**Virtual totalitarianism**

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Be it the scandals disclosed by the Facebook papers, the scrutiny over the use of algorithms by the company, the inability to combat galloping misinformation on its platforms, or the stark amorality of the company’s founder, Mark Zuckerberg, the chance to seek the metaverse has presented itself.

Enter, then, the world of Meta Platforms, aided by the virtual reality headset company Oculus, which was acquired by Facebook in 2014 for $2 billion. Astute watchers then would have been the strategy afoot at the time; most, however, thought the decision misguided and destined to flop.

The metaverse has become a goal for not just Facebook, but the likes of Unity Technologies and Epic Games, though Facebook is distinctly not interested in gaming. It can be seen to be a sort of Internet 2.0, envisaged as shared 3D spaces streaked by virtual and augmented reality (VR and AR respectively). You can access that reality via a pair of glasses or some virtual reality set and get transported to a virtual space populated by avatars. “The essence of virtual and augmented reality is that you need to have a technology that delivers this feeling of presence,” Zuckerberg mentions in an interview this year. “The sense that you are actually there with another person and all the different sensations that come with it.”

According to Facebook, the metaverse will feature a totalising system of various functions and services designed to be “the successor to the mobile internet”. There will be Horizon Home for social interactions, “the first thing you see when you put on your Quest headset.” Video conferencing and phone conversations will be replaced by Quest for Business.

For all the company’s egregious sins, this new technology will be pursued, says Andrew Bosworth, Vice President of Facebook Reality Labs and Nick Clegg, Vice President of the company’s global affairs, ‘responsibly’. In September, $50 million in research development was promised to ensure that such products met that mark, an amount somewhat piddly when compared to other areas of research the company lavishes money upon.

On November 15, there were further announcements that the Digital Wellness Lab at Boston Children’s Hospital would “focus on improving our understanding of how we can foster young people’s digital literacy and embed wellness into emerging metaverse technologies.” The children, it seems, will not be spared.

All this tells us that Facebook is moving towards its next stage of surveillance capitalism, a relentless drive towards extracting and squeezing every bit of nutriment of being that is human behaviour. The privacy of users, already tattered and battered by the predations of Facebook data privateers, can be further diminished, even as it is supposedly protected. “Metaverse technologies like VR and AR are perhaps the most data-extractive digital sensors we’re likely to invite into our homes in the next decade,” reasons Marcus Carter of the University of Sydney’s Socio-Tech Futures Lab.

Zuckerberg has spent some time contemplating the road of enthronement in the VR/AR market. The amount of money Facebook has heaped upon its VR and AR research and development division is eye watering. One estimate places it at $10 billion. Critics can at least take comfort in the fact that most of the company’s social VR/AR products to date have tended to splutter into well-deserved oblivion or flounder in ‘invite-only beta phases’.

Then there is the issue of the headsets themselves, cumbersome bits of hardware saddled across the user’s face like a harness.

None of that gets away from the sinister premise in this new company strategy. Zuckerberg and his minions seek to corporately control the metaverse, using VR and AR to identify behavioural biometrics unique to each user. Everything from body gyration to eye movement becomes fair game. “We should all be concerned about how Facebook could and will use the data collected within the metaverse,” writes virtual reality enthusiast Bree McEwan.

In truth, we should be more than concerned. Facebook’s strength of influence has been its embrace of the innocuous even as it gears up for inflicting the next societal harm. But its increasingly centralising tendencies – making the user generate a marketable portrait of usage and behaviour – will be given a further kick along with the metaverse.

With Oculus and the Facebook account linked, one headset, and one user, ever greater pools of marketized data will be generated. Work, fitness, entertainment, social choices will all become a deeper quarry to be mined and monetised by salivating wonks in a corporate enterprise.

Excerpted: ‘Totalitarian Cyber-Creep: Mark Zuckerberg in the Metaverse’

Courtesy: Counterpunch.org