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Ready, communicators:
Communications and public relations
in the metaverse

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Ready, communicators: Communications and public relations in the metaverse

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Abstract

As the metaverse becomes less of a niche for the tech-savvy few and more of a reality for the general public, practitioners and scholars will need to reassess their previous understandings of communications theory, tactics, and practices. This editorial discusses some of the issues presented by these new virtual environments, before suggesting opportunities and methods in which communicators can rise to these challenges. Also featured in this editorial are introductions to the theme and articles featured in this publication, as well as sincere thanks and acknowledgements to the editors and supporters without whom this issue would not have been possible.

Keywords: metaverse, virtual reality, avatars, technology, communications, public relations

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Editorial

Imagine you have the opportunity to create another version of yourself in a brand new world. How much will you keep the same? How much will you change? Will you adhere to existing social constructs, or do you try to reinvent the rules of engagement? How real do you believe this other you and alternate environment is?

These are some of the questions that we should be asking ourselves as the metaverse becomes more of a reality. By amalgamating and utilizing augmented and virtual reality technologies, the metaverse is an arena where users are given the ability to interact with other participants and enjoy experiences within networked, simulated three-dimensional environments. Through the creation of avatars, participants have the opportunity to re-invent themselves in a multitude of virtual worlds.

The implications of the metaverse for communicators are both manifold and complex. In her article, Robbins (2022) discusses the ways in which the metaverse will impact different communications streams. She posits that advertisers, marketers, and consumer brands will be able to create revenue opportunities through virtual goods and services, including attire for avatars, exclusive online events (such as virtual concerts and movies), and NFT sales and investments. Communications and public relations professionals, on the other hand, will need to understand how to effectively engage with users across and within this new reality to meet organizational and communications goals (Robbins, 2022).

What happens, however, when our understanding of user interactions or engagement in the metaverse is altered? Two separate media outlets have already written articles about women being verbally and sexually assaulted by men while testing Facebook's Meta platforms

(Euronews & Reuters, 2022; Wakefield, 2022). In one of the cases, the woman was attacked within sixty seconds of her entering the platform. To make matters worse, her perpetrators mocked her during the assault with one going so far as to say, “Don’t pretend you don’t love it” (Euronews & Reuters, 2022, para. 1).

The above incidents are disturbing for more reasons than the violence itself. What these occurrences imply is that people do not believe the metaverse to be real. As such, there appears to be a lack of desire to engage in appropriate behaviour, simply because there is a perception that there are no repercussions to be had. This assumption is unfortunately not unfounded. While Facebook did state, in response to these incidents, that they were implementing a feature that would allow users to erect a personal-space bubble around their avatars when they feel threatened (Euronews & Reuters, 2022; Wakefield, 2022), they didn’t speak of punishing the assailants.

Practitioners also need to consider the complexities of communicating in a reality where there are digital approximations of facial expressions and body language. In her article for *Psychology Today*, Segal (2021) questions the ability of users to connect empathically in the metaverse when they lack real-world context and can present fabricated versions of themselves, controlling for expressions, appearances, and surroundings. Though Wei (2021) challenges Segal’s assertion that empathy will be difficult to achieve in the metaverse, she does agree that relationships may be viewed as “potentially less authentic” because “people are not really seeing each other” (para. 5).

What then does this mean for communications practitioners and scholars? Practitioners should look to be agile, open to embracing new approaches, and willing to take some risks while navigating the metaverse. Frohlich (2022) perhaps puts it best when he asserts that practitioners should not be thinking about the metaverse as a world that mimics reality but as an “activation channel” (para. 7). With the data this new ecosystem will generate and the opportunity to practice two-way symmetrical communications and engage with users within these new contexts, practitioners are in an advantageous position to guide developments and influence policies within the metaverse, while taking their craft to new heights.

For scholars, the metaverse allows us the chance to augment and elevate our field of study. From supplementing existing integrated communications scholarship with new stakeholder identifications and “touch points” (Hallahan, 2008, p. 310), to analyzing the “behaviour and cognitive” effects of communications on metaverse personas and audiences in the situational theory of publics (Tkalac, 2008, p. 529), these new realities will encourage updated evaluations and definitions of existing communication theories.

Despite some of the challenges and complexities, the metaverse is far from a threat. By employing academically supported best practices, remaining flexible and inquisitive, and retaining a collaborative mindset and attitude, communicators are well-equipped to become thought leaders within these virtual spaces. Let us therefore strive to create versions of ourselves that will play significant and impactful roles in shaping these brand-new worlds for the better.

Articles in this Issue

Centered around the theme of sociopolitical communications, this issue of the Journal features three thought-provoking articles that address topics ranging from homelessness to digital disruption. Two articles explore the role that communications, particularly that of social media, plays in influencing perceptions and sentiment, while one article addresses the impact of digital communities on traditional industries.

Jamie Lloyd-Smith's paper on one of the most vulnerable populations in Canada – people with lived experience of homelessness – challenges readers to re-evaluate the ways in which the stories of these individuals are currently being told. Through her examination of Instagram posts by Canadian organizations that support people experiencing homelessness, she reminds us of the importance of engaging disenfranchised voices in ways that do not reinforce existing notions or unconscious biases.

Similar to how social media has allowed users to reach a global audience that was previously difficult to attain, online publishing outlets have allowed readers and writers the ability to interact with each other without the presence of a third-party editor and publisher. In her article, Elizaveta Poliakova, MA does a thorough analysis of Wattpad's vision, operating model, and governance to determine if the peer-to-peer site does in fact disrupt or threaten the existing publishing ecosystem.

Lindsay Mackenzie, MCM studies the role that social media and news reporting played in exacerbating a spike of Liquor Mart thefts in Winnipeg from August 31, 2018, to December 1, 2019. Through interviews, a questionnaire, and a content analysis of published news articles, she explores the application of the Balance Zone Theory and crisis communications tactics in relation to this social phenomenon. Her single-case case study not only has the potential of providing valuable insights to policing organizations implicated in media hypes, but also speaks to the role social media plays in crime situations.

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