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## **BEHOLD THE METAVERSE: FACEBOOK'S META REVOLUTION AND THE CIRCULATION OF ELITE DISCOURSE**

Brent Lucia  
The University of Connecticut

Matthew Vetter  
Indiana University of Pennsylvania

Much of techno-optimism is shaped around notions that a free, classless society will be developed through the efforts of Big Tech. From these efforts will spring forth a revolution—much like the countercultural revolution seen in the 1960's— that will drastically shift cultural as we know it, led by technological innovations. These beliefs, referenced as the “Californian ideology” (Ferrari 2020), not only links Big Tech to nostalgic notions of “revolution” but conveniently position their corporate goals alongside a utopic vision of the future they have for their consumers. These futures are often labeled: sociotechnical imaginaries.

Facebook especially has deployed these sociotechnical imaginaries to either flatten or amplify values surrounding its company, creating impressions of the future for its own political or cultural power. Our paper examines Facebook's sociotechnical imaginary as seen within media artifacts responding to the Metaverse announcement, paying close attention to the ways in which these artifacts act as sources of amplification or criticality towards Meta's agenda. The analysis makes salient the moments where Meta's visions of revolution become amplified or deflected, raising questions not only Meta's discursive power but the role of tech journalists.

### **Zuckerberg's Metaverse Announcement**

Facebook's dominance as a social networking site (SNS) is unprecedented, having 2.8 billion monthly active users as of 2021 and ranking as the fourth most used website globally. However, the company has confronted controversies concerning user data, political manipulation, and the physiological effects of its platform. During the 2021 *Connect!* conference, Zuckerberg announced that the company changed its name to Meta and pivoted towards VR technology. This transition has been seen as a response

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to extensive reputational crises while also shifting its business model, a consistent pattern given Zuckerberg's previous entrepreneurial behavior (Kraus et al., 2022). At face value, the announcement was an indication of a new commitment to the future of virtual reality (VR), as well as a corporate branding move. However, it was also obvious that the move was strategically timed to distract attention from a series of negative events and accusations. Frances Haugen, in her role in the *Facebook Papers* case, revealed the harmful algorithms Facebook used and its handling of hate speech. Accusations against the corporation have since swirled in the following areas: the company's poor work situation (Paul, 2021), privacy and security threat to clients (Noman et al., 2019), capricious censorship practices, and inability to check misinformation (Romo, 2021; Saker and Frith, 2022; Timberg, et al., 2021; Vaidhyathan, 2018). Thus, to Kraus et al. (2022), the rebranding was "a fancy dress to distract from ingrained corporate challenges" (p. 68). Despite these challenges to the company's reputation, media scholars have recognized Zuckerberg's ability to discursively shape the public narrative, establishing visions of the future that serve to "stabiliz[e] the meaning and the potential use of the platform," and persuading the public to embrace such (corporate) visions (Hoffmann et al., 2018: 200).

Zuckerberg's promises in the announcement reinforced the company's commitment to privacy, security and connectivity, acknowledging how, "[p]rivacy and safety need to be built into the metaverse from day one" (7:45), and that the company will need to be "transparent about how things work, what data is collected, and how that data is used over time" (52:12). Zuckerberg noted how elements of privacy and protection will be up to the user, where "[y]ou'll get to decide when you want to be with other people, when you want to block someone from appearing in your space, or when you want to take a break and teleport to a private bubble to be alone" (7:45). The speech emphasized the importance of connectivity for its users and located the Metaverse as an extension of Facebook's core missions. As stated, Meta is still "the company that builds technology to connect people. And the Metaverse is the next frontier, just like social networking was when we got started." (1:09: 41).

### **Meta's Corporate Imaginary seen in Media Artifacts**

The Meta announcement reveals a common pattern among tech companies' sociotechnical imaginaries. Previous research on tech companies such as Facebook has sought to explain their often uncontested power as a result of the neo/cyber-libertarian ideologies central to the history of the Internet itself (Brown, 2015; Creech, 2020) as well as through Zuckerberg's "switching power" or ability to move between and leverage his position in multiple networks at opportune moments (Moran, 2020). While Creech (2020) takes up an analysis of discourse surrounding fake news, it his focus on "elite discourse" (van Dijk, 1993), or "the formulations and ideas that gain political currency within forums that possess an overt gatekeeping structure" (p. 957) that we respond to most directly in this paper. More specifically, we acknowledge the Metaverse announcement itself (CITE) as a type of elite discourse which functions as corporate imaginary. a discursive arrangement of what is said and not said, and how particular contours of the ensuing response are both understood and organized for audiences to consume.

The circulation of elite discourse within digital ecologies may be constantly transformed (amplified or challenged) as it is taken up in journalist circles and other more popular media genres across the web. It is within such transformations that Meta's social power ebbs and flows (Creech 2020), and how imaginaries establish themselves within popular discourse. Examining media artifacts such as op-eds, reviews, editorials, feature articles, and other reaction pieces allows us to trace how non-elite, popular discourses contend with, amplify, and/or challenge these imaginaries that uphold such power.

There are always multiple imaginaries in circulation, and these are often not only communicated by those in power but taken up by agents within a particular discourse. Such self-defining strategies by a corporate entity can never be fully established alone, are often contested, and cannot be guaranteed to circulate as intended (Sismondo, 2020). Zuckerberg's discursive constructions look to pull from and feed into a larger body of discourse surrounding the company, helping to not only situate Facebook into society but also situate society into Facebook (Hoffmann et al., 2018: 214).

### **Empowering Elite Discourse through Amplification and Critique**

This paper examines Facebook's sociotechnical imaginary as represented by media artifacts responding to the Metaverse announcement, paying attention to the ways in which these responses act as sources of amplification and criticality towards Facebook's corporate imaginary within popular media discourse. Using a method of corpus analysis, this study investigated the company's sociotechnical imaginary as it circulates in media artifacts (n=428) responding to Zuckerberg's 2021 Metaverse announcement. Analysis of how these artifacts respond to issues related to identity, privacy, security, and connectivity revealed that the majority amplify Meta's corporate messaging, empowering its elite discourse and solidifying its social power. While certain artifacts attempt to confront the prevailing narrative related to privacy, such discourse is often ineffectively rooted in cyber-libertarian ideology. In order to more effectively challenge Meta's social power, future critical discourse should be 1) more holistically deployed and 2) cognizant of the logics of surveillance capitalism and user exploitation. Ultimately, our paper considers the rhetorical strategies and functions deployed in the circulation of elite discourse, while also acknowledging the dynamism of sociotechnical imaginaries.

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