## RETHINKING TECHNOLOGY: LIFE IN & OUT OF THE METAVERSE

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Moderated by **Patricia Cohen**, Global Economics Correspondent, The New York Times

#### Overview

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the world witnessed a rapid shift to online workspaces and an increase in the use of social media to remain connected and voice concerns. This further blurred the lines between the material and the digital worlds. Enter the metaverse, a digital reality where users across the globe can interact in real-time for the purposes of business, socialization, humanitarian outreach, awareness building and much more. However, given the numerous problems enabled by social media and technology firms – including the regular collection of private user data by Facebook (Meta), the tracking of user activity outside a firm's app by Google and the theft of account login details to impersonate or steal a person's identity – the panelists acknowledged that there is good reason to be wary of all the metaverse will make possible.

The panelists attempted to ideate solutions to these problems. Topics such as how to build trust in the metaverse, how to make cyberspaces more inclusive, how to regulate and secure the metaverse without relying on the resources of governments – which may attempt surveillance themselves – as well as how to protect human integrity online were front and center in the conversation. The panelists agreed that these were core agenda items but diverged on how they could realistically be pursued. The panelists concluded that in an era of increasing complexity, where properties in the digital realm and Non-Fungible Tokens are selling for millions and complex cryptocurrencies are forming a new shadow marketspace, the metaverse will inevitably gain more importance, and thus frameworks must be established by the private sector and governments in lockstep to create a well-regulated space for personal and business activities.

## **Session Proposals**

Through the course of the deliberation, the panelists centered on three key solution frameworks that could alleviate concerns regarding the metaverse while concurrently making cyberspace a safer and more ethical environment. Ms. O'Callaghan first proposed the decentralization of the metaverse, meaning that the cyberspace should not be made to follow the norms of one parent company, especially since users worldwide have different value systems and are subject to different national laws. According to Ms. O'Callaghan, decentralizing the metaverse, as well as data itself, will promote the inclusion of marginalized groups such as youth, persons of colour and women into the metaverse and will allow communities to better regulate themselves instead of being subject to the dictates of a single technology company. This strikes us as quite abstract – a sentiment echoed by Ms. Cohen, given that the decentralization of power requires the entrenchment of an efficient support system. Communities could also suffer from decentralization given that users are usually left to fend for themselves when they encounter pressing issues online. However, Ms. O'Callaghan also highlighted the need to incorporate citizen oversight and insight into how the metaverse operates. Mr. Bozentko also recommended

the simplification of Meta's terms and conditions as a trust-building measure. Only if people understand how algorithms process their metadata and how Meta itself will govern the metaverse will they be willing to partake in this digital realm. We agree these solutions are sorely needed within the digital landscape.

Mr. Bozentko and Ms. Nagore recommended linking cybercrimes to the damages done in the material world. By linking the impact of possible crimes and violations within the metaverse to the real-world disruption of personal rights, the metaverse can operate as a digital society that recognises that digital disruptions have a very real impact on people in the physical world. The panelists were divided on how to achieve this, but Mr. Bozentko proposed that laws will have to recognise that simulated environments are part of the real world and hence, within the jurisdiction of the law. This argument doesn't circumvent the fact that a key operator in the metaverse is a company, Meta/Facebook, that has often been criticised for its breaches of user privacy. The panelists were divided on whether this measure was needed right now given that the metaverse currently was not widely used. However, assuming the increasing importance of the metaverse, a proactive approach is necessary to ensure the enshrinement of fundamental rights of users within the metaverse from (near) the beginning. As youth representatives, we support a proactive stance to digital policymaking as well as the extension of real-world laws to cyberspace, primarily because our generation uses social media the most and thus, we remain the most exposed to the issues not being addressed e.g., discrimination & harassment online, having our privacy breached by private actors, etc.

Finally, Ms. Linde recommended democratizing social media algorithms. According to her, because algorithms cater to both noble and ignoble personalities, users with opprobrious motives are empowered online. This in turn allows racism, sexism, xenophobia and other forms of digital apartheid to be practised online. By encoding the algorithms within the metaverse to promote more diverse content to users – by representing content from persons of colour, different genders, ideologies, and ethnicities – new users can be made more tolerant individuals capable of understanding cultural and personal differences, making the metaverse a more democratic and inclusive space.

## **Action Points Proposed by Global Liberal Arts Alliance Students**

Citizen Judiciary Committees. As was done in ancient Greece to promote civic participation and ensure that citizens were aware of the challenges facing their home city-states, there is now a need to create government-backed, inclusive, civilian citizen judiciary committees to deliberate and investigate events occurring within cyberspace. Social media use and presence are global and widespread, and it will be a more integral part of economic activity in the near-term. However, social media companies, like Meta, indulge in the mining of personal data from their platforms to sell to third-party businesses who use the data to more aggressively push certain views, products, and commodities onto certain communities. This targeted advertisement as well as segmentation of populations has led to a deep distrust among youth and other marginalized communities around the world. No one can dispute technology is and will be an integral part of the world we live in. Thus, the platforms themselves need to be more transparent about how they work. For this reason, we recommend setting up citizen review committees that can be selected by a country's judiciary at random to work in lockstep with the legislative branch of the government in analysing and reviewing current and future technology use laws. It is imperative

that these review committees are diverse so that the concerns of all communities can be addressed, and cyberspace can be made more inclusive in reality, not just in appearance.

The creation of a United Nations Cyberspace Affairs Commission. The panel proposed the simplification of terms & conditions as a solution to alleviate the mistrust of technology within the global community but did not offer detailed suggestions for how this could be achieved without direct action by IT companies. One possibility is that simple, short, well explained, evolving terms & conditions (for apps, services, and metaverse) and cookie policies should be a worldwide requirement for social media platforms, so as to not further erode user rights. To address this issue, we propose the creation of a new UN body dealing exclusively with cyberspace affairs and with a direct line to the UN Security Council to allow it to send resolutions that can become binding. This would allow the enforcement of the resolution laws globally and would bolster security online faster than any other multilateral diplomatic effort. A possible first resolution for this new body to consider is that if the product/service being offered online doesn't have an understandable and succinct terms & conditions contract, then it won't be allowed to launch or be used anywhere. It would be analogous to the current selling policy on the internet, for example, no matter where you are, it is illegal for non-sanctioned persons to buy fissile material.

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