Grusin, R. 2003) as an academic reference, and using their terminology; *immediacy, hypermediacy and remediation*. I have chosen this book because I believe it holds a significant relevance to Meta. Although this book was written in 2003, it theorises ideas of an embodied internet and a virtual reality: a significant feature in the technology that could be the mainstream in years to come.

In the book, the author talks about a film, *Strange Days*[5]*,* in which there is a technology called *'the wire'* in which a helmet captures, and records sensations made by the wearer's brain. Through *playback mode* and wearing the helmet, you can access and experience these recorded sensations. The helmet is explained as '*a fanciful extrapolation of contemporary virtual reality, with its goal of unmediated visual experience (Bolter, J. and Grusin, R. 2003. p.4).* From early on the authors seem to take a dystopian view of the idea of this technology by telling us that *'if the ultimate purpose of media is indeed to transfer sense experiences from one person to another, the wire threatens to make all media obsolete' (Bolter, J. and Grusin, R. 2003. p.3.).* They believe the fact that it bypasses all forms of mediation: makes it the ultimate mediating technology. This shows that they believe that the wire, or a technology like the wire, could be a threat to all other forms of media. Although this film and book were created almost 19 and 28 years ago respectively, they both represent a very similar concept to which Zuckerberg is offering today. During Facebook's 2021 Connect event, he presented his future vision for the metaverse. Zuckerberg states that *'in the next five or 10 years, a lot of this is going to be mainstream.'* He elaborates on what he means a couple minutes later into the keynote.

*You're going to be able to move across these different experiences on all kinds of different devices, sometimes using for virtual reality so you're fully immersed,*

*sometimes using augmented reality glasses so you can be present in the physical world as well, and sometimes on a computer or phone so you can quickly jump into the metaverse from existing platforms.'*

Zuckerberg has taken the idea of remediation even further as and says that you will be able to access any type of media digitally in the metaverse. He explains that you'll be able to access *'almost any type of media that can represented digitally, photos, videos, art, movies, books, games, you name it.'* You could call this the ultimate form of remediation as you are directly able to access every other form of media through one medium, the metaverse. Humanity has always been interested in the exchange of information, ever since the invention of the printing press. Along with this exchange brought immediacy, the desire for a transparent interface in which the user would no longer recognise that the contents they were interacting with were of a medium. As time has gone by, new technological advancements have showed that remediation isn't a concept that has just come into existence. It ties in with McLuhan's earlier ideas of how 'the "content' of any medium is always another medium' (McLuhan, 1964). The *content* of the telephone and radio is speech. The *content* of video-calling or FaceTime is radio and video. The content of the metaverse seems to embody the ultimate form of remediation: the ability to mediate any form of media without the user being aware they were interacting with a medium. This is opposed to the view of Bolter and Grusin: *'Although each medium promises to reform its predecessors by offering a more immediate or authentic experience, the promise of reform inevitably leads us to become aware of the new medium as a medium.'* With this, you could argue that ultimately with the contemporary VR and AR hardware you're going to be aware of the medium. But with the increased use[6] of VR and AR every year there's going to be investment into the technology, which may result in sleeker technology. For example, in early 90's, mobile phones used to be bulky with extendable antennas: harder to transport than the thin smartphones of today.

This event wasn't to solely show off their new technology and visions for the future, but to leave the Facebook name in the past and start a fresh slate with Meta. During the metaverse keynote, Zuckerberg makes it clear that *'privacy and safety need to be built into the metaverse from day one.'* Not only privacy and safety, but open standards, transparency over collection of data and interoperability are categories that were included in the keynote for this new platform. It's not surprising that he included this in the keynote as in 2020, information got leaked from an inside source that Facebook was aware of their influence on countless real-world issues. Leaks released by whistle-blower and former Facebook data product manager Frances Haugen revealing that the company were profiting off misinformation on their platform. This led to reporting on *the Facebook Files*[7] by the Wall Street Journal which revealed multiple revelations of Facebook's involvement in; human-trafficking of maids in Saudi Arabia[8]; fuelling hate crime in India[9]; and collaborating with the Vietnamese government to censor anti-state posts[10]. I wonder what's more important to Meta: moving forwards towards the future or leaving behind what's in the past. This quote from *Remediation* summarises this brand change perfectly.

*'We will argue that these new media are doing exactly what their predecessors have done: presenting themselves as refashioned and improved versions of other media (Bolter and Grusin, 2003, p.14-15).'*

What you could apply to Meta from here is the fact that they are not only presenting themselves as a new and improved Facebook: but even more than just a social media platform. They present the metaverse not only to be used socially, but for business, fitness, and education: which increases the potential reach of the platform. The data we input into this new platform will probably be different to any data we've inputted into any platform before. After the numerous times Facebook have used abused the data we share with them, should we give them even more forms of data than before? If we're potentially using the platform for multiple areas of our lives, they could potentially abuse all kinds of data. The data we input may not be the same as the Facebook of today in which inputs are determined by clicking on the interface. You could say the metaverse will be a near total state of immediacy where the interface is transparent, and the medium is so immersive that you could argue that it's unrecognisable. The way we input data into the metaverse is different to any other media we've seen before. Through the keynote, we know that they plan to track hands and voices as a way of interaction. The interactions tracked before were in the form of buttons such as like, comment, share, follow, etc. With immersive technology such as AR and VR, the categories of data they could collect is more varied than ever. Who knows what influence they could hold with a platform that aspires to have bigger goals? The effects on society could come at consequence of people's reliance on social networking, and lack of knowledge at what happens to their data after it is inputted. Marshall MacLuhan explains this in *Understanding Media.*

*'This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium-that is, of any extension of ourselves- result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology'* *(MacLuhan, 1964.p.7.)*

The extension of ourselves could represent Meta in this regard, due to it representing an extension of our live if it plays a large role. The new scale means the importance we give to it. MacLuhan means that if people rely on a specific technology and place a lot of importance in it, it will have personal and social consequences. This is obvious. But he places importance that it's the fault of the user for interacting with it in the first place.

The unique selling point of this platform, and the reason it could, is that we haven't seen augmented or virtual reality integrated into the mainstream technology of society. It's not a technology that the majority people are familiar with or have first-hand experience using. I think one of the reasons we haven't seen this yet is because the unpracticality of wearing a headset or some sort of eyewear for a prolonged amount of time. It's not a thing people are used to having to do. When mobile phones were brought out, the concept of a screen wasn't a struggle to understand as people had television and desktop computers. With the metaverse, altering what you see through some equipment attached to your head is something that society is going to have to adjust to. If Facebook made a new brand like they did with Meta but offered the same products as before: people would have less trust in the company. Whereas in this situation, I feel Facebook have made a new brand to present their brand-new technology: without having to attach this innovative and unknown potential to the already tarnished Facebook name.

I acknowledge that while there is a massive amount of potential held by Meta, VR use is increasing year by year. There are also doubts I have about the trust that people have in Meta future and the practicality of contemporary VR and AR technology- although the latter will change.

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