THE IMPACT OF VIRTUAL REALITY AND AUGUMENTED REALITY ON STORRYTELLING. THE FUTURE OF JOURNALISM IN METAVERSE

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ABSTRACT

Metaverse or WEB 3.0 is the environment that combines elements of virtual reality, augmented reality or simply the future of the internet. The Metaverse is currently under development worldwide. It was Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg who first signaled that this is the next stage of the internet, but he is not the only one involved in building the Metaverse. Silicon Valley IT giants didn't want to miss out this opportunity and are already investing huge sums to secure their place at the forefront of the development of this new medium. Experts say this new universe will make its mark, influence and change almost every industry. In this context, we expect one of the big changes to be felt by journalists and the media industry as a whole.

We are already seeing the first steps towards immersive journalism, with journalists working in large global media organizations already using virtual and augmented reality to explain better certain stories and to attract a wider readership. This article will provide a theoretical analysis of the impact that Metaverse can have on the media industry, taking into account the technological steps currently being taken in this direction.

INTRODUCTION

The term "Metaverse" has been increasingly used since 2021, when businessman Mark Zukerberg announced that it represents the future of social networking and explained in detail what the new virtual universe entails. However, the concept is not a new one, and the term was first used by Neal Stephenson in his book "Snow Crash" in 1992. Obviously, at the time it mentioned a possible living future, now we are talking about a universe that is becoming closer and closer to the reality we all know and is becoming more and more integrated into it. Interpreting the literature to date, Josuha A. Sipper defines the Metaverse as "the virtual world in which people travel, live, and perform certain functions" (Sipper, 2022, p. xvii). In contrast, Nick Rosa sees the Metaverse as a multitude of platforms that are likely to be interconnected "offering content, experiences, and the chance to live in different virtual worlds" (Rosa, 2023, p.5). Many scholars see the Metaverse as the next level of the world wide web that will give a new dimension to social interaction and communication.

In fact, virtual reality and augmented reality are starting to be useful in everyday life. We have seen famous artists organizing concerts in the metaverse or major institutions such as the European Commission turning to virtual reality to explain the importance of virtual reality to young people. But media institutions are also slowly moving into this universe, and the first steps have been taken with the advent of immersive journalism.

FROM IMMERSIVE JOURNALISM TO METAVERSE

Experts in the field define immersive journalism as a blending of realities in the presentation of news material. For example, Uskali, Gynnild, Jones, and Sirkkunen (2020) characterize this new type of media narration by using immersive technologies such as 360-degree video, virtual reality, augmented reality. According to the cited authors it is an "experiential approach that allows users to experience, and subsequently become immersed in, stories created not in the real world but in a virtual, augmented, or mixed reality" (Uskali, Gynnild, Jones, and Sirkkunen, 2020, p. 2). Immersive journalism began to experience a meteoric rise in 2018 when in the "analytical journalism" category, The Arizona Republic and USA Today Network won the award for their explanatory material about Donald Trump's planned wall on the Mexican border. The journalists were honored for reporting that

masterfully combined text, video, podcasts and virtual reality. Incidentally, the New York Times has been using virtual reality and augmented reality since 2015, as Sarah Jones (2017) explains, and since then several media outlets have experimented with this type of journalism.

It is very clear that this type of journalism is still in its infancy, and the prospects for development are generous given the speed of innovation in digital technology. The way in which certain events can be explained has been improved so that information users can better understand the thread of certain events, as in the case of Arizona Republic and the USA Today Network.

But journalism in the metaverse means much more. As well as making news content more engaging and easier to understand, the metaverse will mean that information will reach many more journalists much more quickly, and space and time barriers can be increasingly reduced. For example, researchers at the University of Craiova's Applied Science Research Infrastructure have created an application that, using AR glasses, allows users to participate in a press conference in real time but through augmented reality. Obviously the app needs more time to develop to its true potential, but the first steps have been taken. So, probably in the not so distant future, journalists will be able to attend press conferences or press statements just through glasses, using a QR code, or the meeting will take place directly in the metaverse and they will send their avatar to collect information for a news story. This approach will make the information gathering process easier and will also reduce many costs.

Currently, small media outlets cannot afford local correspondents, and the process of sending a journalist to an external event is very expensive. With the advent of the metaverse, these costs could disappear with an initial investment in technology supporting the new generation of virtual communication. Therefore, a journalist from Craiova could attend a conference in Brussels and quickly report on the event in the European capital.

EDITORIAL MEETINGS IN THE METAVERSE

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, the daily habits of journalists have changed quite a bit. Many started working from home and only those who could not work remotely remained in the newsroom. Thus, editorial meetings no longer took place in the newsrooms at the institutions' headquarters, but in virtual newsrooms on specialized conference platforms. Even the way newsrooms were run changed radically as E. Appelgren notes that "leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic went virtual, and during the initial months of the pandemic this implied a need for managers to change" (Appelgren, 2021, p. 723). During the pandemic, all these habits became more complex and their number increased. These are the first steps taken by newsrooms towards virtual meetings, but already some publications have already taken the next step into the future and organized metaverse editorial meetings.

In South Korea, the leading economic newspaper Maeil Business Newspaper has already held its first metaverse editorial meeting and brought together editors and publishers of the media institution who broadcast from different areas. The virtual meeting took place via SK Telecom's Jump - Virtual Meetup platform and employees could use avatars of their choice. The decision was made so that editors, publishers and field reporters could understand more clearly what the metaverse is and what the virtual universal means for the future of journalism.

And they're not the only ones to take the plunge into the metaverse, media group Vice has purchased virtual space in Decentraland, a company developing part of the metaverse. The space will be used as the agency's virtual innovation lab, where teams can experiment with NFTs, DAOs and Web3.0.

This is just the beginning of this kind of interaction at newsroom level, it's very clear that big companies are now struggling to win the battle in virtual reality and building office meeting platforms using avatars. Most of them offer a variety of virtual meeting spaces, including meeting rooms of different designs and sizes or breakout spaces.

The movement towards virtual interaction in metaverse will certainly be long-lasting, and at the moment the cost for this type of technology is high, so it is not affordable for everyone, with a pair of virtual reality glasses costing around €2000.

The fact that media institutions are increasingly interested in the metaverse is evidenced by the recent move by The European Broadcasting Union (EBU) Technical Committee to set up a working group to help EBU members better understand and prepare for new forms of the technology.

ADVERTISING IN METAVERSE

Journalism will have to reinvent itself and to adapt to new technologies, primarily because the current monetization system is becoming less and less sustainable. Today, TV is attracting less and less advertising money and more and more finance is going online. As the metaverse becomes the next generation of the world wide web, media institutions must also follow the trend.

Big companies, especially in the fashion industry, have already entered the metaverse and want to play an important role in this new universe, but above all they want to be as well known in this virtual environment as they are in the real world.

As brands move into the metaverse, media institutions will also have to follow the trend. In the built metaverse we already know that ads borrow from the old school and we miss them in the form of virtual billboards, but new opportunities will arise. Major events such as concerts are currently taking place where, similar to the real world, sponsorship and promotion opportunities are arising and can generate huge profits. We will also see metaverse commerce.

 After a detailed analysis of how business can develop in the metaverse and how advertising can be monetized, Matthew Ball points out that the biggest problem could be "determining what an ad is or should be in a 3D virtual world rendered in real time - and how to set a price and how sell it" (Ball, 2022 p. 267).

Advertising, through the media, has always been based on observation, and the metaverse could change this. The current system of online advertising through ads will become much more complex in the metaverse, and ads could provide a truly breathtaking experience for users.

RISK OF FAKE NEWS IN METAVERSE

After the wave of false information that has emerged in the wake of the Covid-19 pademia and the war in Ukraine, fake news has become a global security issue. As early as 2016, Ștefan Vlăduțescu and Dan Voinea drew attention to the fact that "The major problems of the moment are how to avoid ourselves, how to fight, how to stop through sociology, psychology and techonology the fake news phenomenon" (Vlăduțescu and Voinea, 2019, p. 260). At present, the battle with fake news seems far from being won, and the emergence of new technologies could make it increasingly difficult to combat this phenomenon.

John Pavlik (2022) raises several issues and brings to the fore the risk that immersive, interactive and multisensory experiences created through virtual reality can have on news materials. He notes that it could increase users' tendency to believe that certain content is real. And this will only turn virtual reality into a tool for spreading false information that will give aspects very powerful experience that can easily be seen as credible. That is why Pavlik explains that journalists must respect ethics and deontology in the exercise of their profession and only use elements of virtual reality and augmented reality that can be added to the material they produce, not distort the truth.

At the same time, some authors believe that the solution in the fight against fake news could come with the development of technology. Analyzing the potential benefits that blockchain can bring to journalism, Dan Voinea mentions that a technological solution to a social problem could be created by making a "blockchain platform that uses artificial intelligence algorithms to classify all news and providing incentives for the general public to work as news validators". (Voinea, 2019, p. 251). And this idea has been embraced by other researchers who have proposed similar solutions.

CONCLUSIONS

With innovations in technology, the way journalists report stories from the field has begun to change, and this change will be increasingly reflected in their work in the period ahead. The development of the new metaverse will be a key point in the future of journalism, from which media industry players could reap significant benefits. The new type of journalism will transform press materials that until now could only be observed and analyzed into real experiences in which the consumer is directly involved as a participant or virtual witness in immersive narratives.

The biggest risk of using virtual reality is undoubtedly the danger of fake news. This could take on extremely high proportions because of the experiential implications it generates, which would give the impression of credibility. However, this topic will be developed in detail in future research.

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