

METaverse ON METaverse: REPRESENTATIONS AND THE IMPACT ON OUR OPINION

METaverso SU METaverso: RAPPRESENTAZIONI E IMPATTO SULLA NOSTRA OPINIONE

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Abstract

The appearance of new technologies recalls a set of fears and questions but also a new boost of enthusiasm, passing through multiple discourses in the surrounding: from writing to portable devices, from smartphone to WhatsApp, we are all listening to narratives waiting to move back or forth. We all remember the words of Plato, accusing writing to be just a sort of “memory boost” or medicine, not the solution but the cause of forgetfulness. These discourses, not necessarily complete or scientifically supported, precede the mass dissemination of a product or a service, welcoming them at a narrative level, discrediting or supporting the tool and all the associated practices, defining and making them desirable and meaningful, especially when these discourses intend to reach an audience made of neophytes. An example of negative discord is the clamor around device for individual listening and private music - back in the ‘80s of the last Century - mentioned as the main cause of social isolation among adolescents of the time: “Isolated from the world with headphones-rock” (here we also find an attack on a musical genre from “young”); and again, “many children infected by the new fashion” related to “expensive equipment that make you lose all contact with the surrounding environment”, whose sociological reflections are discussed in the article.

La comparsa delle nuove tecnologie richiama un insieme di paure e interrogativi ma anche una nuova spinta di entusiasmo, passando attraverso molteplici discorsi nell'intorno: dalla scrittura ai dispositivi portatili, dallo smartphone a WhatsApp, tutti ascoltiamo narrazioni in attesa di spostarsi indietro o avanti. Ricordiamo tutti le parole di Platone, che accusava la scrittura di essere solo una sorta di “stimolatore di memoria” o medicina, non la soluzione ma la causa dell'oblio. Questi discorsi, non necessariamente completi o scientificamente supportati, precedono la diffusione di massa di un prodotto o di un servizio, accogliendoli a livello narrativo, screditando o assecondando lo strumento e tutte le pratiche associate, definendoli e rendendoli desiderabili e significativi, soprattutto quando questi discorsi intendono raggiungere un pubblico fatto di neofiti. Un esempio di discordia negativa è il clamore intorno ai dispositivi per l'ascolto individuale e privato della musica - già negli anni '80 del secolo scorso - indicati come la principale causa di isolamento sociale tra gli adolescenti dell'epoca: “Isolati dal mondo con le cuffie-rock” (qui troviamo anche un attacco a un genere musicale da “giovane”); e ancora, “tanti bambini contagiati dalla nuova moda” relativa ad “attrezzature costose che fanno perdere ogni contatto con l'ambiente circostante”, le cui riflessioni sociologiche sono discusse nell'articolo.

Keywords

Metaverse; technologies; opinions; sociological reflections.

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Moral panic, acceptance, fear and enthusiasm

We have many examples often marked by the accent of moral panic (Cohen, 1970) which orients one of the most immediate responses to new elements in our everyday life. The "amplification of deviance" and the act of "social labelling" are related to the moral panic attitude, affecting the idea we are building around a theme of which we know little. «Moral panic originally described both dramatic and dramatised public reactions to youth culture from the 1960s onwards (Young, 2008). Concern for children's and youths' digital media use and its harmful consequences parallel previous moral panic over youth culture regarding, e.g. clothes, music, political opinions, drug use, and sexuality. Common to earlier historical incidents and children's and youths' digital media use now is mass media's portrayal and accentuation of a generational divide» (Seland and Hyggen, 2021, p. 133).

Our ideas are deeply influenced by the narration and the storytelling around the issues itself. The role of the representations is not just linked to the metaverse, but to every kind of human experience. If we think that a smartphone in the classroom is simply a disturbing object and we read a lot of articles or post in the main social networks we are in, we will reinforce our idea of smartphones as an energy-consuming obstacle to our teaching. If we think smartphones are a great occasion to ask students to take a stand, show what they know (from informal to formal environment) and we read newspapers, watch documentaries or television news saying it will be a boost in the classroom and will change teaching, well we will probably choose smartphone as a tool in the classroom or as a bridge to make our students participate. Images, articles, posts, tv shows, commercials, videos, newspapers, chats and informal occasions are all powerful tools to orient our opinion.

What are our reactions then? We can describe the so-called "pencil metaphor", helping us to interpret the main reactions to new technologies and devices.

The "leaders" are the first ones adopting technologies: like every early adopter they share what they have tried enthusiastically, sharing the experiences, gains and problems with colleagues. They do not fear technology at all, they try, make mistakes and try again.

The "sharp ones" observe what the "early adopters" have done, grab the best, learn from others' mistakes and make a lot of exercise and experiences after it.

The "wood" would use technology if someone would train, support, give materials and help them, but they stand still.

The "ferrules" are very pessimistic and resistant: they do not change a word of their ordinary teaching or working. We can say they are media-proof, like a nice raincoat that protects us from the rain on a moody day.

The "eraser" usually undoes all the work done by other people, especially the "early adopters" and the "sharp ones", fearing technologies or just avoiding to move on to something different.

The "hanger-on", last but not least, attend webinars and seminars, know the main information linked to technologies but just don't do anything.

The communication around the metaverse

So, what about the metaverse? The contribution reflects on the communication accompanying the metaverse, through a selection of the main images and messages that Meta circulates in Facebook participating in two orders of intents: the first is to describe the potential of the metaverse, in the technical specificities and in the gains imagined in different sectors (education, work, healthcare); the second is to reach a set of people, potentially interested, that could become users, supporters or partners of the metaverse when it will be closer to the "mass" access and consumption.

Specifically, three areas have been selected within the social campaign targeted at different audiences: the first is healthcare, the second is education, the third is agriculture.

Who are these products aimed at? To doctors, managers, present and future patients; to teachers, principals, students and families; to professionals of agricultural work but also to all of us as final consumers.

Regardless of the content of the narratives, the metaverse is addressed to all and can meet the needs of many different actors. The three areas represent, in fact, three main hubs for our society: health, education, work related to food (a very debated issue at public level, also in relation to natural disasters associated with the environmental crisis, but also the pandemic). Three essential nuclei of the life of each of us and especially of future generations.

"The metaverse will have a positive impact in the field of education, so we are helping to develop it" (this is the claim declined also for health and agriculture) and "the metaverse is a virtual space, but its impact will be real". These sentences are the pay-off of the commercial within the European campaign (edited by the international agency "Creative-X") launched in Italy from September the 5th: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NpOrHd1bZTU>.

Passing from the video campaign to the social network, the posts spread on Meta social media page describe different situations: the result is a balanced composition between people and characters/objects created digitally (obviously human beings are in the scene as a value) and brief sentences in a positive tone.

Let's see and comment on the main scenarios.

The first scenario is education (science and history classes):

- "in virtual science classes, students will learn immersively" (the background is occupied by a boy manipulating cells with other peers);
- "students will learn history in the metaverse" (the background is a meeting between students and Romans);
- "the metaverse is a virtual space, but its impact will be real" (with an "over-the-shoulder" framing, illuminating curious and smiling students);
- "and they will observe Mark Antony debating in Ancient Rome as if they were really there" (Mark Antony meets two students);
- "In the metaverse, history students will travel back in time" (five students appear to materialize as ectoplasms in front of a Roman building);
- "In the metaverse, students will learn astronomy by orbiting Saturn's rings" (a little girl travels on a spacecraft approaching Saturn).

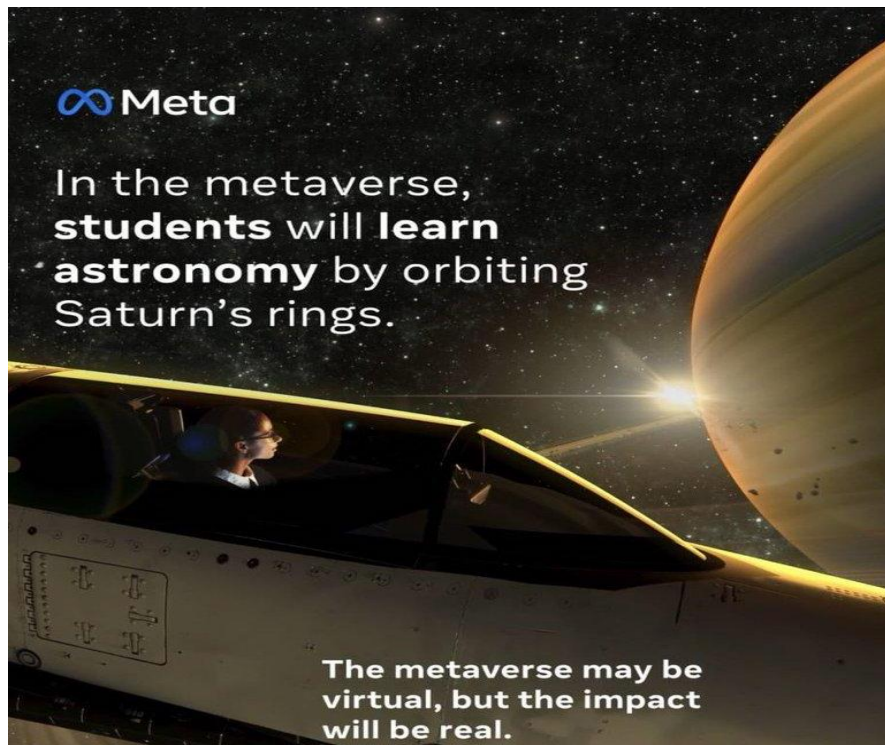


Image 1 - frame from a post on Facebook page

Immersively, as we will see, means deeply - as if we were in the situation - making learning more engaging and stimulating (picturing students as bored and school as boring). Manipulation, then, implies the possibility of acting, participating, moving objects and using practice as an important link to learning, as Gee stated (Gee, 2003) considering the idea of situated learning.

The second is the agriculture scenario:

- "in the metaverse farmers will be able to get the most out of their harvest" (here the foreground of the protagonist is followed by an image relating to the mapping of soil moisture);
- "in the metaverse farmers will be able to get the most out of their harvest using real-time data" (the farmer occupies the right side of the image with a careful look at his own field).

"Get the most out of their harvest" means to get the most out of our work, commitment, effort and struggle. But, who wants to work hard and earn little?

The third is the healthcare scenario:

- "in the metaverse surgeons can do all the necessary practice" (we see a doctor engaged in operating a virtual heart, which also returns in another image as particular).

Again, who wants to meet a doctor with no experience and no competences when in hospital? Again, the construction of the message is quite simple.

Final remarks

We can outline three main ideas.

First, the new is the old. Metaverse looks like something brand new, but of course the concept of immersivity and the impact of it is not new at all, but it looks like it is. The concept seems to come back in the front row, after having occupied many contributions dedicated to virtual reality, hybrid reality, augmented reality and in general the extended learning environment in the educational field. It is not a novelty and certainly it works also as a sort of conceptual bridge (some-

thing new but not so scary), allowing a familiar connection. Immersion means first of all ensuring a deep experience, which places us in a very engaging way (as if we were immersed in a beautiful book or movie), a condition that can be supported by the use of tools such as headsets, gloves or other peripherals (goggles, helmets, earphones, cybersuits) for a real simulation generating interaction. Kumpulainen and Mikkola (2014) define the presence of wearable devices as a central element for people involved in overcoming space-time limits and in the use of digital identities.

Second, these discourses are catchy in order to make the market more interested in the technology development and in the definition of investments: it is evident that the campaign wants to bring stakeholders to understand the advantages of the metaverse for learning, for work, for people's health. These are sponsored posts that support the metaverse by highlighting only the positive aspects. Not surprisingly, in the campaign we are discussing, they do not address gamers or to younger people, who tend to connect the metaverse to entertainment and leisure time, as already done in the previous campaigns.

Third, the fact that we are facing something "in progress" is evident: the metaverse is under construction and it is a collective effort resulting from our investments. All the sentences are in the future tense. Actions are just imagined, we simply need to believe in them.

Will students participate in a debate in Ancient Rome? Will they see Saturn's rings up close? Will they understand cell behavior through manipulation? Will doctors be able to practice from home as often as they want? Finally, will farmers be able to monitor soil quality using real-time data?

The tone is clearly celebratory and does not include the flip side of the coin related to costs, investments, tools, accessibility, real diffusion in schools, families, hospitals, labour market. If we consider the concept of digital divide, of course such an expensive system will for sure make a huge difference between schools that can afford such a cost and schools that cannot. Or between hospitals that can make a huge investment and hospitals whose doctors cannot use the metaverse to make practice. And, last, between farmers who can invest in the metaverse and farmers who work in a traditional way.

Human history related to technology is full of trials, experiments and cancelled launches. We really hope the metaverse will not be a tool for exclusion, re-proposing the gap between who can and who cannot. The discussion of the main posts is not intended to make a political statement: we are not assuming the metaverse is evil, but we think we need to focus on how media representations can orient or influence our ideas on the metaverse.

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