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Editorial: Metaverse Futures: Policy, Power, and the Digital Media Landscape

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Abstract

As corporations, brands and digital platforms increasingly invest in these interconnected spaces, the metaverse is fast becoming a major field for content creation, engagement and commercialisation. At the same time these transformations raise pressing questions about governance, regulatory oversight and power relations within emerging digital ecosystems and markets. This Special Issue of the '*Journal of Digital Media & Policy*' explores the importance of intersections of digital media, policy and the metaverse. The contributions assesses how digital media industries structures participation, govern virtual environments and monetise user engagement through immersive marketing, influencer cultures and data-driven strategies. By bringing together interdisciplinary perspectives, the issue highlights the rising need for regulatory frameworks capable of balancing technological innovation with transparency, accountability, and user agency in rapidly expanding metaverse landscape.

Key Words: Metaverse; Digital Media Policy; Platform Governance; Virtual Environment; Data Privacy; Algorithmic Targeting; Immersive Technologies; Digital Economy; Consumer Protectionism; AI-Generated Identities

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The unfolding of the metaverse marks a novel phase in the development of digital media, where immersive technologies such as augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR) and artificial intelligence (AI), and mixed reality (MR) (Zhang *et al.* 2023; Dey *et al.* 2025), which are reshaping the way communication, participation, and economic activity unfold in virtual environments (Anidjar *et al.* 2023). While prior discourse around the metaverse has regularly been framed around the technological innovation and economic opportunity, scholars are increasingly developing arguments in the areas of governance, regulatory and ethical challenges related with these emerging virtual ecosystems. Specifically new policy concerns about data governance user safety market concentration and cross-border jurisdiction have been raised by the convergence of immersive interfaces platform economies and algorithmic decision systems (Dwivedi *et al.* 2022; Lee *et al.* 2023). Existing media and communication regulatory frameworks that were created for traditional online platforms are made more difficult by the metaverses blurring of the lines between physical and digital spaces (Mystakidis 2022). In persistent and highly interactive virtual environments issues like identity management privacy protection intellectual property rights and the moderation of harmful or misleading content become much more complicated (Park and Kim 2022; Ning *et al.* 2021). Concerns regarding digital inequality platform governance and the concentration of power among powerful technology companies are also brought up by the growing commercialization of immersive platforms (Kshetri and Dwivedi 2023). These advancements highlight the critical need for interdisciplinary policy research that can direct ethical management of the developing metaverse ecosystem.

Basing on digital media policy view, the metaverse represents not merely a technological development but a transformation of the media ecosystem in which communication, identity formation and exchange economics are embedded in (Leibowicz 2025). Further to this, immersive environments extend the datafication processes already characteristic of platform-based media systems by capturing granular biometric and behavioural data generated through spatial interaction, gestures, and sensory engagement (Martini 2025). In the same vein, the metaverse is being shaped by powerful technology corporations and global platform infrastructures which develop participation, ownership and monetisation within these environments. Governance of the virtual worlds shows broader tensions between corporate platform power, state regulatory authority, and user agency (Yang *et al.* 2024). Against this backdrop, the metaverse should be viewed not as a technological innovation, but as an evolving socio-technical ecosystem shaped by competing interests among governments, technology corporations, civil society and users.

The governments and regulatory bodies are seriously looking into and start working to tackle the implications of immersive digital environments that is operating across national boundaries and legal jurisdictions (Ning *et al.* 2021). There are several questions which are surrounding around digital identities, taxation on virtual assets, intellectual property protection and the regulation of virtual economies which is highlighting the complexity of managing and governing the online worlds (Kshetri and Dwivedi 2023). Civil society organizations and user communities have also become important stakeholders in this debate, and they are advocating for inclusive design, data protection and ethical governance structures within 3D immersive platforms (Mystakidis 2022).

However, on the other hand the metaverse should be viewed not just as a technological innovation, but as an evolving socio-technical ecosystems which are shaped by competing interests among governments, technology corporations, civil societies and users. In these organisations governance arrangements are being determined by whether these virtual environments are developed as an open, collaborative spaces or highly centralized and controlled digital domains.

Therefore, special issue seeks to advance major critical debates on the governance of digital media in the metaverse by examining the political, institutional and regulatory dynamics shaping these emerging spaces. Collectively, the issue highlights the urgent need for policy framework capable of balancing technological innovation with transparency, accountability, and equitable participation in the evolving metaverse landscape.

The opening contribution by Ahmed Samir Hammad and Sherif Attia Badran explores the challenges arising from the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in the public sectors of health, education, justice, and the finance/administration within the Arab context, specifically Egypt and Bahrain. The research examines the factors of transparency and trust in AI systems and their use within an authority that was long considered the exclusive domain of the state, which held a mandate to manage these areas from its citizens. Results indicate that, despite specialists' awareness of the potential and risks of using AI, they continue to use it to enhance decision-making efficiency. The research also reveals an aspect of illegitimacy within this framework related to clarity, transparency, and ethical responsibility.

Complementing this perspective, Jaércio da Silva and Cécile Méadel focuses on how the metaverse's promise of immersion is being actualised in cultural and creative industries through extended reality technologies. Following Meta's 2021 rebranding and the subsequent retreat of metaverse discourse, we analyse how XR creations persist through alternative pathways. Their analysis reveals that market consolidation relies on three distinct yet interdependent audiences: lead users who experiment with emerging technologies, professional intermediaries who legitimize and circulate works, and the public targeted through Location-Based Entertainment venues. The article contributes to understanding how cultural industries navigate technological uncertainty, constructing markets through iterative experimentation rather than established business models, revealing broader tensions between artistic ambition, technical constraints, and economic sustainability in digital cultural production.

From a policy perspective, Sandra Alvaro and Aranzazu Pérez-Indaverea they argue that video games are among the main entry points to the Metaverse and offer a glimpse of its possible realisation, thereby serving as a useful arena for discussing and anticipating policy frameworks. They analyse three well-known and diverse metaversal games, Fortnite, Minecraft, and Guild Wars 2, at two levels. At the surface, the analysis focuses on the narratives that unfold across interaction while transmitting values and shaping the gamer's subjectivities in forms that transcend the game arena. From a humanities perspective on Metaverse policy, this article considers metaversal games as potential participatory spaces for collectively proposing a more ethical and diverse Metaverse.

Unlike previous contributions, Vincenzo De Masi, Ernestina Xinyi Zhu, Andrea Nanetti and JIN Xuetao, examines how major platforms, including Tencent, ByteDance, Baidu, and NetEase, integrate AI-driven avatars, spatial interfaces, and synthetic media into environments that remain accountable to national laws on cybersecurity, personal data protection, and algorithmic governance. Adopting a qualitative, multi-layered methodology that combines policy document analysis, platform case studies, and interpretive media analysis, their study shows how virtual identity, biometric data, and immersive advertising are managed within a framework designed to balance economic growth with cultural and political stability.

Offering a different perspective, Uriah Baleja, Kalani Rajapakshe-Pathirannehelage, Tariq Alsafi Francis Chukwuedo Achi evaluate the readiness of Saudi Arabia's intellectual property (IP) framework to protect retail brands operating within metaverse environments. Guided by an interpretivist paradigm and employing doctrinal-comparative legal analysis, their research examines Saudi IP statutes, Vision 2030 policy documents, and international IP conventions alongside thirty-three peer-reviewed articles on metaverse marketing and brand law. The study proposes a dual-moderator conceptual framework in which IP principles moderate the relationship between brand equity and consumer trust, while legal protection mechanisms moderate risk exposure and sustain brand value.

In contrast, Chenjerai Muchenje, Wilbert Manyanga and Nkanyiso Kaizer Ndlovu highlight the transformative potential of immersive technologies in reshaping Africa's marketing ecosystems while foregrounding the risks posed by their unregulated expansion. Their findings reveal a dual trajectory with the metaverse promising economic growth, enhanced market access, and the stimulation of local creativity and raises serious concerns around consumer exploitation, digital dependency, data sovereignty erosion, and cultural homogenisation. Governance mapping highlights Africa's uneven engagement in global digital policymaking, with limited influence in shaping international standards despite isolated areas of progress.

Brighton Nyagadza, Abu Bashar, Eugene Tafadzwa Maziriri, and Tamer Alkadash assess how brands increasingly exploit behavioural data generated in virtual and immersive spaces to personalise experiences, push user options, and deploy subtle forms of manipulation. They outline the methods through which behavioural, biometric, and interaction-level data are harvested and translated into predictive marketing strategies, highlighting the rising opacity and influence asymmetries inherent to virtual spaces. They contribute to original insights by bridging digital marketing, behavioural economics, and cyber-regulation to articulate a coherent framework for the responsible use of data in rapidly changing virtual environments.

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