

Chapter 9

Potential Threats: Extremism and Terrorism in the Metaverse

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ABSTRACT

Throughout history, terrorism has adeptly leveraged technological advancements to further its ominous objectives. As societies have evolved, so too have the methods employed by extremists. From the early utilization of print media to spread propaganda, to the more recent harnessing of social media platforms for recruitment and radicalization, terrorist groups have consistently exploited the cutting edge of available technology. Now, with the dawn of the Metaverse, terrorism is about to be at another pivotal intersection. This digital realm, characterized by immersive virtual environments and complex interactivity, offers a new frontier for these malevolent actors. The metaverse not only provides concealed platforms for communication and coordination, but also introduces potential grounds for training, recruitment, and even virtual staging of attacks. As we venture deeper into this digital epoch, it's imperative that we remain vigilant, recognizing that as technology advances, so too will the tactics of those intent on using it for harm.

INTRODUCTION

The world is about to live a completely virtual life through “The Metaverse”, a kind of universe where human interactions are undertaken neither face-to-face nor digitally, but in ways that combine properties of the real, physical world with properties of the internet and smart technology, adding to them other elements. The result would be a new world, or, to be more accurate, new worlds, this boundless landscapes and anonymity could offer a haven for radical ideologies and extremist activities.

Each of these new worlds in the Metaverse would try hard to distinguish itself from the other worlds by promoting difference and uniqueness, in order to present itself as the best and most successful type of models. They would have its own citizens, constitution, and laws which have nothing to do with the laws of the real world. As a result, it would fall a prey to extremism, which would, consequently, give rise to new forms of religious fanaticism, chauvinism and racism.

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Even worse, people with radical ideas and beliefs may join hands, forming groups that would practice cult-like rituals in temples that would be founded by the members of these groups, in such a situation, radicalism looms large; inhabitants of the metaverse are more than likely to adopt extremist patterns of thinking, or even become terrorists.

Furthermore, the metaverse's darker corners might evolve in ways reminiscent of today's dark web. As people grapple with virtual addictions and as digital theft, fraud, and harassment manifest in novel forms, there's an increased risk that extremist organizations would exploit these platforms. Especially worrisome is the potential for terror outfits with ideological and religious motivations to employ the metaverse as a recruiting ground, communication hub, and even a training camp for real-world atrocities.

In the light of the foregoing, this chapter sheds light on the metaverse as a concept, with special focus on the ways in which extremist and terrorist organizations would use it for purposes of communicating, recruiting, financing and training, in an attempt to raise awareness of the potential dangers of the metaverse so that they can be avoided.

This chapter is a desktop research study, seeks to explore the potential uses of the metaverse by extremists and terrorists, this could be through defining the concept of the metaverse first, then exploring the possible applications for the extremists and terrorists in the metaverse, with a focus of the most likely uses for the terrorist groups.

The Definition of the Metaverse

In Connect 2021, the Facebook annual conference for the year 2021, Mark Zuckerberg announced that he has changed the name of his company to Meta (Connect, 2021), thus revolutionizing the world's largest social network and adopting a new strategy based on what can be called 'the metaverse industry'. Just like Alphabet became the parent company of Google, Facebook became one of the companies that Meta owns. As a result of the outbreak of COVID19, the internet gained more importance as the main means of communication in the areas of education, work, medicine, shopping, etc., which stimulated much thinking about the future of the internet in general as well as about the future of human communication, which mostly takes place in cyberspace, through social networks. Questions arose about future developments in human communication and developments in the nature and usage of the internet. One of the most important questions asked at that time was: will it be possible for humans to be transferred to the internet so that they can inhabit it instead of watching it through computers and smart phones? If the answer was yes, what kind of technology would be used for fulfilling this purpose? These questions, among others, were associated with the feeling that internet needs to be revolutionized.

As for the term 'Metaverse', it was first used by Neal Stephenson in the sci-fi novel *Snow Crash* (1992) (Levy & Stephenson, 2022). The word combines 'Meta', Facebook's new name which means 'beyond', with 'verse', short for 'universe', to denote a universe beyond the world we know and live in.

It is interesting that Stephenson uses the term pejoratively as a reference to the virtual world owned by despotic companies that enslave the end users of technology, which is not far from the truth of technology companies, which regard their clients as commodities.

However, it is worth noting that Zuckerberg was not the first to develop the metaverse technology. In fact, this technology had been around before Zuckerberg came up with the name. One of its most famous examples is the augmented-reality game called *Pokemon Go*, which can be considered a prototype of the metaverse (Patel, 2021).

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