



ENGAGING IN THE  
METAVERSE, NFTS, AI,  
AND NEW TECHNOLOGY

**2022**

*Annual Perspective*

# MAP OF THE CONTRIBUTIONS



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# INTRODUCTION

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PRCA GLOBAL ETHICS COUNCIL  
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[Mary Beth West on Twitter](#)



Without question, the implications of digital-technology development, marketing, utilisation, and data-collection practices present a veritable “Wild West” of communications-ethics conflicts, quagmires, and ambiguities for management teams and the public relations strategists who serve within them.

All too often, PR teams are not even included – much less well-integrated – into strategic-development conversations about how digital platforms and technologies will be conceived, coded, programmed, and managed for delivery in the marketplace.

Consequently, PR practitioners are often left with the unenviable task of not only playing reactive custodial-service to crises that befall companies having made inherently bad ethics decisions tied to their digital offerings, but also with the compounded challenge of PR teams often lacking the requisite vocabulary and awareness of core issues fundamental to the technologies at hand.

That situation needs to change.

But in order for it to change, we as an industry must *know what we don’t know* and forge change for ourselves by getting educated and interjecting our voices, insights, and reputation-management value propositions more authoritatively across senior-management disciplines on technology issues and opportunities.

In March 2022, Stanford University published *The 2022 AI Index: Industrialisation of AI and Mounting Ethical Concerns* (Daniel Zhang, Jack Clark, and Ray Perrault), which noted that “research on fairness and transparency in AI has exploded since 2014, with a fivefold increase in publications on related topics over the past four years”.

However, despite widespread interest and concern about AI ethics issues, legal regulation is lagging far behind the need for compliance in the space.

This situation portends only escalating urgency for the PR function to serve as a voice of well-informed conscience on digital-tech matters, in balanced service to the public and end-users – and not simply to the profit motives of employers and clients.

The PRCA Ethics Council urges the full gamut of the PR industry to embrace new areas of learning, awareness, and strategic consideration tied to the ethics of AI and how communications technology might be manipulated in ways that risk violating stakeholder trust and brand reputation.

This year’s Annual Perspective is a great place to start, and we thank our colleagues across the world who contributed essays for this edition.

# MIKE ABEL MPRCA

FOUNDING PARTNER AND CEO,  
M&C SAATCHI GROUP SOUTH AFRICA

[Mike Abel on Twitter](#)



## THE POWER NOW SITS WITH YOU, USE IT WISELY

The Metaverse will provide a global platform for brands to engage with their audiences at any time, whether it’s to entertain, educate, engage, or SELL. We’re on the exciting precipice of an entire global shift in regard to how we operate as an industry, creating new routes to market, and distribution solutions.

Breaking down terrestrial borders in favour of an open virtual world, real-time engagement on a global scale, and harnessing data to better segment messaging will greatly impact the industry. But, as with any shift in how (and where) we operate and communicate, a void opens in terms of regulation, policy, and security requirements. Just like in real life.

It is here that our responsibility sits, ensuring we have the checks and balances in place to ensure that this new environment we create for engagement is one led with ethical and considered practices.

The key ethical challenge – and opportunity – could be the topic of data and the use thereof. The speed of adoption and access to the Metaverse now creates a rapidly expanding pool of data and we need to ensure that this is kept in a respectful, safe, and healthy way. Rights and licensing, targeted interactions, and the power to influence individuals through subliminal messaging are a few ethical concerns created from the sheer magnitude of the data available.

To tap into the benefits of this decentralised open access world, we need to first have our checks and balances in place, including:

- Increase in vetting
- Increase in data security
- Increase of verified sources
- Engagement guidelines.

Without a doubt, there remains a solid ethical need for your activity to be deliberate and strategic, and not as a leveraged trend for a short-term goal. This, coupled with good governance policies and a globally accepted best practice within this new space, has the power to open the industry up ten-fold. The power now sits with you, use it wisely.

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[Khaled AlShehhi on Twitter](#)

**MARKETING ETHICS  
IN THE METAVERSE**

Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems “understand” and shape a lot of what happens in our lives. AI applications answer questions when we call out our digital voice assistant. They run the chatbots that handle our customer-service issues. They help diagnose cancer and other conditions. They help us navigate traffic and reach our destination. They shape what goes into our newsfeeds and video choices. They can “read” our emotions. They write news stories, paint like Van Gogh, and create music that sounds like the Beatles.

They should be driven by human needs, making people’s lives better, but not everyone is convinced we’re headed in the right direction. Last June, Pew Research Center and Elon University’s Imagining the Internet Center released the results of a survey of 600 experts about where they thought efforts aimed at ethical artificial intelligence design would stand in the year 2030. The majority (68%) of technology innovators, developers, business and policy leaders, researchers, and activists didn’t expect the development of AI systems in the next decade to be driven by ethics and the public good.

Instead, they see the rapidly advancing AI ecosystem being developed and dominated by businesses seeking to compete and maximise profits and by governments seeking to compete, surveil, and exert control. Indeed, ethical behaviours and outcomes are extremely difficult to define, implement, and enforce. At the very least, an ethical framework for the application of AI would include transparency, justice and fairness, privacy, freedom and human autonomy, beneficence and non-maleficence, freedom, trust, sustainability, and dignity.

The alternate reality of the Metaverse complicates things further. In this searchable, clickable, and machine-readable digital copy of the world, communicators will have a whole virtual universe to create immersive, 3D experiences for the companies and brands they represent. On top of the digital data they already have access to, they’ll be able to track body movement, brainwaves, and physiological responses through XR and IoT devices like VR headsets, AR glasses, and AI-enabled devices.

The technology is not without danger. Deepfakes, data leaks, and cyber-attacks could all damage a brand and its customers. Augmented, Virtual and Hyper Reality can induce negative physical response. At best, users can get motion sickness, but a sensory overload can trigger seizures in people who suffer from epilepsy. Age restrictions need to be in place, as with other forms of communications. Talking of protection, you can’t get more personal than biometric data, which XR devices already collect. Its security is a primary concern. Marketers in the Metaverse will need strong cybersecurity to avoid data scandals and manipulation of brands. They’ll have to avoid deepfakes, hacked avatars, and manipulated objects, all forms of malicious behaviour that can damage brand reputations.

Marketers need to anticipate these issues and consider privacy, ethics, and safety issues for the emerging and immersive realities. Companies must prepare themselves for the Metaverse by developing best practices to guide ethical decision-making. Best practices should include how marketing companies respect consumer data, how to respond to misinformation attacks, along with what type of technologies and experiences to use in the Metaverse. In a world where seeing is no longer believing, the only way to establish and retain trust is via ethics, accountability, transparency, and human-centric design.

**ELOÏNE BARRY MPRCA**  
**CEO, AFRICAN MEDIA AGENCY**

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**WHERE DOES YOUR ETHICAL  
COMPASS POINT TO?**

We need to take a broader, philosophical view of how we might apply ethical practice when considering both the dangers and potential of the Metaverse and other emerging technology. Simply, the challenge here isn’t the technology itself, but our wider perception of ethical PR. Where does your ethical compass point to? If you inherently work with a strong sense of ethics on a daily basis across all your different audiences, whether it’s with journalists, government officials, and clients, then the opportunity is clear for PR practitioners.

Embracing new technology can unlock new insights, ways of working, and the kind of intelligence that can drive high-impact campaigns. For an industry always striving to showcase its power, technology like AI presents new and wonderful openings to pursue. On the other hand, if your work isn’t aligned with a sound ethical framework, then let’s address this now before using these amazing and emerging technologies. Of course, we are going to make mistakes. We’ve already seen the minefield that social media created for practitioners when it was first introduced.

Professional communicators need to look at their existing practices at managing risk to ensure they effectively mitigate future issues. Otherwise, we risk contributing to the spread of misinformation, lies, and false promises – all of which our global industry has worked so hard to fight.

STÉPHANE BILLIET  
VICE-PRESIDENT, WE CHANGE

[Stéphane Billiet on Twitter](#)

A NEW FRONTIER  
OF PR ETHICS

If the Metaverse is still just an experimental playground for a handful of early-adopter brands, it will soon be, without a doubt, a new space of influence that PR professionals will have to add to their range of skills. And that they will have to be able to master, for better or for worse because, obviously, the Metaverse promises to be a virtual space even more conducive to dark PR than social networks.

Disinformation, astroturfing, and destabilisation are unfortunately also part of the promises of this exchange platform with an impact multiplied by its immersive and instantaneous nature. What is particularly problematic is that in the Metaverse everything happens in real time, and it is not possible to know if a real person is hiding behind an avatar or if it is an artificial intelligence.

PR professionals need to be prepared to handle crises in the warrior mode of propaganda because it will probably not be uncommon to see armies of avatars piloted by robots descend on their targets to denigrate them or instil doubt by spreading fake news.

PR professionals must now approach legislators and experts to ensure that the terms of use, privacy control, and security options are adapted to this new technology, in accordance with their ethics.

Because the never-ending applications of the digital revolution question the integrity of PR practices as never before, the teaching of ethics in the students' curriculum, from the very first years of their academic career, should be a priority to stimulate critical and constructive reflection, onwards. I strongly believe that the teaching of our codes of ethics is our strongest weapon of massive deterrence to prevent the temptation of deviance. Beyond this, the integration of questions relating to ethical and societal issues, and theoretical and practical tools should be now, more than ever, be mandatory for communication studies.

The Metaverse is a new frontier of PR ethics.



CONOR BRENNAN MPRCA  
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REBUILDING A SAFE  
ONLINE EXPERIENCE

If policymakers and regulators have already moved to reposition our understanding of what it is to have control of the data you produce online, the next target in their sights is the safety of users online. For individuals and businesses alike, there is a growing sense that online communications should no longer be played out in a so called 'Wild West' where user-generated content, live experiences, or even state-backed campaigns jeopardise users' safety.

And so, after much campaigning and wrangling, governments have the unenviable task of regulating the internet in such a way that balances the rights of users, allows for innovation and new ideas to flourish, and keeps people safe. But so entrenched is the idea of decentralised and organic online content that any curtailing of perceived harmful content needs to start by realigning our low expectation of what role online spaces play in society.

The interest and curiosity of the Metaverse affords this opportunity. Could it be that an online space keeps its users safe by design? That there is new collective trust in our surroundings and exploration doesn't lead to the darker depths of the internet? Time will tell but the current intervention from policymakers, increasingly beyond the US and Europe, will give a clear signal on what we, as a society, expect of the online realm and indeed our tolerance threshold.





[Pedro Cadina on Twitter](#)



THE METAVERSE: THE PROMISED  
LAND OR THE LOS ANGELES OF BLADE  
RUNNER?

The Metaverse’s futuristic promise is to create a connected universe where we will all be immersed in virtual reality. This hyperconnected, wonderful new world brings about a series of opportunities and lots of challenges, especially for us communicators.

The Metaverse is similar to a new cyber promised land, with potential to recreate communication, now in the virtual world. This would afford more immersive experiences to brands and their customers, developing campaigns and creative pieces that use tools such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Augmented Reality (AR). With avatars, Virtual Reality (VR) activations and NFTs, communications professionals will be able to prepare innovative relationship spaces for the brands.

With the Metaverse, BigTechs will be able to capture an immense amount of sensitive information. In addition to what they already have today, these companies will have at their disposal our body movements, brain waves, physiological responses and wishes, among other things.

In which direction will BigTechs place their algorithms: to increase their earnings or to protect citizens?

Also bear in mind that deepfakes, hacked avatars, and tampered objects may lead to criminal manipulations and violations of privacy. Think of a terrorist or a paedophile posing as a child.

The Metaverse and VR open space for sensory overload caused by overexposure or overlapping communication. Some studies show that these overloads may cause seizures in people with epilepsy, accidents during commuting due to the use of VR or impacts on memory due to desensitisation and mental confusion.

The Metaverse is not an absolute reality yet. At the same time, as we build this virtual, wonderful new world, we need adequate security, privacy, and ethics rules, without which we will find ourselves in the Los Angeles of Blade Runner.

[Femi Falodun on Twitter](#)



ETHICAL ISSUES SURROUNDING  
WEB3 AND AI – PR AND  
COMMUNICATIONS PERSPECTIVE

For techno-optimists, Web3 promises a free, decentralised, community-governed internet powered by tokens, and completely owned by users and builders. For techno-pessimists, Web3 and the Metaverse are nothing but the Wild Wild West of tech innovation: at best, a utopian dream of opportunistic geeks and billionaire VCs trying to create a new world order on the back of an instrumented economy, and at worst, a murky world of multilevel marketing, pyramid schemes, powered by the blockchain, cryptography, AI, VR and a large dose of FOMO.

A key concern about Web3-related technologies is the general ambiguity about what is right or wrong. As with most emerging tech, innovation is outpacing regulation as authorities struggle to understand and control a system that is designed to be free of their control. Lack of regulatory oversight creates room for bad actors to harm platform builders and users. Some of the ethical issues in Web3 today are privacy and data leaks, ICO scams, copyright infringement with NFTs, and outright theft.

Another key concern with Web3 is sustainability. According to Digiconomist, Bitcoin mining generates up to 96 million tons of CO2 emissions yearly, while Ethereum mining produces 47 million tons. The Bitcoin network also produces 30,000 tons of electronic waste per year. Although proponents are introducing new methods that are less energy-intensive, it is expected that crypto’s carbon footprint will continue to increase as adoption grows.

The biggest ethical concerns with AI include racial bias from robots, inequality in distribution of wealth created by robots, cybersecurity risks, robot rights, unemployment due to loss of jobs to machines, and the Singularity – a fear that someday, humanity will lose control to complex intelligent systems.

PR people who work in and around the Web3 ecosystem must pay close attention to these issues in order to properly guide their stakeholders – both builders and users – on how to communicate and engage with actors within the ecosystem. As long as PR practitioners stay adequately informed on the tech, and remain people-centric, they will emerge as trusted partners for governments, Web3 builders and users, helping them to find and communicate the best ways that these technologies can enrich the human experience.

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**DON'T WAIT.  
LEAD.**

Communications technology, evolving social media services, and AI have empowered communications professionals and people worldwide. We have already seen those technological advancements shaping our lives and societies. Emerging technologies and the Metaverse will bring us even more magical tools which will take us by storm. We will be able to influence audiences more effectively than ever in human history. We will create even more engaging content, razor-sharp reach, and a high impact on target audiences. These tools will be a massive force for good in professional hands.

Our greatest challenge as communications professionals is to understand our responsibility and accountability. Highly immersive and AI-powered personalised communication can bypass traditional media literacy skills and hit our emotional nerves before we realise what has happened. The downside of using these superpowers is the lack of understanding that not everything is ethical or even legal. We will require new professional skills and high ethical standards to navigate the ethical use of communications technology.

Public relations, freedom of speech, and freedom of the press are fundamental elements of democracy and healthy dialogue. We have already witnessed a terrible erosion of trust and faith in human decency. Democracies thrive when people distinguish between real news, entertainment, misinformation, and disinformation. Artificial Intelligence and algorithms play with our emotions and divide us instead of uniting. Media and technology literacies will become fundamental skills for everyone, but we need to be masters in the field.

PR professionals need to understand how artificial intelligence, algorithms and data gravitation will change our lives and communities. The PR industry should not just wait for what happens in AI and communications technology but proactively contribute and influence. We need to work with international and national policymakers to secure transparency and ethical use of personal data in the development and use of AI.

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**A NEW PARADIGM FOR  
INSTITUTIONALISED TRUST**

Ethics is at the core of innovation. An ethical approach to technology leads to trust, which ultimately speeds the innovation adoption curve by helping stakeholders find more benefits than risk in the innovative tech. As challenges emerge, building trust is fundamental to empowering communities to engage with technology. Ethical PR helps to look at those challenges from the different stakeholders' perspectives and values, and works to minimise perceived risks, such as malicious intent, manipulation, lack of control, and breaches of data security and privacy.

One of the main opportunities for PR professionals is to make innovation and ethics go hand-in-hand. As society moves from using technology to living technology, stakeholders grow more concerned about issues related to trust and transparency.

PR professionals that find new ways to develop institutionalised trust and prepare and guide their clients on this will have a competitive advantage for their reputation and business. Those that do not 'economise on trust' will be the ones to flourish, as stakeholders use institutionalised trust to decide on interactions.

The praxis of institutionalised trust relies on a feeling of security as a result of structural assurances, like guarantees and policies, regarding, for instance, design of algorithms, potential bias and, of course, privacy and data protection.

These new challenges lead to a call for action for PR professionals to develop frameworks that help their clients to identify and manage these types of issues and provide structural communication solutions that help managing them.



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WHEN THE LINES BLUR

We live in a world increasingly permeated by technology, a trend that the pandemic has clearly accelerated. The importance and speed that digitalisation and the advance of emerging technologies – such as AI, blockchain and big data – have acquired in all aspects of our lives is so evident that no sector can ignore or normalise it without constantly asking itself about the opportunities, but also the challenges that this advance implies.

One type of technology that is having an increasing presence in the workplace is Virtual Reality. The experience in the virtual world is based entirely on perceptions: you perceive that you are in a room with one or more people, and by their voice and the movement of their lips, there comes a moment when you feel that you are really next to that person, sharing the same space, even though in reality, it is an avatar and the space is a virtual one and not a physical one. This clearly poses a huge challenge in terms of our critical thinking and our digital and information literacy, requiring PR leaders and professionals to increasingly work on their ability to understand the boundary between what is real and what they *perceive* as real. It is certainly a new world to explore, with an awareness of its potential, but also its risks.

IVA GRIGOROVA  
DIRECTOR PR BUSINESS, MSL,  
PART OF PUBLICIS GROUPE BULGARIA

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PLAYGROUND OF DISCOVERY OPENS  
NEW REPUTATIONAL RISKS

The emerging technologies are opening a new playground for brands to reach and engage with consumers. Deep understanding of how Metaverse and AI platforms work will give brands the knowledge of possibilities and challenges to solve for better consumer experience, engagement, and loyalty.

The Metaverse offers a new perspective for brands to build virtual experience and to allow people to explore and receive new information. Brands assets become digital ones in a world that people can see, feel, experience only through technology. All this creates a connection, but also a new kind of relationship with audiences.

One thing is certain: brands and marketers must be tech savvy or have tech savvy teams because the Metaverse is still a platform in the process of discovering its potential, possibilities, and outcomes, which creates future challenges for brands and their communication.

Just as a physical community has its norms and regulations, the same applies to building the virtual community. It's a platform where everything is connected and where brands can collaborate with their audiences, while understanding their needs. Still communication must happen transparently. Consumers must know where and how they are engaging and how the brand and the platform is protecting their identity. It's similar to the policies on other platforms such as social media, websites, or any other walled gardens.

Consumers and stakeholders in the Metaverse are like brands audiences outside the digital space. They also have needs, interests, certain behaviour. It's the same data-points that brands would need to consider when building their content for their digital audience. It's more important how brands are using and protecting their consumers' data and how they are engaging with audiences in support of brand reputation. Because it's a new communication dimension, brands must be aware of trolls, cybercrime, money laundering, and other data leaks. All of this can cause manipulation of brands perception, encourage certain consumer behaviour digitally that damage brands' reputation but also can influence consumers emotionally or mentally in the real world as well.

All principles of crisis communication management and brand reputation protection apply here together with respecting consumers' consent to personal data usage. Metaverse regulations should be systemised and applied, and data-protection rules should be updated. The big question ahead of marketers and communitarian professionals is how brands will be implementing and protecting their audience first party data in the Metaverse?

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**OPPORTUNITY AND CHALLENGE:**  
**NFTS, SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE ENVIRONMENT**

NFTs are more about publicity than digital art. Currently, Justin Bieber is promoting an NFT collection on his Instagram. I won't comment on the so-called art aspect of Bieber's NFTs!

In collaboration with his clothing brand designer, Bieber is making use of his good name and massive following to sell his own House of Drew-inspired NFTs.

Bieber understands the value of a strong public image in seizing opportunities. Without his celebrity status and social media presence, I believe his NFTs would probably never see the light of day. In fact, they most likely wouldn't be in demand.

Demand is also created when NFTs are sold and bought repetitively. The bad news is NFT transactions take place on the blockchain using large amounts of energy. A single NFT reportedly uses the equivalent amount of energy consumed by a household in a month.

Many brands, including Coca-Cola, McDonalds, and Gucci, are harnessing the power of reputation to venture into the world of NFTs. This year, many influencers are also capitalising on their growing followers to hop on the NFT trend.

A new type of business, called NFT service providers, also emerged this year, offering end-to-end NFT services from consultations and project launches to web development and social media marketing, specifically through platforms like Twitter and Discord.

Without demand, NFTs are mostly dead art. Fame creates demand. PR and social media create fame. With the growing number of celebrities, influencers, and companies trying to promote and sell NFTs on the back of their reputation, who's to blame for the environmental challenge posed by the NFT opportunity?

**CAROLINE HSU MPRCA**  
**CHIEF GLOBAL OFFICER,**  
**THE HOFFMAN AGENCY**

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**DON'T BE BLINDED, ACCOUNTABILITY**  
**SHOULD RULE**

The most important consideration in working with clients in these sectors is being able to ask difficult questions — questions that the media and public are likely wanting to know, and that help us determine whether the client is a force for good or not.

It's easy to be blinded by hype when it comes to anything 'emerging' like the Metaverse, AI or cryptocurrency. Behaving like journalists and asking tough questions upfront sets us up as an equal partner in any relationship that develops and forces clients to come up with answers, even if they are not yet complete. Through this process, we are holding both them and ourselves accountable.

Being accountable means we have to be prepared to turn down or end work if we doubt the company's intentions, and we have on numerous occasions. It's clear that the Metaverse is going to be difficult to get right, and that's fine. What's important is that we follow a process that leads us to choose to represent clients who are approaching it positively and sincerely. This may well mean that agencies need to reassess the power dynamic of the client-agency relationship — and assume a higher position than we currently do.

**HILMARIE HUTCHISON MPRCA**  
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**METaverse, AI AND NEW TECHNOLOGIES:**  
**FRIENDS OR FOES?**

The alarm bells are ringing loud and clear. We hear of app user data exploitation, data leaks, and more. We cannot simply apply the rules of the real world to the Metaverse and expect stakeholders to self-regulate.

The behavioural patterns in the Metaverse will have some of the pitfalls of our reality but in no way will it be modelled solely on our world. The impact on children is particularly worrying as actual reality is blurred and they can be victims of bullying or trolling here too. The truth is, communicating to adults in the Metaverse is not the same as communicating with children. For example, if a person’s safe deposit vault in a bank is in the Metaverse, can anyone open it or just the ‘real’ account holder? If a particular user can choose to be anyone in the Metaverse it becomes hard to protect the vulnerable, like children or people with disabilities.

The inherent dangers of the Metaverse are many – misuse of personal information, cyber-attacks, fake news, immoral use of data and resources, lack of trust, the erosion of jobs; all have the power to hurt brands. Hence, we need to find common structured regulations and ethical ways to encourage healthy interactions.

This can be a defining moment for us – to establish best practices that are founded on accountability, transparency, and trust. Let us place more emphasis on evolving practices and protect our consumers personally, socially, emotionally, and legally.

Above all, we should be continually aware of the thin dividing line between trust, reality, and this new world called the Metaverse. Overcoming the ethical challenges will determine our place in business and industry as a whole.

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**‘PROTO-HUMANITY’**

At a time when conversations around online privacy were reaching an all-time high given the access companies were enforcing, mostly without consent, Meta doubled down on its digital growth with a simple proposition: a future where we are all connected in virtual hubs that seek to make proximity a thing of the past.

The familiarity the Metaverse shares with the state of the current internet is indicated through the decades of digital convivial spaces created since the advent of online gaming. The term Metaverse was actually coined as far back as 1992 and what is inherently being proposed offers practitioners added reach metrics that compound people’s concerns. As communication professionals, being granted a full asset of new platforms to establish strategic tactics through or empower our existing processes comes as a welcome addition – advanced AR/VR and immersive experiences that capitalise on digital mediums – but at what cost?

It is true that programmatic innovations have helped us communicate with intended audiences, expending client budgets on necessary markets, but sheer influence is not enough to garner authentic engagement. As we embark upon the Web3 journey, we must be cautious of what we are asking of the populace, most of whom have become increasingly savvy about subversive ploys of communication in the interest of data mining. While it is tempting to compare the ideas we have today to what we defined the internet to be a generation ago, assuming the inevitability of progress or people’s compliance is a stark presumption at best.



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**EDUCATION, INCLUSIVITY,**  
**AND TRANSPARENCY ARE KEY TO WORKING**  
**WITH EMERGING TECH IN MENA**

The prospect of creating entire new worlds in which to communicate with audiences, which come with entirely new rules and unwritten guidebooks, and where threats of misinformation, cyberattacks and data breaches lurk around every corner, is at once tantalising and terrifying. In the MENA region, as in others worldwide, the Metaverse and other emerging technologies raise ethical questions of education, inclusivity, and transparency for communicators, to name a few.

Communications practitioners should have access to training to feel empowered and fully understand the potential but also the limitations, for instance around bias, of the technologies that they are now using. There's the opportunity for interactions with brands to become even more streamlined and personalised, enhancing stakeholder engagement and relationships. But whilst technologies such as AI and chatbots are useful, we've all seen the need for real human connection to be maintained in our post-pandemic world, which has transparency at its heart. PR practitioners should also be aware of the changes happening in the journalism industry and start conversations with the media about how they are using AI, for instance. This way we can ensure that we continue to deliver suitable content which still allows for the authenticity of our brands to shine through and builds that ever-elusive trust with audiences.

Regarding inclusivity, the prevalence of the Metaverse threatens to widen the digital divide where issues like WiFi poverty and device access have a very real impact on the understanding and use of these tools. Separately, as practitioners, we must continue to recognise that multiple communication channels still have a place, particularly in the MENA region, where communities might not want to engage with these technologies, citing privacy, moral, or religious reasons.

As markets across MENA continue their drive towards creating knowledge-based economies that are underpinned by emerging tech and where, famously, data is cited as the new oil, collaboration and best practice must guide strategic communications in an ethical way to help brands navigate these brave new worlds.



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**ENOUGH OF THE FAKES,**  
**LET'S PROMOTE THE TRUTH**

We live in a world of digital magic, where anyone can create new visual realities from a device as small as their mobile phones. While this may be a boon for Hollywood and entertainment, the ability to create anything from photoshopped images to deepfake videos is behind the surge of fake content, particularly on social media. It is becoming harder to know what is true from what is false, and to separate fakes from real imagery and videos. When it comes to contentious issues, bad faith actors are taking advantage of creative skills and new tools to design fake content that can win over online audiences.

Fakes can be used for any purpose or issue. Only recently, a fake video was used to promote the opening of a major new building in the region. While some thought the video was an act of inspiration, I questioned why a CGI video needed to be used as part of the building's campaign. There were no disclaimers to say that the video was faked, and the video itself was designed to make it look as if it was real and shot on a smartphone.

Call me a killjoy (I've been called worse), but I truly believe that our job as communicators is to be factually accurate and not set out to mislead our audiences. Call it a Hippocratic oath for communicators and public relations professionals if you will. Our marketing friends can design beautiful visuals and fantastical videos to sell products, as the public understands that an advert is solely the promotion of a product, brand or service to attract interest, engagement, and sales. They will often take brand claims and marketing materials with a pinch of salt.

What we do as communicators must be separate from this. We are responsible for building and maintaining reputations over the long term, and we cannot start or continue our relations with key groups based on falsehoods or fakes, no matter how good our intentions may be. Let us all commit to not use any fake material, false messaging or any other means that will mislead our audiences. Instead, let's promote truth and transparency, so that we can achieve the aim of creating and maintaining positive relationships between our own organisations and the stakeholders that we care about. Are you with me?



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**DREAM VIRTUAL,  
THINK REAL**

“Ethics is knowing the difference between what you have a right to do and what is right to do.” This quote from a former US Supreme Court judge always comes to mind when I ruminate on ethical practices in PR and communications. Especially in a world where sophisticated technology is becoming an integral part of brand marketing and communications.

Cutting-edge as they are, using shiny new tech tools is fraught with dangers that could damage brand reputation and profitability. As guardians of our clients’ credibility, we must know “the right thing to do” as we help them engage with their audience in the New World tech space.

Take, for instance, the Metaverse. It has opened doors to a world of opportunities we never even knew existed. Brands now have an entire virtual universe to design immersive experiences for their audiences. At the same time, artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning are helping brands leverage consumer data to change the way businesses draw customers and make conversions.

However, advanced tech is also opening sink holes like data leaks, deepfakes, and safety risks to the mind and body.

For PR practitioners and communicators, this is the time to deep dive into ethical and responsible consultancy and the importance of values and purpose. Our work should begin with educating ourselves about these technologies so that we can provide proper guidance to our clients and draw up best practices for them – and ourselves.

We must impress upon our clients that respecting consumer privacy through transparency and ethical use of data is non-negotiable. We need to help them stay on top of malicious attacks, data leaks, and brand manipulation by advising investment in cybersecurity.

We must also be cognisant about the sensory impact of virtual experiences when we design campaigns in extended reality spaces. This is critical for the safety of the audiences and to ensure that brands do not lose customers due to badly designed, overwhelming advertisements. One misstep could turn this dream into a dystopian nightmare.

So, even as we craft exciting worlds of customer experiences with the help of emerging technology, we need to stay connected with the ethical responsibilities that come with the territory. In short: dream virtual, think real.



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**ETHICS AND AI: THREE CHALLENGES  
FACING PR**

Amid several conversations around ethics and AI, I see three core challenges PR professionals can focus on in order to help society better understand opportunities and threats associated with emerging technologies. The first one is to encourage transparency around how AI is shaped and what kind of ethics is part of the machine learning process, basically to understand behaviours that are taught to AI and for which circumstances. This factor can help the adoption of responsible AI design on a vast scale.

The second challenge is about how AI is used in communications and, here, the creation and disclosure of professional codes of conducts represents an added value to build an ethical AI ecosystem. Training programmes should support the sharing of the codes which, ideally, should be regularly updated.

Finally, these exponential technologies are already able to replicate many features of human beings – such as voice, appearance, memories, sense of humour, conversations – and soon they might create digital clones in meta contexts that can potentially replace human companionship and “live forever”. Ethics should guide communications and dialogues around how this might impact future perceptions around the value and the meaning of human life, which is limited in time, and therefore, precious.



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**THE VIRTUAL WORLD'S FUTURE:  
OVER-REGULATED OR WILD AND UNSAFE?**

Most virtual companies are still struggling to live with a blatant dichotomy, inherent to the digital economy: they want to interact liberally with users (and their data) but also require a trustworthy environment to engage with consumers.

In Southeast Asia, the first challenge takes another layer of salt: governments often demand that user data be stored locally in sometimes government-affiliated servers, and user behaviour and speech be regulated or censored. In Myanmar last year, the junta government plugged government-controlled filters to connect an internet user's behaviour with his or her telco registered ID and live location.

In regards to the second issue, Southeast Asia's boasts one of the fastest technological adoption rates globally, meaning that as with social media usage, engagement with influencers, and gaming time before that, Southeast Asian users will likely be enthusiastic adopters of Metaverses. In this perspective, the unregulated nature of the new territories created on the blockchain infrastructure (or Web3) will pose plenty of ethical risk. How can consumers and brands enter the space without getting attacked or abused?

Imagine a (virtual) world where your (virtual) friend is live muted before your (virtual) eyes as he ushers (not virtual) forbidden political speech during a (virtual) Coca-Cola branded concert. Imagine your virtual possessions suddenly disappearing with the decentralised organisation they were part of?

If social media forced brands to become social (or political) animals, what will brands become in virtual worlds, which can be either over-regulated or left wild and unsafe? And how will PR and brand consultants manage ethical concerns as users fall victim to expansive regulation, financial scams, or user-data trading?

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**THE TIME IS NOW TO UPDATE OUR BEST  
PRACTICE PLAYBOOKS**

The Metaverse: where physical converges with digital to create a world of new opportunities and possibilities for brands and marketers. A virtual universe of three-dimensional innovative, immersive brand experiences offering a whole host of creative customer interactions. And, if history is anything to go by (and it is, it really is), one where breaches of user privacy, misuse of personal data, deepfakes, misinformation, and cyber-attacks will undoubtedly be as present as that next great strategy for building virtual customer relationships.

So, what does this mean for communications professionals? It means we need to be Metaverse confident, and fast. And it means we need to continue to hold up the mirror of responsibility to our clients and executives, ensuring that we lead when it comes to ethical behaviours.

Regulation and new laws will likely be slow, perhaps even intentionally hampered, when it comes to these emerging technologies and the risk of damage to brand reputation is high. We must get ahead of the curve and prepare ourselves and our organisations by further developing best practice communications playbooks and guides, taking a proactive position on ethics, safety, inclusivity, transparency, and privacy in the Metaverse. Clients and executives must know how to handle the challenges they will inevitably face; how to manage personal data, both legally and ethically; how to respond to misinformation, fakes, and cyber-attacks; and how to ensure customers are treated with care and respect in these new domains.

As the people charged with managing reputations, we need to keep our clients and executives informed, educated, and accountable – and the time to start having these conversations and updating our best practice playbooks is right now.



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THE METAVERSE HAS GREAT POTENTIAL  
TO CONNECT US

If there is one thing I’ve learned watching different technologies emerge it’s that they often reflect humanity: technology can bring out both our better and worse selves. The emerging Metaverse and Web3, are already delivering plenty of lessons. Let’s start with the positive: during the pandemic, my two daughters lost their real-world connections during lockdowns. Like many other tweens, they started hanging out in Minecraft and Fortnite, not only as a place to play games but as a social space with their friends. The Metaverse has great potential to connect us.

But there are also negatives to virtual spaces. With some imagination, we can start to ask questions about other behaviours we might end up having to deal with: what happens when you can physically see trolls attacking? What happens when a Twitter mob comes for a brand in the Metaverse; are we going to see a crowd of avatars with virtual pitchforks and burning torches? If there are customer service issues, can we expect long queues at the virtual presence of a company? And how do we know that organisations are who they say they are in the Metaverse or when we buy virtual objects from them? There are many of these questions and while some of them may sound a bit wild and unlikely, if there is one thing recent years have taught us it’s that those wild and unlikely things happen all the time. It’s a great time to start experimenting and learning in these spaces, so we don’t have to do it when a crisis hits at scale.

PRANAV RASTOGI MPRCA  
MANAGING DIRECTOR, REDHILL

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THE PR INDUSTRY MUST BE PREPARED

The biggest ethical issue that will concern the PR industry as we engage in new technologies is content moderation. Tech companies are constantly embroiled in battles, legal and otherwise, as they struggle to moderate content on their existing platforms – despite the very real and present dangers posed by misinformation.

Today, we do not have content moderation standards and ethical guardrails across the internet. Our legal framework does not move fast enough to keep up with its development. AI and machine learning technology have been used for years; yet we still witness incidents where AI results in gender, financial, and racial biases.

On the Metaverse, it is simultaneously the most exciting new technology and the scariest that most of us in the PR industry have encountered.

Exciting – because it provides a huge opportunity for us to create new experiences for brands, pioneer new forms of engagement, and produce an immersive experience for consumers.

Scary – because it is being presented to us as a seemingly new decentralised internet experience, but it is still being driven by businesses focusing on growth and profit. Safety and ethics will likely still be compromised. The same issues will resurface.

We are only now, many years later, facing up to the ethical dilemmas posed by internet 2.0. Unless there is a great impetus in the form of unprecedented societal pressure and call for change, the indications are that Web3 will follow the pattern of Web1 and Web2 – “build first, we’ll deal with the problems later”. The PR industry must be prepared for any eventuality and adapt accordingly.

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FOUNDER AND CEO, SHAKESPEARE  
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PRIVACY AND IDENTITY  
IN THE VIRTUAL WORLD

The ethical challenges of any emerging technology, in my experience, emerge alongside the technology. I think the challenges include privacy – and this is the big one. Companies will be able to collate, store, and keep more private and personal data on the blockchain forever. Privacy, therefore, needs to go hand in hand with updated digital privacy laws, cyber security, and data protection.

Given the influence virtual worlds might have on society, I also feel concerned that toxicity, protection of minors, and presentation of identity are key ethical concerns. How will people present themselves in the Metaverse? Will there be safety for all? What about vulnerable people? On the flipside, choosing an identity online that you better identify with could be a beautiful thing. Again, I feel like there needs to be some new legislation in this area.

As an industry, we have a responsibility to ensure our clients operate in the Metaverse with integrity. We need to work towards ensuring there is a deep understanding of how to present products and services, to who, and when. I’m excited by the prospects offered by emerging technology, but our movements through the Metaverse need to be overlaid with clear legal, social, and emotional guidelines. Openness and freedom are key to the Metaverse, and I think the ‘rules of engagement’ should not be created by governments or corporations, but rather by a global community of consumers, designers, ethicists, technologists, and mental health practitioners.

We have the chance to ensure virtual and artificial intelligence-driven worlds are exciting, fun, safe places to be.

SUDHA SINGH FPRCA  
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INDUSTRY MUST LEAD ON EDUCATION,  
AWARENESS, AND BENCHMARKING

As we all know, the pandemic has accelerated the adoption of digital technologies. Some of it has been for the good (for work, for socialising or payment), and some of it we don’t have much clarity on. For instance, there are a number of companies across the world who are now in possession of vast amounts of personal data from test and trace, and there exists no regulation or guidelines on how they might use or protect that data. From a communications perspective, it has the potential to go pear shaped very quickly in case of a data breach.

Then there is the issue of ethics washing around ‘AI for Good’. We already know there are huge problems in who designs the programmes and what the technology is used for: is it being used to spread disinformation or facial recognition? But there is very little conversation on energy consumption by data centres that store big data. And this is a technology that we expect will be pervasive. At what cost?

And what about Metaverse – Mark Zuckerberg’s ambitious new project? With Metaverse, the fundamental concern is around privacy and the ethical framework around extended reality. What data is collected, how is it collected, and where does that data reside? According to experts, Metaverse is probably an aggregation of all the problems we already know social media, internet governance, and AI ethics to have.

If you look at all the above, the most worrying thing is the pace of change. As an industry, we should be leading on education, awareness, and benchmarking. The biggest challenge I would say is that only a handful of people are interested in understanding ethics, and most of the time it is as a side project. For us to be able to adopt new technology to make our work more impactful and advise our clients on the risks, we need everyone – from the intern to the CEO – to be a part of this learning. My recommendation would be that the PRCA consider an annual training programme with people from not just the industry, but technology companies and experts, enabling a better grasp of the issues and how we must prepare to deal with them.

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METaverse OFFERS NEW POSSIBILITIES,  
BUT FUNDAMENTALS REMAIN

In a story by Wired in 2021, they said a good way to think about Metaverse is to replace ‘Metaverse’ with the word ‘cyberspace’. The Metaverse will change how we interact with technology, but the fundamentals for communicators will be the same – stay true to the principles and values of your brand and organisation. Like WebEx, Slack, and WhatsApp, tools and technology that start out as great for gamers and keeping in touch with friends often become vital business channels of tomorrow. The Metaverse will be no different.

While we are seeing in these early days of the Metaverse a number of serious incidents and risks arising, in particular around sexual content, discrimination, abuse, and cybersecurity, we can expect safety features to improve over time as more is learnt about how people interact in these spaces. How the Metaverse will also deal with longer term issues such as transfer and inheritance of property rights, remains to be seen. Reputation professionals will play a vital role in helping brands navigate these risks, while also finding ways to not limit brand innovation and experimentation. From an ethical standpoint, this means a steadfast focus on doing whatever is possible to protect the young and vulnerable from exploitation or harm.

As communicators we must always keep evolving our offer and skills to ensure we reach the audiences that are important to our story, through the channels that are most effective. I believe the Metaverse will have a transformative effect on the communications industry, and present an abundance of new and exciting engagement opportunities, but caution and care must also be exercised.



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PR AND SOCIAL MEDIA MANAGER,  
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READY, SET ... VERSE!

Since the pandemic, incredible progress has been made across all digital platforms, with complex networks and consumer universes bringing people together. But among all of this, one word is now on everybody’s lips: Metaverse.

Yet the Metaverse is not new. This ulterior universe first appeared a long time ago in the guise of video games. And video games today are simply demonstrating what the Metaverse now offers, through Extended Realities (AR, MR, and VR), and via PCs, phones, and game consoles.

Whilst the Metaverse is not exactly a ‘video game’, it allows users to have virtual hangouts, use digital currencies to buy and sell commodities, and to create personalised avatars.

With more and more tech and digital companies investing in this idea of the Metaverse, what are some challenges we consumers will be facing in this brave new world?

- **Neural and Biological Privacy:** Consumers may have to allow AR and VR devices to predict, and more dangerously to depict, their avatar’s behaviour in the Metaverse. We’ve seen this through Pokemon Go! How will this affect our behaviour in reality?
- **Consumer Data and Fake Data:** It is important for the consumer to know who owns their data, who will have access to it and, most importantly, what will be done with it. There will need to be more transparency from the tech giants.
- **Crypto Security:** How safe and secure will these gateways be when it comes to our bank details?
- **Ethical Responsibility and User Interaction:** Can an avatar be responsible for its actions? Imagine your avatar gets assaulted in the Metaverse. While there may be no physical impact, how might an avatar’s actions and experiences impact on the actual psychological wellbeing of the user?





LARS VOEDISCH MPRCA  
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TRUTH AND TRANSPARENCY SHOULD  
GUIDE OUR JOURNEY IN THE METAVERSE

Stepping into the Metaverse is but a natural progression of communications, as we all have to embrace the inevitable duality of digital and physical worlds. Data will undoubtedly be part of this new revolution – with technologies such as AI and AR constituting the backbone of data-driven, end-to-end visual and audio interactions, including interactive 3D spaces, event platforms, multi-sensory conference rooms and briefing centres, for engaging different stakeholders.

While evolving to keep up with the accelerated pace of digital transformation through new tools and solutions, the communications industry as a whole should ensure that it continues to uphold the basic values and standards of trust and transparency. This includes using information responsibly – even as we work at leveraging the Metaverse and other emerging technologies to engage with different audiences on a deeper and more personal level.

Trust has become the currency governing today’s business world, and PR and communications professionals should continue to make ethics the cornerstone of their campaigns amidst this emerging reality. As with new technologies, the Metaverse is a double-edged sword, presenting new challenges: amidst the proliferation of deepfakes and data manipulations, brands and companies are not immune to reputational risks that can erode trust – whether within teams, or how partners, consumers, investors, and the public perceive their organisation or products/services.

In this new milieu, communications practitioners have to be extra vigilant – balancing creative and strategic direction with sustainable data governance and compliance practices and being transparent and open about how they handle stakeholder data.

At the end of the day, we are communicating with and to people. Oftentimes, the wider marketing universe pushes the envelope towards what is technically doable, but neglects the aspect of user acceptance. After all is said and done, the person on the receiving end of our campaigns is the one who makes the final call on whether or not the campaign is relatable and relevant (and hence successful)!

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ARE WE PERPETRATORS OR VICTIMS?

Identifying fake news is one of the critical challenges our industry faces according to the ICCO World Report 2021/2022. Is the fakery fed by clients, or fed by agencies to the media or influencers, or by those intermediaries to the public? Are we perpetrators or victims? The PR and communications industry needs to substantiate claims, question, and validate data presented and apply rigorous ethical practices and principles to matters that seem ‘too good to be true’. It most likely is.

Fake design agency Madbird was built on lie upon lie and rotten to the core, using technology as a blunt instrument to lure clients and employees. It created fake characters, imagery, campaigns, and clients – and it nearly succeeded. Is it possible the PR and comms industry might have fake imposters? It’s already happened in the design industry. Remember 5Ds? Dig deep, do due diligence.

AI can enhance communications, refining programmes by predicting how audiences might react, how messaging might resonate. If managed properly, and with sound ethical principles, these technological developments will make our industry more effective, delivering greater value, and less reliant on instinctive guessing. When faced with potential technological breakthroughs, hold up a mirror and ask yourself if this is ethically sound, truthful, and good for society overall as much as for stakeholders. You will know which way to go.

